



Exploring the Meaning of Religious Identity and Political Engagement: A Phenomenological Exploration of Personal Narratives

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between religion and politics has been a central topic of study in the social sciences, with a growing interest in how religious identity shapes political ideologies. While existing research has largely focused on institutional dynamics and political ideologies, the gap in understanding the specific, personal, and subjective experiences of individuals navigating the intersection of religious and political identities remains underexplored in the literature. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how individuals' religious beliefs influence their political views and engagement. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, we examine the lived experiences of individuals to uncover the meaning they ascribe to their religious and political identities. Through in-depth interviews with 15 participants, we identified key themes related to the influence of religious identity on political participation and decision-making, as well as the personal conflicts arising from discrepancies between religious and political ideologies. Our findings suggest that religious beliefs profoundly shape individuals' political perspectives, often guiding their political actions and decisions. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the personal dimensions of political engagement, challenging the prevailing focus on macro-level analyses. The study's findings have important implications for future research particularly in understanding the role of religion in personal political engagement and the potential for further exploration of this intersection across different cultural and religious contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

Religion and politics are two fundamental forces that shape societal structures and individuals' worldviews. Historically, the relationship between these two domains has been a source of debate and conflict, yet it remains deeply ingrained in the way communities function and interact. In many societies, religious beliefs significantly influence political ideologies, shaping policies, guiding political movements, and affecting individuals' social roles and responsibilities. This intersection is particularly prominent in regions where religious institutions hold significant power and influence over public life (Soekiswati dkk., 2024). Moreover, the rise of religious-based political movements in contemporary global politics underscores the enduring importance of understanding how religion and politics intersect at both the institutional and individual levels.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its deep connection to the lived experiences of individuals. Religious identity is often a source of meaning, moral guidance, and social cohesion, while political engagement can be seen as a means of translating these religious values into societal frameworks. As such, the ways in which individuals' religious beliefs shape their political views and participation are of great importance in understanding contemporary social dynamics. This intersection of religion and politics is particularly crucial in understanding how individuals navigate

political spaces that may not always align with their religious values, or conversely, how religion acts as a driving force in political action.

Despite the broad scholarly attention to the influence of religion on politics, much of the existing research has focused on macro-level analyses of religious institutions, political ideologies, or the relationship between religious groups and the state. Less attention has been given to the personal, lived experiences of individuals who negotiate their religious and political identities in everyday life. Thus, there is a need for a deeper, more nuanced exploration of how individuals perceive and make sense of the intersection of religion and politics (Verhofstadt dkk., 2024). This exploration requires an approach that prioritizes the subjective, lived experiences of individuals, something phenomenology is uniquely suited to provide. By focusing on the meanings individuals attach to their religious and political engagements, this study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this complex and dynamic relationship.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals in specific phenomena has become a critical area of focus in contemporary social science. The exploration of how people perceive and interpret their personal experiences, particularly in complex and multifaceted areas such as religion and politics, provides valuable insights into how these influences shape individual identities and actions. Phenomenological research, which centers on understanding the meanings individuals attach to their lived experiences, has proven to be an effective methodology for uncovering the nuances of personal beliefs, values, and actions. By focusing on the individual's perspective, phenomenology offers an in-depth approach to exploring the intersection of religion and politics at a personal level, moving beyond generalized analyses to understand the lived realities of individuals.

However, there are significant methodological challenges in exploring deep meanings and subjective experiences, particularly when dealing with complex, deeply ingrained beliefs such as those related to religion and politics. Traditional quantitative approaches, which focus on measuring and categorizing phenomena, often fail to capture the richness of personal experience. These methods, while useful for identifying patterns or correlations, cannot adequately address the depth of subjective experiences, leaving gaps in understanding how individuals make sense of their religious and political identities (Suherman dkk., 2019). The limitations of these approaches underscore the necessity for qualitative, phenomenological research, which allows for the collection of rich, detailed accounts of personal experience and provides a deeper understanding of how individuals interpret and navigate the relationship between religion and politics.

Given these limitations, previous research on the intersection of religion and politics, although abundant, often fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of individuals. Much of the existing literature focuses on macro-level political ideologies, religious institutions, or societal trends, overlooking the personal, lived experiences of those whose religious beliefs directly inform their political views. As such, this gap in the literature highlights the need for a phenomenological approach that explores the subjective meanings individuals assign to their experiences, offering a more holistic view of how religion and politics intersect in personal, everyday life.

While much of the existing literature on the intersection of religion and politics has focused on the broad, macro-level relationships between religious institutions, political ideologies, and societal trends, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of the deeply personal, subjective experiences that shape individual political views based on religious beliefs. Commonly, researchers have approached this issue through practical, established methods, such as surveys and quantitative data analysis, which primarily focus on measuring correlations between religion and political behavior. While these approaches provide valuable insights into general trends, they fail to capture the nuances and richness of individuals' personal experiences and the meanings they attach to their religious and political identities.

The limitations of these methods become apparent when considering the depth and complexity of the phenomena under investigation. Quantitative approaches often overlook the intricate, subjective processes through which individuals navigate their religious and political affiliations (Machouche dkk., 2019). They do not account for the way these affiliations intersect with

broader social, cultural, and emotional experiences, which are essential to understanding the lived reality of the individuals involved. As a result, existing research offers a limited understanding of how religious beliefs shape political views on a personal level, leaving critical aspects of this relationship unexplored.

To address this gap, a phenomenological approach is necessary, one that delves deeply into the lived experiences of individuals and allows for a holistic exploration of the meanings they ascribe to their religious and political engagement. By focusing on the subjective, personal narratives of individuals, phenomenology can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how religion shapes political perspectives in everyday life. This approach will offer richer insights into the ways people experience and interpret their religious and political identities, uncovering the essence of these experiences that are often overlooked by conventional methods.

Previous research on the intersection of religion and politics has predominantly focused on institutional-level dynamics and broader political ideologies. Studies have examined how religious groups influence political systems, and vice versa, often utilizing quantitative methods to explore correlations between religious affiliation and political behavior. However, fewer studies have addressed the subjective, lived experiences of individuals navigating the complex relationship between their religious identity and political views (Chen & He, 2024). Theoretical frameworks in this area, such as political theology and religious sociology, have provided useful insights but have often overlooked the personal, experiential aspects of this phenomenon. Thus, there is a clear gap in understanding how individual experiences shape political choices in the context of religious beliefs, which this study seeks to address.

This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals at the intersection of religion and politics. Phenomenology allows for an in-depth exploration of personal narratives and the meanings participants attach to their religious and political identities. By focusing on individuals' subjective experiences, phenomenology provides a more nuanced understanding of how these two powerful forces intersect in personal and political spheres. The approach is particularly well-suited for this study, as it moves beyond the limitations of quantitative methods and allows for a richer exploration of the essences of personal beliefs and political engagement. This method offers the opportunity to delve deeper into the subjective nature of the experience, answering the critical knowledge gap regarding the meaning individuals ascribe to their religious and political participation.

The structure of this article follows a logical progression that facilitates an understanding of the research process and findings. The introduction provides an overview of the general and specific background to frame the research question. The article then presents the phenomenological methodology, detailing how data was collected and analyzed through thematic analysis to uncover the key themes in participants' experiences (Amir, 2019). Following the results, a discussion section will interpret the findings in relation to the broader literature, addressing how the personal experiences of individuals can illuminate the broader relationship between religion and politics. The article concludes by summarizing the key insights and implications for future research in this field.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of individuals regarding the relationship between religion and politics. Phenomenology is particularly well-suited for investigating the lived experiences of individuals and understanding the meanings they ascribe to specific phenomena. The approach allows for in-depth exploration of how participants perceive and interpret their experiences, providing insights into the essence of these experiences (Braybrook dkk., 2022). In this study, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was applied, which focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their personal experiences within a

particular context. IPA was chosen for its ability to provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between religious identity and political views, allowing for the identification of key themes and insights from participants' personal narratives.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they had relevant experiences related to the phenomena under investigation. The inclusion criteria required participants to be adults (ages 18 and older), with a demonstrated connection between their religious identity and political views. Additionally, participants needed to have experience navigating the intersection of religion and politics, whether through personal reflection, political engagement, or participation in religious communities. Exclusion criteria included individuals without strong religious affiliations or those who did not actively engage in political processes. A total of 15 participants were involved in the study, with a gender distribution of 8 females and 7 males. The average age of participants was 35 years. These participants represented diverse religious backgrounds, including Christianity, Islam, and other faith traditions, providing a broad perspective on the research topic.

Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to discuss their experiences in their own words while also ensuring that key topics related to the research question were covered. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet, private settings to ensure a comfortable and confidential environment for participants. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, and participants were encouraged to share their personal experiences with as much detail as possible (Dutta, 2022). A semi-structured interview guide was used to direct the conversation while leaving room for participants to elaborate on their individual perspectives. This guide was based on previous research and adapted to the specific context of this study. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves identifying key themes and patterns that emerge from participants' narratives. The analysis process began with reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews to familiarize with the data. Subsequently, meaningful units of data were identified and coded to capture the essence of participants' experiences (Oviedo, 2022). The codes were grouped into emerging themes through systematic steps, and these themes were interpreted within the context of the research question. NVivo software was used to assist with organizing the data, but the focus remained on the interpretative process rather than the tool itself. The final themes represented the core aspects of how participants experienced the relationship between their religious identity and political views, offering insights into the meanings they attributed to these experiences.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent before participation, ensuring that they were fully aware of the study's purpose and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Participants were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses, with all data being stored securely and used solely for research purposes (Meiring, 2020). Written consent was obtained from each participant, and they were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The study adhered to international ethical standards for research, ensuring that the rights and welfare of the participants were protected throughout the research process.

RESULTS

The results of this study are presented through a thematic analysis of participants' experiences in relation to their religious identity and its impact on their political views. The narratives collected through in-depth interviews reveal several key themes that represent the experiences and perspectives

of the participants. These themes have been grouped to reflect the ways in which participants perceive the interplay between religion and politics in their lives.

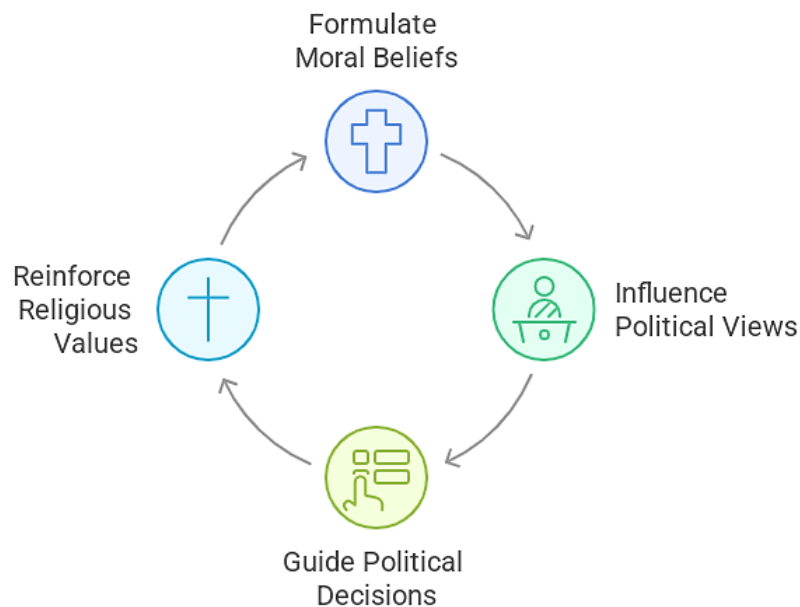
The Influence of Religious Identity on Political Views

A predominant theme that emerged from the interviews is the profound influence that religious identity has on participants' political views. Many participants reported that their religious beliefs provided a framework for understanding political ideologies and shaped their attitudes toward policy issues. For example, one participant explained:

"My faith guides me in how I view social justice issues. It's not just about politics, it's about what is right in the eyes of God, and that drives the way I vote and who I support."

This quote illustrates how religious identity not only influences moral and ethical considerations but also plays a significant role in the political decisions individuals make. The participants expressed a deep connection between their spiritual beliefs and their political ideologies, suggesting that their religious values are integral to how they engage with politics.

The Cycle of Religious Identity and Political Views



Religious Experiences and Political Engagement

Another key theme emerged around the idea of religious experiences directly influencing political engagement. Participants noted that their involvement in religious communities, such as attending services or participating in religious-based political movements, had reinforced their political engagement. For instance, one participant shared:

"Being part of a religious group made me realize that we have to stand up for our beliefs. It encouraged me to get more involved in local politics and speak out on issues that matter to our faith community."

This theme reveals that religious experiences often translate into political action, where participants feel a moral imperative to advocate for policies that align with their religious values. The experiences of religious fellowship and communal worship were often cited as catalysts for greater political participation and activism.

Conflict Between Religious Beliefs and Political Ideologies

A more complex theme involved the tension between personal religious beliefs and the political ideologies held by mainstream political parties or societal norms. Some participants expressed difficulty reconciling their religious teachings with certain political stances. One participant explained:

"Sometimes, I find it hard to align my church's teachings with the political parties that dominate the government. For example, I believe in the sanctity of life, yet I struggle with how some politicians interpret that in the political arena."

This theme suggests that while religious beliefs strongly influence political perspectives, there are often conflicts when political parties or platforms do not align with religious values. This conflict prompted participants to engage in critical self-reflection, questioning their political affiliations and exploring alternative viewpoints.

The Role of Family and Community in Shaping Political Views

Family and community were identified as key social environments that influenced how religious beliefs intersect with political views. Many participants discussed how family traditions and communal worship experiences shaped their political opinions. As one participant noted:

"My family has always been involved in the church, and our discussions about politics were always rooted in our religious beliefs. It was from these conversations that I started to see the world through a faith-based lens."

This theme highlights the importance of social environments—specifically familial and communal contexts—in shaping political attitudes. The narratives suggest that religious values are often passed down through family structures and community networks, reinforcing political ideologies and behaviors.

The essence of the findings reveals that participants' religious identities are deeply intertwined with their political views. The influence of religion shapes both the political ideologies individuals hold and the way they engage with political systems. Religious experiences not only guide personal political behavior but also encourage individuals to actively participate in political processes, sometimes creating conflicts with mainstream political ideologies. Additionally, familial and community influences play significant roles in reinforcing these connections.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how religious identity influences individuals' political views, with particular emphasis on the personal, subjective experiences of the participants (Singh dkk., 2023). The research reveals that participants' religious beliefs serve as a guiding framework for their political ideologies and actions. In particular, the analysis uncovered how religious identity shapes political engagement, often motivating individuals to align their political choices with their spiritual values. These findings directly address the research question posed in the introduction, demonstrating the significant role religion plays in shaping political perspectives at a deeply personal level.

The findings contribute to the broader understanding of the intersection between religion and politics by highlighting the complex and multifaceted relationship between religious identity and political engagement. The study provides a unique insight into how individuals experience and interpret their religious beliefs in relation to their political actions. Unlike previous studies that often treat religion and politics as distinct domains, this research emphasizes the interconnectedness of these aspects of individuals' identities. The findings suggest that individuals do not simply adhere to political ideologies based on external influences but are instead guided by deeply ingrained religious values that influence their political decisions. This offers a nuanced perspective, emphasizing the importance of considering the subjective, lived experiences of individuals when examining the relationship between religion and politics.

When comparing these findings to previous literature, the study supports and extends the work of scholars who have emphasized the role of religion in shaping political views, such as the influence of religious values on moral and ethical political decisions (Maltabarova, 2022). However, it also challenges the reductionist approach taken by some scholars, who view religion and politics as separate spheres of influence. This study aligns more closely with the work of authors like Panchenko

dkk (2023), who suggested that religious identity and political engagement are intertwined in complex ways that cannot be fully understood through quantitative analysis alone. Additionally, the findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of political engagement as a process deeply rooted in personal, religious convictions, offering a more holistic view of how individuals navigate the political landscape.

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical, shedding light on the profound relationship between religious identity and political views at a personal level. On a social and cultural scale, these findings highlight the significance of religious beliefs in shaping individuals' political ideologies, underscoring the importance of considering personal, subjective experiences when analyzing political behavior. This study offers a deeper understanding of the ways in which individuals use their religious values as a lens through which they navigate and engage with the political world. Practically, these insights can inform political leaders, policymakers, and religious organizations about how religious identity influences political participation and decision-making. Understanding these dynamics could be vital for addressing political polarization and fostering dialogue between diverse political and religious groups.

Despite the valuable insights provided, this study has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the sample size of 15 participants may not fully capture the diversity of experiences within the broader population, particularly across different religious traditions or geographical contexts (Nicolae, 2023). Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data, collected through in-depth interviews, may have introduced biases related to participants' self-perceptions or social desirability. Furthermore, the study's focus on individuals from specific demographic backgrounds limits its generalizability to other populations. These limitations suggest that future research should consider larger, more diverse samples and explore the experiences of individuals from a variety of cultural and religious contexts.

Looking ahead, the findings from this study offer several avenues for future research. One potential direction is to explore how religious identity and political views evolve over time, particularly in individuals who experience shifts in their religious or political affiliations. Additionally, further studies could examine the impact of specific religious practices or beliefs on political participation in different social contexts (Wan & Palmer, 2020). This research could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how religion functions as a tool for political engagement and how personal experiences can shape broader political movements. Future studies may also investigate the role of religious communities in facilitating or hindering political participation, further expanding on the themes uncovered in this study.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the intersection of religion and politics by examining how individuals' religious identities influence their political views and engagement. The findings reveal that participants' religious beliefs are integral in shaping their political ideologies, often guiding their political decisions and participation in political activities. By focusing on subjective, lived experiences, the study contributes to the understanding of how religious values inform personal political views, an area often overlooked in previous research. This research addresses gaps in the literature by emphasizing the personal, lived experiences of individuals, rather than generalizing across broader social or institutional contexts. Future studies could build on these findings by exploring the evolution of religious and political identities over time or investigating the role of religious communities in political engagement. Further research in these areas could provide deeper insights into the dynamic relationship between religion and politics.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article. All aspects of this study were conducted without any financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the outcomes.

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