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Aversion to and Understanding of God Talk in the Public Sphere: A Survey Experiment

Abstract:

“God talk” occurs when a member of the public gives religious reasons for a policy claim. The legitimacy of God talk is the subject of great debate among sociological and political theorists of the public sphere. There has never been an empirical study of the general public’s views of the legitimacy of God talk itself. Using a vignette survey experiment I find among the overall public that there is a statistically significant but extremely small degree of aversion to hearing God talk. Additionally, respondents claim to be able to understand God talk just as well as claims justified by science. Aversion to hearing and understanding God talk do differ by the religion of the respondent. I conclude with a discussion of how these results may influence theoretical debate about the public sphere.

Aversion to and Understanding of God Talk in the Public Sphere: A Survey Experiment

Presidential candidates, particularly from the Republican party, invoke God to justify their claims. More generally, “God talk” occurs when a member of the public gives religious reasons for a policy claim. A noted social ethicist writes that “‘God talk’ as much as ‘rights talk’ is the way Americans speak” in politics (Elshtain 2001: 39). Yet, whether this is true, and if so, how much God talk is acceptable in public debate has long been controversial. On one side, philosopher Richard Rorty has claimed that people should not use “God talk” because it is a “conversation stopper” (Rorty 2003: 148). On the other side, law professor Stephen Carter claims that a norm against God talk is tantamount to linguistic discrimination against religious people (Carter 1993).

Despite the voluminous debate on the legitimacy of God talk by sociological theorists of the public sphere (Habermas 2006; Calhoun, Mendieta and VanAntwerpen 2013; Warner, VanAntwerpen and Calhoun 2010; Calhoun 2011), and the even more voluminous debate by political theorists, there has been no empirical study of the assumptions these theorists make about the public’s willingness to listen to, and claimed ability to understand, God talk. The present study is then in the tradition of empirical studies that explicitly or implicitly clarify the normative concerns of theorists of the public sphere such as John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas (Perrin 2006; Perrin and Vaisey 2008; Perrin and McFarland 2008; Schneiderhan and Khan 2008; Polletta and Chen 2013; Eliasoph 1998; Evans 2012; Evans 2014).

I investigate the reaction to hearing God talk. By “hearing God talk” I mean participating in a conversation about politics that includes God talk, but I use the shorter term for ease of

expression. I find that the general public has a statistically but not substantively significant aversion to hearing God talk. However, there is stronger aversion from the non-religious. I also find, contrary to expectations, that the public feels they can understand God talk, although again some sub-groups differ.

THEORETICAL RELEVANCE OF AVERSION TO GOD TALK

There are many aspects to the debate about God talk. It is critical to emphasize that the strong version of the theoretical conversation I am contributing to concerns hearing God talk. I have no data on accepting religious justifications. (There is a large literature on that subject summarized below.) I begin by summarizing claims for why aversion is so important to debates about the public sphere, and later do the same for claims about understanding God talk.

Normative consensus among theorists that God talk is impermissible depends on which zone of the public sphere the God talk is occurring. In a bull's-eye metaphor, the center of the target is justifications by elected officials for policies, such as on the floor of Congress. There is strong consensus among theorists that public officials should not justify policies with God talk. In the middle zone are campaigns for public office and interest group mobilization for the passage of laws and policies (Rawls 1993: 215-16). This has not been a topic of extensive theoretical debate. At the outermost zone are discussions among citizens that are in theory the basis of the liberal democratic public sphere, and which influence the center in a more indirect way (McCarthy 1994: 50-54). In this paper I focus on these face-to-face conversations about political issues in the outer zone not only because it is here that the norms for God talk are more contested by political theorists, but because these conversations are of particular importance to

sociologists. I provide two empirical analyses that will contribute to the normative and theoretical debate over God talk: whether the public is truly averse to hearing such talk, and whether members of the public think they can understand such talk.

The basic testable empirical claim of the social and political theorists is that participants in the public sphere are averse to hearing God talk. The most famous proponent of this view is religiously-oriented law professor Stephen Carter, who writes that “one good way to end a conversation . . . is to tell a group of well-educated professionals that you hold a political position . . . because it is required by your understanding of God’s will” (Carter 1993: 23). Atheist Richard Rorty agrees, writing in response to Carter that “the main reason that religion needs to be privatized is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper” (Rorty 1999: 171).

Discrimination

Determining whether aversion to God talk occurs is important for a number of theoretical claims. The first is by conservative Protestant intellectuals who claim they face linguistic discrimination because they are discouraged by listeners from giving their real reasons for positions, but must instead give secular reasons (often called “public reasons” in this literature). As Rogers Smith summarizes, “Many critics . . . contend instead that these ‘public reason’ standards are normatively inappropriate because they discourage religious expression that should be accepted, even encouraged. Public reasons are often deemed to be undemocratic; to privilege secular views unfairly; to limit desirable alternatives in pluralistic societies; and to be politically counterproductive, breeding resentment, not social harmony” (Smith 2008: 276). This results in a “subtle form of religious persecution,” where “the primary threats to democracy come not from

overzealous religious groups seeking to impose their sectarian agenda, but from the exclusionary ideals of democracy and public discourse espoused by liberal elites” (Klemp and Macedo 2009: 209). Similarly, political scientist Hugh Heclo writes that insisting on secular public reasons “is telling religious people to shut up” (Heclo 2007: 125). Empirically, if I find no aversion to hearing God talk, then claims of generalized discursive discrimination are hard to maintain. More specifically, from this normative perspective, I can determine which groups are advocates of discrimination, and this information will help these scholars clarify their claims.

Avoiding Conflict and Violence

The traditional justification among theorists of the liberal public sphere for norms against God talk is the fear of instability and violence. This concern is older than the founding of the U.S., and the main lesson that Locke and his contemporaries took from the 30 years war in the early 17th century. Followers of John Rawls have concluded that “without citizens’ allegiance to public reason and their honoring the duty of civility, divisions and hostilities are bound in time to assert themselves . . . harmony and concord depend on the vitality of the public political culture and on citizens’ being devoted to and realizing the ideal of public reason” (Smith 2008: 274). Another group of theorists write that “political liberals fear the diffidence and divisiveness that deep-seated and particularistic commitments might produce, and . . . believe that it is important to domesticate and to privatize such commitments in order to forestall such dangerous political consequences” (Isaac, Filner and Bivins 1999: 230). This belief is also taught to the public through norms of proper public etiquette. For example, etiquette promoters make declarations such as “never discuss politics or religion.”¹ As a headline of a “Miss Manners” column states: “politics and religion? Don’t go there.”²

In contrast, proponents of God talk disagree that religious discourse leads to conflict and violence. Philosopher of religion Nicholas Wolterstorff notes that “the slaughter, torture, and generalized brutality of our century has mainly been conducted in the name of one or another secular cause – nationalisms of many sorts, communism, fascism, patriotisms of various kinds, economic hegemony. In seventeenth-century Europe, human beings cared deeply about religion. In our century, most have cared more deeply about various secular causes” (Wolterstorff 1997: 78, 80). Many theologians have concluded that the norm against giving religious reasons in the public sphere is “a secularist ruse designed to reduce religion to insignificance” (Stout 2004: 63). To some critics of Rawls, not discussing deep-seated differences seems even more dangerous in the face of religious pluralism because “acknowledging the inevitability of conflict and exclusion . . . helps resist conflict’s tendencies to turn bloody” (Mathewes 2007: 268).

Empirically, if the public is averse to hearing God talk then the concerns of liberal theorists about violence are mollified because God talk is truly discouraged by public norms. However, if the public is not averse to hearing God talk, then at minimum the public disagrees about the dangers of God talk, and at maximum the public is setting itself up for religious conflict. Moreover, identifying which groups that are supportive of or averse to hearing God talk will help the theorists focus on conflict that is more likely to occur.

True Reasons and the Health of the Public Sphere

Rawlsians claim that avoiding God talk provides respect for all members of the public, and thus strengthens the public sphere. In contrast, religiously-inspired critics claim that a norm against God talk damages the public sphere by making it impossible to discuss some vital topics. Secular public reason is a very limited language, claims Stout, so there are “issues that cannot be

resolved solely on the basis of commonly accepted principles.” Often a richer religious language is necessary (Stout 2004: 88).

Others claim that if the purpose of the public sphere is to share reasons for policy proposals, it is not an actual dialogue if one person is not offering their real reasons, which may be religious. Legal scholar Steven D. Smith writes that “it is the imposition (under the heading of ‘public reason’ or similar notions) of artificial constraints on discourse, and in particular the insistence that only secular talk is suitable for public discourse, that stifle conversation” (Smith 2010: 40). Stout thinks that the use of false reasons is itself disrespectful, turning the Rawlsian claim that public reason provides respect for others on its head (Stout 2004: 72). Theologian Michael Banner considers the use of public reason by the religious, a situation where “one partner in a conversation allows his or her contribution to be decisively shaped by the need to avoid disagreement,” to not be “dialogue at all but the absurd (and finally rather patronising) attempt to echo in advance the views of the other” (Banner 1999: 39). Again, the need for this entire theoretical debate about the influence of God talk on the health of the public sphere is thrown into question if there is no aversion to hearing God talk. More precisely, the debate could be clarified by knowing which groups are averse to hearing God talk.

THEORETICAL RELEVANCE OF UNDERSTANDING GOD TALK

A second empirical assumption among political and social theorists concerns people’s ability to understand God talk. For example, political theorist Richard North disagrees with other theorists who say religious reasons are not intelligible, writing that “it is hardly ever the

case that such reasons are unintelligible to secular citizens” (North 2012: 186). However, none of these theorists have evidence about unintelligibility for the public.

The origin of concerns about mutual understanding is that giving reasons that are accessible to all citizens is a cornerstone of liberal democracy. Theorists conclude that there is a “‘reason-giving requirement,’ which calls upon citizens and lawmakers to confront conditions of disagreement by offering one another reasons,” and that these reasons can only be those ‘that others can be reasonably be expected to endorse’” which means avoiding “reasons based on religious doctrines” (Klemp 2010: 5). As Robert Audi summarizes, “when there must be coercion, liberal democracies try to justify it in terms of considerations – such as public safety – that any rational adult citizen will find persuasive and can identify with” (Audi 1997: 16). For theorists, a minimal precondition for persuasion is understanding the argument.

This concern with mutual understanding has resulted in a debate among sociological theorists about how this understanding should occur across religious differences, and particularly between the religious and secular citizens. Habermas (and Rawls) have called for religious people to “translate” their religious reasons to secular reasons to make “religious insights accessible to nonreligious participants in public discourse” (Calhoun 2011: 85). Habermas and Calhoun (and others) debate whether “translation” for understanding is appropriate, or whether citizens should engage in “mutual interrogation” or a “complementary learning process” (Calhoun 2011: 85). Regardless of the exact process, this entire debate is premised on the empirical assumption that God talk is not understandable outside of the specific religious community of the speaker and thus needs to be translated. However, what if religious reasons

are just as intelligible as other reasons? If so, then much sociological theorizing about the public sphere needs to be reconsidered.

EXISTING EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

The debate about the legitimacy and understanding of God talk in the public sphere has occurred almost exclusively on a theoretical level. There is a literature, largely conducted by Djupe and his colleagues, that is not only experimental, as is the case here, but examines, to take the title of a book co-authored by Djupe, “God Talk” (Djupe and Calfano 2014). Djupe and his colleagues are primarily interested in the influence of God talk on political activities and conclusions. For example, one set of studies experimentally examines whether religious phrases (God talk) in political discourse leads respondents to support the candidate or view the speaker as coming from a particular party (Djupe and Calfano 2014: Chapter 3). Even closer to the topic of the present paper is another study examining the effect of giving religious reasons on the odds of the respondent accepting the political position (Djupe and Gwiasda 2010). Another examines the impact of religious or scientific statements on trusting or being ambivalent about the statement (Djupe and Calfano 2014: Chapter 5). These studies are similar to what I am engaged in here, in that they experimentally examine God talk in politics. However, my paper is not concerned with influence per se, but rather empirically examines the political theory question of the acceptability and claimed understanding of using religious arguments, not their impact. That is, my paper is more of an empirical adjunct to the political theory literature than to the American politics literature. One link between this literature and this paper is that non-aversion and understanding are the pre-requisites to being influenced by God talk.

There is another strand of empirical scholarship that contributes to political and social theory of the public sphere which examines the extent to which American religious institutions enact norms of deliberative citizenship. For example, this literature asks whether actual democratic deliberation occurs within churches that lives up to the standards of political theory (Shields 2009; Klemp 2007; Neiheisel, Djupe and Sokhey 2008; Djupe and Neiheisel 2008; Djupe and Olson 2013). This literature is somewhat different from what I am engaged in here as I am focusing on the assumptions the theoretical literature makes about the public's attitudes.

There is also a fairly extensive literature about how religiously motivated social movement activists use religious language (Warren 2001; Hart 2001; Hunter 1991; Wood 2002; Lichterman 2012; Bachtiger et al. 2013; Engelke 2013; Braunstein 2012). For example, Lichterman shows that religious activists use religious discourse to “‘map’ their place in the civic arena,” where groups “define their civic identities and relationships to other groups in concrete settings” (Lichterman 2008: 84, 85). While these studies are informative, their focus on activists and elites place them in the middle zone of the public sphere, not the outer zone of citizen interaction that this paper focuses upon.

Closer to the topic at hand, there is an empirical literature that examines how individuals perceive the influence of religion in the public sphere, but what is meant by influence is extremely general. For example, one survey asked respondents “should religion be a private matter, one that should be kept out of public debate over social and political issues?” Sixty six percent of the public said it should be kept out (and 34% kept in). This masks great variation, with 37% of attending fundamentalists and 85% of the non-religious saying religion should be kept out (Regnerus and Smith 1998: 1357). However, what is meant by “public debate” is

ambiguous here, and I suspect it means, for the respondent, lobbying by religious organizations and activity by the religious right, and not individual level conversations that are the focus of the theoretical literature and this paper.

There are two qualitative studies that examine citizens' aversion to hearing God talk that are informative but not directly comparable to this paper. Alan Wolfe conducted an in-depth interview study of middle class Americans, and generally found that Americans believe in being civil to each other when it comes to religion and politics. They do not want to exclude people from debates because of their religion, are concerned with pushing their views on others, and reject the idea that their religion has all of the answers (Wolfe 1998: Ch. 2).

As part of a broader study, Evans asked mostly religiously active in-depth interview respondents whether they should explain their position on reproductive genetic technologies to a Hindu neighbor "using religious terms or secular terms?" (Evans 2010). Many of the religious respondents wanted to avoid religion altogether, and the others thought that if asked to give reasons behind their secular reasons, they felt they would eventually have to turn to their religious reasons, because it is what they believe (Evans 2010: 162). But, they wanted to at least start a conversation with secular reasons. Evans' sample was small and not nationally representative. Moreover, instead of willingness to hear God talk he was focused upon desire to speak God talk. His finding of people wanting to use God talk at different stages of a conversation is also too detailed to model with the available survey data.

HYPOTHESES

I focus upon the specifically Christian God talk people are most likely to hear. The greater dilemma is in selecting a type of discourse to compare God talk to. There is no neutral discourse in the public sphere, but we can imagine comparing God talk to justifications for arguments based on secular American values, common sense, personal experience and much else. Close examination of the political theory literature that I am ultimately trying to contribute to suggests that liberal theorists' ideal justificatory language should be, in principle, independent of particularistic belief and thus universal. This makes American values, common sense and personal experience ineffective comparisons. Instead I selected justifications based on science, which John Rawls, the most influential of the political theorists, held up as a neutral justificatory language (Rawls 2001: 91-92). Science portrays its findings as objectively true, and thus independent of the beliefs of any group.

While studies have shown that there is at best a very limited conflict between members of religious groups and science over fact claims about nature (Evans 2011), the public thinks of science and religion as distinct idea systems, which may not be the case with religion and values, common sense or personal experience. Of course, not all members of the public will perceive science as neutral and universal, but may see science as promoting a particular morality (Evans 2013). However, the same would be the case for the other possible comparisons. I encourage other investigators to conduct studies that compare God talk to other forms of justification, which would possibly produce different conclusions about God talk.

Hypotheses Concerning Aversion to Hearing God Talk by Particular Groups

The most basic hypothesis is that the public overall, including the majority of the public that identifies with the Christian religion, has an aversion to hearing God talk, and would prefer a

conversation based on science. This hypothesis tests the claims of theorists that religion is a “conversation stopper.” On the other hand, this aversion may not exist because the theorists are reflecting on their own non-representative experience, and the norms of American etiquette may be aspirational and not a description of actual practice:

H1: The overall public will be more averse to talking with someone who is justifying their claims with religious reasons than to talking with someone justifying their claims with scientific reasons

Aversion may depend on the religion of the person hearing the God talk. If, as the theoretical literature suggests, aversion is generated by offense at having to accept ultimately non-shared deep reasons for a policy position, we would expect that those most distant from the Christian tradition would be most averse to Christian God talk. Moreover, there is a growing divide between those who identify with organized religion and those who do not (Hout and Fischer 2014):

H2A: Non-religious and non-Christian religious respondents will be more averse to talking with someone who is justifying their claims with religious reasons than to talking with someone who is justifying their claims with scientific reasons

H1 presumed that the Christian majority sees divides within itself (such as Catholic vs. Protestant) that could be exacerbated by God talk – divides that were the original motivation for the founding of the liberal political sphere. If so, Christians will want to avoid God talk. However, scholars have claimed that by the late 20th century denominational differences between Christians were in decline, leaving a general liberal vs. conservative divide in its wake

(Wuthnow 1988). Moreover, the divide between religious and non-religious identified by Hout and Fischer might result in all Christians feeling they have more in common with each other than with the non-religious. If so, Christians will not be averse to hearing Christian God talk because they do not see fundamental differences between Christians:

H2B: Christians will have no preference between talking with someone who is justifying their claims with religious reasons and someone justifying their claims with scientific reasons

The religious critics of liberalism claim that religion is the first language of religious people, who then have to translate to secular terms to satisfy the norms of the public sphere. This implies that religious people prefer religious justifications. However, this is not likely to be the case for all Christians. American religious traditions differ in their orientation toward public displays of religion, with, for example, mainline Protestants trying to use secular language in public debates (Wuthnow and Evans 2002; Braunstein 2012: 112). Moreover, Catholic elites using the natural law tradition speak in a secular, philosophical register in the public sphere. In fact, Evans found that Catholics tended to not want to use “God talk” at all (Evans 2010: 159). On the other hand, conservative Protestants are the strongest advocates of religious involvement in public life (Regnerus and Smith 1998), and it is the conservative Protestant academics who are the strongest advocates of allowing God talk in the public sphere. Therefore:

H2C: Conservative Protestants will be less averse to talking with someone who is justifying their claims with religious reasons than to talking with someone who is justifying their claims with scientific reasons.

H2D: Mainline Protestants and Catholics will be more averse to talking with someone who is justifying their claims with religious reasons than to talking with someone who is justifying their claims with scientific reasons.

Hypotheses Concerning the Ability to Understand God Talk

One of the reasons that political theorists say that God talk is unacceptable is that it makes it impossible to understand the reasons behind someone's political claims. Theorists then call for various types of translation. However, it is possible that citizens may not think understanding a religious argument requires understanding all the way down to metaphysical principles, and that religious reasons may be understandable enough. Moreover, they may understand God talk just as well as they would understand secular forms of justification, such as science. The null hypothesis is:

H3: The overall public will be less likely to claim they can understand an argument justified by religious reasons than one justified by scientific reasons

Like aversion, understanding may differ by the religion of the listener. From the theoretical literature we would expect that people who do not share the religious beliefs of the speaker will be less able to understand a religious argument. If so:

H4A: The non-religious and non-Christian religious respondents will be less likely to claim they can understand an argument justified by religious claims than one justified by scientific claims

Finally, Christians may find it more difficult to understand a non-religious argument because, as the critics claim, they “think” in the first language of religion and then translate to secular language. If so:

H4B: Christians will be more likely to claim they can understand an argument justified by religious claims than one justified by scientific claims

THE VALUE OF SURVEY ANALYSES TO THEORETICAL AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

This paper is an attempt to communicate to disparate academic audiences that are often non-empirical or qualitative in orientation – most notably political and social theorists, as well as qualitative empiricists. I therefore must discuss the challenges, limitations and contributions of survey research in this area.

The first challenge is that theorists do not state their claims in empirically testable and directly comparable forms with agreed-upon definitions of concepts, so any operationalization will not precisely represent any one theoretical text. Secondly, and relatedly, there is no meso-level theoretical tradition in which to ground hypotheses, so concrete operationalizations must reach all the way up to the most abstract academic statements. An analogue would be a scholar trying to evaluate abstract statements about gender using a survey, but without the meso-level theories of identity.

Surveys are limited in that by necessity they cannot define terms in the questions in great detail. I cannot, for example, determine what each respondent thinks “understanding” a claim means. Another limitation is that the concepts I measure have to fit into a survey question, so I

cannot do justice to the detail and nuance of claims about God talk. For example, I use only a reference to the Christian Bible to stand in for God talk, although obviously there are other types of God talk, such as general references to the transcendent, spiritual claims and even cadences that invoke transcendence. Moreover, I only have one comparison to God talk, which is a scientific justification, whereas an inductive in-depth interview study could see what forms of justification are used when the respondents are not prompted by the researcher. Additionally, I only evaluate one interactional site in the public sphere (interaction among friends), whereas theorists would be interested in discourse in different sites in the public sphere, as well as interaction among these sites.

I believe that necessarily narrow survey research makes a contribution to our understanding. First, the standard justification for national level surveys vs. case studies – representativeness – applies. For example, the two known qualitative case studies of this exact topic seem to have similar geographic biases. Moreover, the experimental design of the survey (see below) eliminates the tendency for respondents to give socially desirable presentations of self, which cannot be controlled in a standard in-depth interview. Second, a necessarily narrow finding from a survey can also contribute to the understanding of an in-depth interview study that produces broad findings because the narrow fits within the broad. For example, an interview study that evaluates every possible type of God talk would need to address the finding about the one particular type of God talk addressed in this paper. Similarly, a political theorist who assumes that people are averse to a much richer definition of God talk would need to explain why people appear to not be averse to the narrow conception of God talk examined in this paper. In sum, the theoretical tradition examined in this paper cannot be precisely and completely

operationalized, but I believe that this partial operationalization of one narrow component of these claims is nonetheless an important contribution. Given the influence of these normative debates in academia, it is critical that their empirical assumptions be as accurate as possible.

METHOD

Data

These data come from a broader survey on religion and science fielded by GfK. GfK maintains an online panel that is representative of the U.S. population, randomly recruited through probability-based sampling using addresses provided by the U.S. Postal Service. GfK provides computer equipment or online access to prospective panel members. Once people have joined the panel they are notified via email that they have been chosen to participate in a survey, which they can take at their convenience. Data from the GfK panel have been extensively used by social scientists. For example, one component of the 2012 American National Election Studies and the sixth wave of the American component of the World Values Survey were fielded by GfK.³

Design

I chose an experimental instead of an observational design because the experimental design allows a stronger claim to causality by eliminating, at least in the basic analyses, the omitted variable problem (Mutz 2011: 9). A second advantage is that the respondent does not see the comparisons being made so they cannot provide a more socially acceptable answer (Mutz 2011: 54, 56, 64). If I had simply asked respondents whether they prefer God talk or

science talk, I might have had people recognizing that they should pick science due to American etiquette or their lack of religion, or perhaps picking religion because of their own religious tradition.

I designed a vignette with three randomly assigned factors resulting in a total of eight conditions in a 2x2x2 factorial design. Each respondent only saw one vignette. The vignette began with “Now we are going to describe an imaginary social situation, and then afterwards ask you some questions about it.” The vignette read:

Robert is a friend of yours. He is trying to [F1: discuss his view with/convince] other friends that [F2: abortion/income inequality] is wrong because [F3: teachings in the New Testament of the Christian Bible tell/the latest published scientific research tells] us that [F2: human life begins at conception. Therefore, to be consistent, abortion should be illegal./unequal societies have conflict between the rich and the poor. Therefore, tax policy should be changed to lessen inequality.]

F1, F2 and F3 refer to the factors, split by the “/”, that were randomly assigned to the respondents. There are then eight possible combinations of the factors. Given the focus of this paper I ignore F1. I focus on F3 and compare the 50% of the members of the sample who saw the religious justification to the 50% who saw the scientific justification. To validate that I can indeed generalize across the two issues (F2) – one “liberal” and one “conservative” – I also conduct sub-analyses for each issue. In general, the effects of F3 are in the same direction for both of the issues (F2) and I interpret each to be variations around the general effect. I leave it to

future research to examine the various suggestive possibilities of somewhat different aversion to and understanding of God talk about different types of issues.

At the end of the vignette, the respondents were asked two questions. The first was “If you were there with Robert, how interested would you be in continuing the discussion of his argument with him? Would you be: Very interested, Interested, Somewhat interested, Not very interested, Not interested at all.” This is the measure of aversion to hearing a conversation about a social/political issue. The second question was “If you talked with Robert for a while, how well do you think you would be able to understand his argument? Extremely well, Well, Somewhat well, Not very well, Not well at all.” This is the measure of claimed ability to understand an argument. Each of these was coded into a five point measure, with the “not interested at all” in further discussion and understanding the argument “not well at all” each receiving the highest number of 5.

If asked of scholars, some of the arguments resulting from the combinations of factors may be more persuasive than others. Most notably, readers versed in the “is/ought” distinction will note that science cannot tell us that life begins at conception, only what happens at conception, with the label “life” being a philosophical or normative claim. However, the follow up question to the vignette – and the topic of this paper – concerns willingness to hear the argument, not agreeing with it, so the quality of the argument is less important.

Moreover, in public discourse, the “is/ought” distinction is regularly ignored. “Science” is consistently invoked for policy arguments without a corresponding normative claim. For example, the science demonstrating anthropogenic global warming is used to justify renewable energy without stating the logically required normative addendum that we do not want to live in

a hotter world. Moreover, claiming that science tells us “life” begins at conception is probably now the most common anti-abortion argument. The anti-abortion movement has tried to claim the mantle of science, and these activists adopted science precisely because it is a powerful justificatory language (Shields 2009). Finally, as I will show below, only 20.8% of respondents claim they will not be able to understand Robert’s scientific anti-abortion claim, which is essentially the same percentage (23.2) who claim they will not be able to understand Robert’s scientific income inequality claim. So, while this claim may not pass philosophical muster, it is a recognizable claim in public discourse.

An even greater challenge in research design was to select a political issue for Robert to be talking about. I wanted to select one that was conservative and one that was liberal so as to make a generalization across political position and narrow in on God talk itself. Ideally I would have selected the same issue but varied Robert’s stance. However, I concluded that there was no one issue that has a truly visible liberal and conservative religious presence in the public sphere and for which there are also credible religious and scientific arguments. Therefore, for the conservative stance I selected Robert making anti-abortion claims, and for the liberal, making claims about mitigating social inequality. In the basic analyses I report overall results with sub-analyses for the two issues. This results in largely variations around the generalization, but with some slight and suggestive patterns. I lack the additional data to explain this variance, and hope that future research can address which issues result in more or less acceptance and understanding of God talk.

Method of Analysis

H1 and H3 make claims about the entire population and the other hypotheses make claims about sub-populations. I conduct bivariate associations, and examine whether respondents who see a “God talk” vignette score higher on the aversion scale than those who see the scientific justification vignette. The relationship between an experimentally manipulated factor and the dependent variable is not subject to confounding effects because by design there can be no correlation between any other independent variable and the manipulated factor. Therefore, there is no need to control for other variables (Mutz 2011: 123). To confirm there are not fundamentally different processes for the two issues I conduct sub-analyses for each.

The stated hypotheses consider aversion and understanding as thresholds within a group, with the question being, for example, whether the group is more averse to a religious argument than to a scientific one. However, the theoretical literature, which was not developed with testable hypotheses in mind, could also generate a parallel set of hypotheses. That is, the reader might want to consider each of the hypotheses to be relative to the overall amount of aversion in the population. For example, the reader may not be interested in whether the non-religious are averse, but whether their level of aversion is different than that of Christian religious groups.

The latter question moves the analysis into a regression framework. I use ordered logistic regression models where the key variable of interest is an interaction effect between the God talk dummy variable and a particular group. This tests whether the degree of aversion to hearing God talk is different between the group and the reference group. The regression model also controls for variables that could confound the relationship between the sub-group and the dependent variable. I control for education, gender, race and age, all of which could be expected to co-vary with the sub-groups and the dependent variables. It is particularly important to control for

gender because I had to select a gender for the protagonist in my vignette. It is possible that female respondents may be averse to hearing a man argue about these issues – abortion in particular. There may also be gender differences in the level of desire for political conversation. For parsimony I focus on the basic hypotheses using the association analysis, and primarily provide the regression analysis for those interested in the relative analysis.

Variables Measuring Religion

I generally follow quantitative research on religion and science in differentiating between respondents who focus upon religion enough to participate in it, and those who have an identity but do not participate (Evans 2011). Therefore, religious dummy variables have an attendance threshold set at claiming to attend religious services “several times a year” or more.

Mainline and conservative Protestants were divided following the coding scheme of Steensland and his colleagues (Steensland et al. 2000). The conservative Protestants in this scheme were further divided into literalist and non-literalists. Those regular attenders in a conservative Protestant denomination who also claimed that “the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word” are coded as literalist conservative Protestants. Those who claimed that the “the Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything should be taken literally, word for word” or the (quite rare in this group) response of “the Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by man” are coded as non-literalist conservative Protestants. Previous studies of religion and science have shown that literalist and non-literalist conservative Protestants often have different views of religion and science (Evans 2011; Evans 2013).⁴

I created a dummy variable indicating the respondent is Catholic, and also placed all non-Christian religious respondents into one dummy variable. I do not use an attendance threshold for the latter because there are not enough non-Christian yet religious respondents in the sample. In contrast to the coding scheme advocated by Steensland and colleagues, I do not put black Protestants into a distinct variable because they have very low numbers in the sample. I combine them with the two conservative Protestant groups because they are more like conservative Protestants in their theology and attitudes on social issues than they are like mainline Protestants (Greeley and Hout 2006: 33).

A religious minority variable for groups like Muslims and Buddhists would usually include Christians who do not fit into the conservative Protestant/mainline/Catholic categorization, such as Mormons and the Eastern Orthodox. Instead, I put these Christians in a distinct variable because they would be expected to have a different reaction to Christian God talk than a non-Christian would.⁵ I will not make claims about these few “other” Christians, but will include this variable in regression models to ensure that the proper comparisons to the reference group are made.

Those who claim that their religious tradition is “not religious/none,” “agnostic,” “atheist” or who refused to answer the initial religion classification question were placed in a non-religious dummy variable. This is a total of 18.0% of the population, a figure roughly consistent with other contemporary measures (Hout and Fischer 2014). The remainder of the sample are those who have a Christian religious identity but who do not participate in religious activities, and they are placed into one dummy variable.

So, in sum, I have dummy variables for high attending literalist conservative Protestants, non-literalist conservative Protestants, mainline Protestants, Catholics, and other Christians; as well as measures for non-Christian religious respondents regardless of attendance level, the non-religious and a final variable for respondents who have a Christian religious identity, but who do not participate in their religion by attending services.⁶ Refusal to answer any question resulted in that case receiving a missing value.⁷

RESULTS: AVERSION TO HEARING GOD TALK

When discussing the size of an effect I report the percent of respondents who are “averse,” defined as those who are “not very interested” or “not interested at all” in continuing the conversation. For the Spearman’s Rho tests of statistical significance, I use all of the ordered categories of the variable, which provides for a more general test. Examining the first two entries in the first row in Table 1 shows that respondents are generally averse to a conversation with Robert, no matter how he is justifying his arguments, with nearly half being averse. This is a confirmation of the sociological literature that shows that Americans avoid talking about issues when framed as being political (Eliasoph 1998; Bennett et al. 2013).

Insert Table 1 Here

The third column compares the percent averse to God talk to the percent averse to scientific justifications. This evaluates Hypothesis 1, and shows that there is more aversion to continuing the conversation if Robert is using religious instead of scientific reasons. The Spearman’s Rho of .038 indicates an association between the five category “continue discussion”

variable and the dichotomous variable indicating that the vignette either described Robert justifying his claim with science or religion, and this is significant at the $p < .05$ level.

This difference is only 4.7 percentage points. There are over 3600 cases in this analysis, and this difference would not be statistically significant were the data set to only have 1600 cases, as is common in survey research. For some research questions a substantively small but statistically significant effect can go unremarked upon because the question is whether there is an effect at all, or because the small effect represents a process that would compound over time to produce a larger substantive effect. For this paper the theoretical relevance of the effect only exists if the effect is large enough to be noticed by participants in the public sphere. For example, both Rorty and Carter claim that they can perceive that when someone justifies a claim with God talk, it is a “conversation stopper.” While I have no way of precisely establishing a threshold of noticeability, it seems unlikely that someone would notice the pattern suggested by the data: if 46 of 100 people wanted to stop a conversation justified with religion and 42 of 100 wanted to stop a conversation justified by science. H1 is nonetheless technically supported. The results show that there is a statistically but not substantively significant aversion to hearing God talk.

The next two lines break out the data by whether the respondent was randomly selected to see the abortion or income inequality vignette. The results are largely the same except that if anything the effect is being driven by aversion to God talk in a conversation about inequality than in a conversation about abortion, with a 3.9 percentage point justification gap for abortion and a 5.7 gap for inequality. It is an important finding that reaction to God talk does not

fundamentally differ by whether the argument being justified by God talk is conservative or liberal.

Non-Christian Sub-Group Analyses in Aversion to Hearing God Talk

The second section in Table 1 shows that for respondents who are non-religious, there is a 12.9 percentage point difference in not wanting to continue discussion when shown the religion vs. science vignettes. The Rho shows that this is statistically significant and therefore the non-religious are averse to hearing God talk. H2A is supported. While this difference would probably be noticeable, the non-religious are not monolithically opposed to God talk, with 42.5% (100-57.5) reporting interest in continuing the discussion when Robert is using God talk.

The next row shows an effect of similar magnitude for the non-Christian religious respondents. However, it is not statistically significant, presumably due to the much smaller N. I speculate that had I obtained an over-sample of religious minorities I would have found a statistically significant effect.

Examining the separate analyses for the abortion and inequality vignettes for these two groups of non-Christian respondents, we see that the effect is being driven by a greater degree by aversion to God talk about inequality, not by abortion. We could speculate that non-Christians see all anti-abortion discourse, scientific or otherwise, to be essentially religious, and thus the science aversion is higher than it “should” be. Regardless, as a generalization across liberal and conservative issues we see that there is a propensity to be somewhat averse to God talk, with 12.9 and 17.0 percentage point gaps, respectively.

Christian Sub-Group Analyses in Aversion to Hearing God Talk

The third section in Table 1, with sub-sections corresponding to a group analysis, show that among the literalist and non-literalist conservative Protestant attenders, Catholics and low attending Christians, there is no difference in their desire to continue conversation if the claims are justified using religion or science. Christians do not have a preference for God talk, including conservative Protestants, and will be equally willing to discuss a topic using religious or scientific justifications. H2B is then supported, and Christians do not now have a concern with God talk, if they ever did. This also means that H2C is not supported, and God talk is not the preferred language of the conservative Protestants. H2D is also not supported in that Catholics and mainline Protestants are not more averse to God talk than to science talk.

However, the results from the mainline Protestants are anomalous. Close examination suggests that the difference is not driven by God talk but by the ostensibly neutral science discourse, in that mainliners are overall more averse to science talk. This is consistent with the literature on attitudes toward science. Evans found that it is mainline Protestants, and not conservative Protestants, who, due to concerns about scientific influence over society, had the least confidence in the people running scientific institutions (Evans 2013: 377).

Examination of the sub-analyses for the abortion and inequality vignettes shows that the mainline, Catholic and low attending Christian analyses reveal expected variation underneath a main effect. However, the two conservative Protestant groups have small effects in different directions: they are more averse to God talk than science-talk in a discussion about abortion, but less averse to God talk than science-talk in discussion about inequality. However, each sub-analysis is not statistically significant, even when I combined the two groups into one general

conservative Protestant group to have an increased N (not shown). Therefore, the generalization is that conservative Protestants are not averse to, or preferential to, God talk.

The analyses reported in Table 1 examine whether particular religious groups, considered in isolation, are averse to hearing God talk. The reader may be interested in comparative levels of aversion between groups, and each of the hypotheses could have been stated as a comparison and remain consistent with the theoretical literature. To make this comparison, I assign the non-religious as the reference group in a regression model, so that each interaction effect evaluates the difference in the level of aversion to hearing God talk compared to scientific talk by a religious group, compared to the non-religious. (For brevity I do not include models for each set of issue vignettes.) The interaction effects in Column 1 in Table 2 show that the only significant differences in levels of aversion are between the literalist high attending conservative Protestants and the non-religious, as well as the mainline Protestants, and the non-religious. Besides the anomalous mainline Protestant finding (explained above), the conclusion is that the non-religious are somewhat more averse, but their aversion is only stronger than that of the literalists who actually have a small (but non-significant) preference for God talk (Table 1).⁸

Insert Table 2 Here

RESULTS: UNDERSTANDING GOD TALK

I now turn to analogous analyses of the other dependent variable – the claimed ability to understand Robert’s argument. To efficiently discuss the size of the effect I report the percent

who “do not understand,” who are those who said they would understand Robert “not very well” or “not well at all.” Comparing the percentages and the Rho in the first row of Table 3 shows, contrary to H3, that the religious justification, in contrast to the scientific one, does not result in any less understanding. That means that the political theorists’ premise for keeping religious language out of the public sphere is not supported by the public – the public does not think they will have a harder time understanding a claim if it is expressed with religion than with science. Sub-group analyses show that respondents are no more likely to understand a religious argument about abortion or income inequality, and that there is no differential understanding for conservative and liberal claims.

Insert Table 3 Here

Of course, it should also be important for political theorists that there are some groups of people who cannot understand God talk. The second section in Table 3 shows that the non-religious respondents claim to understand religious claims less than scientific claims – a 8.4 percentage point statistically significant gap. H4A is supported. This effect is more driven by the income inequality than the abortion vignettes, with the non-religious displaying a marked confidence in their understanding of scientific explanations of inequality compared to other groups. The religious non-Christians do not claim less understanding of a Christian religious argument compared to a scientific argument. We then have a mixed result with H4A, with the non-religious supporting and the religious non-Christians not supporting the hypothesis.

If the first language of the religious respondents is religion, then they should better understand religious arguments than scientific ones. High attending literalist conservative Protestants do claim to understand religious claims better (a 4.5 percentage point gap). This is more driven by the abortion vignettes than the inequality vignettes, which makes sense given that members of this group are probably already aware of religious anti-abortion arguments. The presumably less familiar arguments about inequality show no gap. The other Christian groups claim no difference in understanding between religious and scientific arguments. H4B is supported, but only for the most conservative of the Protestants. Respondents who identify with Christianity but who do not participate are an anomaly, and have a slightly greater percent of respondents claiming to not understand science.

The religion interaction effects in the final column in Table 2 show that the level of the gap in claimed understanding for the non-religious is statistically the same as for all of the Christian groups except the attending literalist conservative Protestants and the low attending Christians. This is expected given that the effects for the non-religious and the literalist conservative Protestants are the opposite of each other.

DISCUSSION

In contrast to the assumptions of the political theorists and the norms of American etiquette, there is no substantive level of aversion to hearing God talk in the public sphere among the general population. However, there is a small statistically significant effect, so small that it seems unlikely to be noticeable. The theorists should emphasize in future work that linguistic

discrimination or the defense of civility, depending on their normative perspective, is not a generalized phenomena, but is concentrated in certain groups.

The non-religious are averse to hearing God talk, and it appears that the non-Christian religious respondents are as well, although there are too few of these respondents in the sample to formally reach that conclusion. Each of the separately measured Christian groups is not averse to God talk, nor do they prefer it. In analyses comparing groups, the degree of aversion for the non-religious is the same as it is for all of the religious groups except that literalist conservative Protestants, who are significantly different than the non-religious only because of their slight preference for God talk. Put differently, the non-religious are only statistically different when compared with the one religious group that has a preference for God talk. I suspect that Rorty, Carter and other theorists are actually describing experiences in extremely unusual populations, such as those with doctorates in humanities disciplines in research universities. If the Christian public was ever opposed to God talk because of fear of sectarian tension, or because it would not be understood, this is no longer the case.

Much of the basis of theoretical prohibitions against God talk is that it is in principle not understandable by all of the citizens, and therefore a political decision based on reasons that citizens cannot ultimately accept is not legitimate. However, the public in general does not claim to understand God talk any less than science talk. This does mask differences within the population, with the non-religious claiming less understanding, the most theologically conservative Protestants claiming the more understanding of God talk and others claiming no difference.

CONCLUSION

Some critics of Rawls say that there should be no norms discouraging God talk. For example, Stout writes “my advice, therefore, is to cultivate the virtues of democratic speech, love justice, and say what you please” (Stout 2004: 85). Evans describes his interviewees as having a “strong commitment to this very American idea that ‘you can say anything you want to me, I just don’t have to be convinced by you.’ Respondents, even secular respondents, are very concerned that religious people be given a fair chance to tell their religious views to everyone” (Evans 2010: 169). This paper also shows that Americans overall are just not very averse to hearing God talk, and I suspect the dominant position is that they will listen to any argument, but just may not be convinced by it.

The data analyzed here suggests that claims that religion is a “conversation stopper,” or that religious people face linguistic discrimination, are exaggerations. Political theorists should in their writings account for the fact that Americans overall are not averse to hearing God talk. Moreover, these data suggest that concerns about an unhealthy public sphere where people are unable to express certain ideas seem overblown.

These normative expectations for the use of religious claims in the public sphere were developed in an era when the public and the public spheres in Western societies were more religious. In an earlier era, secular reasons were expected to be the lingua franca between different types of Christians that would keep another war between religions from occurring – like the thirty years’ war of the 17th century that was the object lesson for early theorists of the liberal public sphere. This paper suggests that Christians no longer see the need for a secular lingua franca. In the past few decades theorists have written about secular reasons not as a lingua franca among the religious but as a means of communication between religious and secular

citizens, or between people from extremely different religions (Calhoun 2011). My results suggest that this theoretical move was justified.

The most identifiable non-Christian group that is averse to hearing and not understanding God talk is the 18% of the public (in this sample) who are non-religious. I suspect that with more data I would have also found that members of non-Christian traditions are averse to Christian God talk as well.

Given that aversion to God talk is largely found among the non-religious and non-Christian population, theorists of the public sphere should consider shifting the debate from concern about violence and the health of the public sphere to minority rights and religious freedom. One argument could be that God talk is uncivil because, while most people do not mind it, and claim to be able to understand it, the non-religious are somewhat averse to it, and are somewhat more likely to claim to not understand it. Therefore, in the same way that majorities should respect the rights of minorities, the majority of the public should respect the aversion of the non-religious (and probably religious minorities).

This would correspond with a slow shift in the intellectual justification for constitutional protections for religious freedom. Originally justified using Christian theology itself, as well by a need to avoid conflict between types of Christians, in recent years the Supreme Court has been shifting to a “nonalienation rationale,” where “religious freedom helps to avoid offending citizens who adhere to minority religious faiths or to none at all, thus helping all citizens to feel like full members of the political community” (Smith 1991: 197).

The greatest re-thinking for political theorists should result from the finding that the public thinks it can equally understand God talk and science talk. Again, the non-religious differ,

but they are primarily statistically different from the literalist conservative Protestants, and only then because the latter group actually claims to understand religious arguments better than scientific arguments. There is no difference between the non-religious and most religious people in the U.S. Theorists should consider if it matters to their theories if the public thinks it can equally understand religious arguments. The theoretical assumption is that the religion of someone else cannot be understood all the way back to first principles, but it is possible that this is an impossible standard in the public sphere.

Political and social theorists make normative claims. However, empirical realities should be relevant in that the normative claims often rest upon empirical assumptions about the population – such as the idea that religion is a conversation stopper. Moreover, the theoretical literature on God talk is rich and detailed. In this study I am able to focus on only a few of the claims in the literature and in a necessarily basic way. However, these basic empirical findings do challenge a number of the more detailed claims in this literature, and theorists should account for these findings in their future assumptions about how the public reacts to God talk.

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ENDNOTES

¹. <http://www.emilypost.com/on-the-job/workplace-relationships/1062-avoid>

-political-pitfalls This discourse is ubiquitous. For example, the great great granddaughter of Emily Post started her advice for how to discuss politics with the following: “Not everyone can pick a fish fork out of the cutlery line up, but most of America made it through childhood with a few ground rules of inviolable etiquette in place: say please and thank you; don't chew with your mouth open; cut the price tag off a gift; if you can't say anything nice, talk about the weather. Just don't, for goodness sake, ever talk about politics or religion at the dinner table!”

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anna-post/the-etiquette-of-talking-_b_87893.html

². <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article>

</2010/04/13/AR2010041304109.html>

³. Between December 27, 2013 and January 13, 2014 GfK surveyed 9900 respondents from the general public for the Religious Understandings of Science Survey. The survey contained extensive measures of the religiosity of the respondents. Between 8/27/14 and 9/2/14 I fielded a survey with a sample drawn via simple random sampling from the respondents to the first study, resulting in 3587 responses. This latter survey contained questions about how the respondent defined a human being, as well as the vignette examined in this paper. The questions about human beings are used in a different publication. The questions I use in this paper about religious and political identity, as well as moral attitudes, were asked on the first survey, eliminating any concern about question-order or priming effects. I use the standard GfK post-stratification weights which include gender, race, education, income and census region.

⁴

. In earlier work I labeled the two groups fundamentalists and evangelicals, respectively. This is too imprecise a use of the term “fundamentalist,” so I use more precise but less parsimonious labels. For a detailed justification of this operationalization of religion, see Evans (2011: 716-17).

⁵. This variable also includes about 10% of the conservative Protestants who in the initial sorting questions did not know they were Protestants or did not select the identity “just Christian,” but who

could later be identified as identifying with a conservative Protestant denomination. Due to their initial response, these people were not asked the Bible question and therefore could not be sorted into the two types of conservative Protestants. They have less than half the rate of achieving an undergraduate degree as the literalist conservative Protestants, and one third the rate of the non-literalist conservative Protestants, suggesting that this group is a particularly uninformed part of the conservative Protestant community.

⁶. The first sorting question asked about religious affiliation, and is similar to the General Social Survey question, with choices such as Protestant, Catholic, “just Christian,” various religious minorities, and categories of non-belief. Those who claimed to be Protestant, just Christian or “something else” were asked “what specific denomination or tradition do you consider yourself to be,” followed by 54 choices. I sorted these into mainline and conservative Protestants (Steensland et al. 2000). The fifty fifth choice was “other,” selected by 6.7% of the respondents, and these qualitative responses were manually coded into the variables. Blank, “none,” and non-institutional/individual responses (“I believe in light”) were coded as non-religious. Statements like “bible believing” were coded as conservative Protestant.

⁷. The descriptive statistics for the variables are as follows: The N for all variables is 3587. The mean for age is 47.44. The remainder of the variables are dichotomous. The percent of the sample in each category is: Non-Religious (18.0), Non-Christian Religious (5.4), Attending Literalist Conservative Protestants (9.4), Attending non-Literalist Conservative Protestants (10.0), Attending Mainline Protestants (7.6), Attending Catholics (13.5), Low attending Christian (30.8), BA Degree or More (29.4), Some College (29.3), African American (11.3), Hispanic (14.2), Other Ethnic Identity (7.6), Woman (51.8).

⁸. Like most ordered logistic models (Long and Freese 2014: 331), the models in this paper violate the parallel lines assumption. Since the Brant diagnostic does not accept weights, I used the autofit function in the gologit2 program (at $p=.05$) to diagnose variables that violate the assumption (Williams 2006). I then fit the partial proportional odds model, which fits the variables that do not

violate the assumption as an ordered logit, and fits the variables that violate the assumption separately for each divide in the dependent variable. I report the more parsimonious ordered logit results in the text of the paper.

The first model is the only one where the partial model could have a different substantive conclusion than the regular ordered logit model. The literalist conservative Protestant attender interaction effect with the God talk variable is not parallel. The coefficient is -1.50 ($p=.000$) for 2-5 vs. 1; -1.06 ($p=.001$) for 3-5 vs. 1-2; -.567 ($p=.097$) for 4-5 vs. 1-3; and -.530 ($p=.204$) for 5 vs. 1-4. That is, the difference in aversion is only found in being “very interested” vs. lesser interests and “interested” vs. lesser interest. It is not found between the interested responses and degrees of disinterest. This way of describing the data is far more specific, but generally consistent with, the substantive conclusion from the ordered logit model.