

# Religious Belief and the Experience of Violence

## *Survivor Testimony from the United States and India*\*

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### **Abstract**

How does religious faith—attitudes or beliefs influenced by participation in faith traditions—shape how people cope with violence? Social scientists recognize coping with loss as a key social function of religion, but political science research has mostly examined religion as identity or practice, not beliefs that can influence opinions and behaviors after violence. This paper draws on interviews with family members of homicide victims in the United States and survivors of anti-Sikh pogroms in India to show how religious beliefs aid with coping and sense-making, and through that process are associated with later political engagement, emotional experiences, and attitudes about blaming and punishing perpetrators. Testimony from about sixty interviews reveals variation in the way religiously-observant survivors from the same faith traditions rely on religious beliefs to explain their actions and preferences. From these interviews, the paper develops a set of hypotheses about how religious belief shapes the experience and consequences of violence victimization, and concludes with directions for research on the role of individual faith and metaphysical belief in the aftermath of violence.

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## 1 Introduction

The sacred texts of many major faiths each contain a rather catholic range of prescriptions and commentaries on how the believer should respond when encountering violence in the world. In the Christian Bible, Moses condones retributive murder likely in an effort to minimize the damage of blood feuds (Numbers 35, NRSV), and tells the Israelites in Deuteronomy to “show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (19:21, NRSV). The same Moses also says, though, that “Vengeance is [God’s] and recompense,” (Deuteronomy 32:35, NRSV), and tells the Israelites “Do not seek revenge” (Leviticus 19:18, NRSV).

This range is not particular to the God of the Old Testament. The Gospel according to Matthew famously commands the followers of Jesus to ‘turn the other cheek’ and not resist an evildoer, regardless of what they may have heard *via* Moses. But Paul’s Epistle to the Romans notes that some humans wielding state authority can take vengeance in God’s name: “[The agent of the state] is the agent of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:4, NRSV). A person looking to the Bible for guidance on how to respond to violence could credibly find support for different paths.

The same is true in other faith traditions. Sikhism, whose sacred texts are among the newest of major world religions, likewise contains varying perspectives on violence and retribution in the Guru Granth Sahib (the hymns of the first Sikh Gurus), or the writings of the later Gurus. Readers of Ang (page) 134 of the Guru Granth Sahib, for example, see a prescription from Guru Arjun Dev that resembles Deuteronomy: “As you plant, so shall you harvest; your destiny is recorded on your forehead.” About 120 pages later in the writings of the same Guru Arjun Dev, there is a contrary message: “One who does not answer back, and does not harbor vengeance – the Lord protects that person” (Ang 259).

Guru Gobind Singh, the last human Sikh guru whose father (the penultimate guru) and heirs were all killed by the Mughal empire, records an endorsement of violence under certain conditions in the twenty second verse of his *Zafarnama*, an epistle in Persian to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb: “All modes of redressing the wrong having failed, raising of sword is pious and just.” The Guru Granth Sahib he compiled and declared the eternal Guru, though, declaims “Those who beat you with their fists — do not pay them back in kind. Kiss their feet, and return to your own home” (Ang 1378).

Why does the posture toward revenge and retribution in religious texts matter to social scientists trying to understand human behavior? Political scientists and other social scientists have established that experiencing and recovering from violence can affect attitudes and political behavior, in sometimes surprising ways

(among many Blattman, 2009; Bateson, 2012; Bauer et al., 2016; Hartman and Morse, 2020). Theoretical expectations in this literature often stipulate that political responses to violence are relatively uniform, or at least directionally consistent for individuals experiencing the same violence. As a result, this literature often does not explain why or how people who survive similar experiences diverge sharply in their emotional responses, their attitudes, or their subsequent political behavior. I argue that the wide range of roles that religion can play in the coping and recovery process is one avenue toward addressing this puzzle.

The metaphysical content and behavioral prescriptions from religious systems help people deal with violence. During violence and in its wake, people naturally seek explanations for the aberrant events they have experienced (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Janoff-Bulman and Frantz, 1997). Going without an explanation, perpetuating a “discrepancy between the event and the person’s global meaning system” (Park, 2010), creates enduring distress and hinders adjustment. Religious beliefs are an important source of meaning and support for people coping with loss (Durkheim, 1912; Park, 2005)—especially violent loss (Updegraff, Silver and Holman, 2008)—because in a context where other systems for explanation and understanding often fail, they help people assign meaning to their experiences and establish priorities for the future (Stephens et al., 2012). The answers that religious frameworks provide—answers to questions like “why did I experience violence?” or “how should I respond?”—have substantial power to shape the political attitudes and behaviors of survivors.

Religious belief and its relationship to personal conduct is also one of the least studied aspects of religion in political science, which has focused primarily on religion as a source of group identity (among many Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Horowitz, 1985; Brass, 1994) or an identity signifier (Margolis, 2018), as a social practice or repertoire (Verba, Brady and Schlozman, 1995; Putnam, 2001; Berman, 2009), or as a pillar of political philosophy that explains how elites structure party politics and the institutions of state (Kalyvas, 1996; Grzymala-Busse, 2024).<sup>1</sup>

A small strain of political science and economics literature has focused on the imperatives of different religions for personal behavior, taking seriously the possibility that doctrine, ritual, and practice have political effects.<sup>2</sup> Studying conflict, Hassner (2016) documents how religious doctrine shapes battlefield decision-making in conventional warfare, and Allie (2024), Brooke, Chouhoud and Hoffman (2023) and Van Noort and Goyal (2025) all detail how the timing of rituals like Islamic prayers and Hindu festivals shape the expression of political attitudes and create opportunities for inter-religious riots. In other areas,

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<sup>1</sup>Scholars like Grzymala-Busse (2012) and Kettell (2024) argue that the field has paid insufficient attention *in general* to religion as a cause (and effect) of important political dynamics.

<sup>2</sup>The political and economic *causes* of doctrinal variation have received less attention (but see Nielsen, 2017, 2020).

scholars have found that adherence to religious ritual practices is linked to economic growth (Campante and Yanagizawa-Drott, 2015) and outgroup attitudes (Clingingsmith, Khwaja and Kremer, 2009), or that receiving religious vs. non-religious messages shapes attitudes about inter-group relations (Grossman, Nomikos and Siddiqui, 2023), pro-social behavior (Condra, Isaqzadeh and Linardi, 2019) and gender equality (Masoud, Jamal and Nugent, 2016), or even actual incidence of political violence (Graham, 2026). Perhaps alone in doing so, McClendon and Riedl (2015, 2019) study the *specific content* of religious messages as a driver of political participation. They show that beyond priming identity and practice, varying the content of Christian sermons shapes the extent and nature of engagement in the normal politics of elections.

Religious beliefs should be, if anything, even more important in shaping people's outlook and behavior during violence than in the electoral politics that McClendon and Riedl study. Experiencing violence and loss automatically engages metaphysical and moral concerns where religious teaching is especially authoritative. Because different scriptural and doctrinal references strike different and not necessarily harmonious notes even within the same denominations, the sets of meaning to which people are led by their faith should vary depending on the particular content of the beliefs they engage. Evangelical Christians who, after experiencing violence, primarily reflect on messages about forbearance and divine judgment might contextualize their experiences very differently than people who suffer the same loss, share the same faith and the same level of religiosity, but who focus on teachings about eternal life to cope with loss. Either might end up having more beliefs and behaviors in common with people of *other* faiths than with co-religionists who focus on different aspects of doctrine.

This variation may explain why religious beliefs are a small part of political science explanations for attitudes and behavior: Using religious faith to make meaning after violence doesn't necessarily imply a particular outcome, even holding constant religious denomination and personal religiosity. Looking more deeply at the metaphors, ideas, and prescriptions that people consider highlights the potentially large role that religion plays in the process of recovery and re-orientation after violence. The apparent un-importance of denomination and religiosity in the political science literature on post-violence attitudes and behaviors is less puzzling after accounting for the fact that the same faith tradition often condones different responses that a survivor can adopt or not depending on the particular beliefs and scripture that they engage.

In this paper, I use evidence from roughly 60 in-depth psychological interviews conducted with individuals who experienced and survived political violence to show how religious frames are invoked by people trying to process danger and loss, and how certain religious teachings, metaphors, and aspects of doctrine covary with political behaviors and beliefs about blame, justice, and the individual's role in the polity. Interview

respondents come from two very separate communities: Roughly half the interviewees are Chicagoans (mostly mothers) who lost family members to homicides between 2015 and 2017 (Milliff, 2023), the other half are Indian Sikhs who survived violence either in anti-Sikh urban pogroms in 1984, or in a rural insurgency in the following decade (Milliff, 2024).

Both sets of interviews were originally conducted to explore the connection between political responses to violence (either dealing with loss after the fact, or trying to ensure safety in the face of ongoing danger) and aspects of emotion and cognition. Each interview discussed respondents' experiences of violence, their beliefs about its causes and consequences, their emotions, behaviors, and social relationships. Respondents made it clear that, for many of them, religious faith was an important interpretive lens and source of guidance for all of these issues. In the course of our conversations, 90% of respondents organically made *multiple* mentions of religious beliefs, texts, or practices as part of their life during or after violence.<sup>3</sup>

I re-analyze these interviews to focus on the mentions of religion that respondents introduced (unsolicited) into the conversation, and examine the role that religious belief plays for respondents recounting acute exposures to political violence, or experiencing the aftermath of violent loss. First, using a combination of human labeling and Large Language Models (LLMs), I categorize mentions of religion in the interview transcripts into a wide range of themes. I show that survivors of violence invoke religion in very different ways, even when they have confronted similar violence, belong to the same religious communities, and have similar pre-existing levels of religiosity. Some people invoke religion as part of coping with loss or trauma, or to justify/encourage forgiveness toward people who harmed them or their loved ones. Others draw on the same religious texts and teachings to think through conundrums about justice and revenge, the relative agency of God and human beings in bringing about violence, and the morally right and wrong ways to live after violence. Some invoke religion as a source of distress or distrust after violence, emphasizing the way that religious leaders have corrupted themselves or their faith, or foregrounding how experiencing violence has made them question the beneficence or existence of God.

Recourse to religious belief and faith is variable but not necessarily random. One of the most important things religion seems to do is activate distinct theories of justice, blame, and recompense after violence. Certain themes—particularly moral retribution and forgiveness—appear regularly in interviews with people from both India and Chicago, and their appearance in conversation is associated with divergent political

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<sup>3</sup>The demographics portion of the interview guide asked about religious identity, church attendance, and social engagement *via* religious communities, but did not ask any questions about religious belief or practice related to violence.

and social outcomes, suggesting that the content of religious belief, not simply its presence or intensity, is what shapes how survivors respond to violence. People whose discussion of religion focuses more on moral retribution end up prioritizing political institutions less in their vision of appropriate redress for the harms they have suffered. People whose discussion of religion centers on coping and finding solace, by contrast, tend to be more positively oriented towards political action and political engagement.

These particular patterns may be specific to the particular religious communities and political violence contexts represented by the sixty interview respondents whose conversations I analyze. The existence of patterns in general, however, is evidence that the content of religious belief helps structure sense-making, preferences about punishment, and perhaps even orientation toward political involvement more broadly in the wake of violence. Beliefs and doctrinal prescriptions provide interpretive frameworks and cognitive resources to help people make sense of chaotic, unusual, and emotional situations. Making sense of the nuanced relationship between religious ideas and coping with violence requires knowing much more than a person's religious affiliation and worship habits. By looking more deeply at the particular theological constructs that people choose to focus on during and after violence, the potentially variable content of religious belief emerges as an important consideration linking religious faith to political life after violence.

## **2 Religion as a Source of Attitudes and Behaviors**

People who are exposed to violence often experience it as an event that ruptures the “orienting systems” (Park, 2010) they use to make sense of their environment. Some literature in social psychology points to the discrepancy in meaning caused by traumatic experience as an important cause of psychological distress after violence (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Park, 2010; Nygaard and Heir, 2012; George and Park, 2022). Recovery or re-equilibration after a traumatic experience requires people to reduce the discrepancy between their understanding of what they experienced and their broader set of beliefs and goals (Ehlers and Clark, 2000; Beierl et al., 2019).

Early social scientists recognized religion as a paramount resource for this process of “meaning-making” after disruptive life events. Emile Durkheim (1912) argued that participation in religious ritual built social identity and group solidarity via shared moral frameworks. Max Weber (2013) focused attention on doctrine, writing during World War I that religious traditions could be distinguished by how they justified or interpreted suffering, and how they dealt with the problem of theodicy, or squared belief in benevolent, powerful divinity with the experience of a flawed world.

More modern social science, largely in social psychology, suggests that recourse to religion as a source of meaning is especially important after violent loss, when secular explanations are more likely to fall short. Religious belief is thought to be a well-equipped guide in these situations insofar as it helps people (or is even designed to help people) comprehend deep metaphysical questions like those about loss and suffering (Geertz, 1993). People who experience violent loss, often but not exclusively people who have pre-existing religious attachments, turn to religious belief to help contextualize their experiences (i.e. answer questions about what has happened and what it means), and then repair damage to a holistic system of meaning (i.e. answer “why” questions about suffering and loss) (Pargament, 1997; Park, 2005; Updegraff, Silver and Holman, 2008; Stephens et al., 2012). For people with religious beliefs, recourse to those beliefs even appears to improve coping and individual-level psychological wellbeing (Pargament et al., 1998; Ano and Vasconcelles, 2005).

While social psychologists have unsurprisingly focused on the effects of religious coping on wellbeing, there is good reason to expect that recourse to religious beliefs in the wake of violence could also shape political attitudes and behaviors. Meaning-making about violence often activates particular theories of justice, as people try to answer questions like “why did this happen to me?” and “how should I and others behave in response to what has happened?” People’s answers to these questions might vary depending on the content of the beliefs (religious or otherwise) they activate when trying to understand their experiences.

The leap from religiously-motivated theories of justice/blame attribution to political attitudes is relatively short. Political scientists have found that victimization and the subsequent recovery process shape outcomes like political participation and pro-social attitudes (Blattman, 2009; Bellows and Miguel, 2009; Bateson, 2012; Bauer et al., 2016), but has mostly referred generally to post-traumatic growth, and struggles to explain the divergence in outcomes for similarly-victimized survivors.

Research in American criminology has produced results that suggest religion might be a good candidate to fill this gap. Adherents to more fundamentalist Christian denominations, for instance, are more supportive of capital punishment than other Christians and than non-believers (Grasmick et al., 1993; Cullen, Fisher and Applegate, 2000; Wozniak and Lewis, 2010). A smaller amount of work shows that specific religious beliefs about the existence of Hell, the nature and character of God, or the fusion of nationalism and Christianity, predict death penalty attitudes even better (Unnever, Cullen and Applegate, 2005; Unnever, Cullen and Bartkowski, 2006; Davis, 2018). Research in political science has found relationships between religious identity and support for peace processes in Israel-Palestine, Bosnia, Iraq, Colombia and elsewhere (Philpott, 2015; Fredman, Bastian and SwannJr., 2017; Uribe et al., 2026).

Relatively little work in political science has examined how the specific content of religious beliefs—beyond denominational identity or level of religiosity—shapes how violence survivors cope and what political attitudes they form as a result. In the rest of this paper, I show that the belief-attitude-behavior nexus deserves more analytical attention from political scientists. Even among adherents to the same faiths and among similarly devout individuals, I show strong associations between the particular religious beliefs that people activate when coping with violence and the punishment preferences, political attitudes, and affective profiles they exhibit after violence.

### 3 Data

#### 3.1 The Interview Corpora

I use the transcripts of roughly 60 interviews I conducted with survivors of homicide violence in Chicago and survivors of political violence in north India in order to identify patterns in invocation of religious beliefs and the associations between religious discussion and political attitudes and behaviors.<sup>4</sup> The interviews are part of two corpora which were collected for separate projects but are, in many ways, similar in format because both projects used the interviews to elicit information about constructs like emotion experiences and situational appraisals, that are closely related to the meaning-making process. The audio-recorded interviews lasted over an hour on average. They included similar demographic questions, discussions of respondents' experience of violence, measurement of present and recalled emotions using psychometric batteries, and questions about locally relevant political attitudes and behaviors. The interview guides for the two different corpora each asked respondents whether/how often they attended religious services, and whether/how often they interacted socially with people they knew from a religious congregation. Other than these questions embedded in the demographic battery, respondents were *never* prompted to discuss religious ritual, social identity, or belief. Just over 90% of respondents brought up religion organically on more than one occasion in their interview.

The two interview corpora I use are distinct in three ways that are relevant to this paper. The first difference is the type of violence that respondents experienced. All respondents in the first corpus, interviewed in or near Chicago, Illinois in 2018, were surviving family members of a homicide victim killed in the city of Chicago between 2015 and 2017. Most interviewees were parents (usually mothers) of the deceased and had not themselves been physically threatened by the violence that killed their children. Though almost all respondents were members of racial minority groups (Black or Latina), the violence they experienced

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<sup>4</sup>Many of the interviews covering violence in India were physically conducted in California, with individuals who left India after experiencing violence. I refer to this second corpus as “India” interviews no matter where they were conducted to avoid confusion.

and discussed was not targeted based on group identity.<sup>5</sup> Respondents in the second corpus, Indian Sikhs interviewed in either India or California in 2019-2020, survived episodes of violence that were explicitly related to religious identity. Many respondents discuss their experiences and the steps they took to survive a burst of anti-Sikh pogroms in 1984. Others discuss experiences of violence post-1984 connected to a Sikh separatist insurgency (and anti-separatist counterinsurgency) in the state of Punjab. Chicago respondents are reflecting, therefore, on the role of religion in coping with violent loss due to criminal violence in a highly-developed but unequal state. Respondents from the other corpus are reflecting on religion in the context of religiously-targeted political violence in a lower-capacity context in the global south. This difference is reflected in the overall rate at which India vs. Chicago respondents mention religious concepts in their answers. Raw religious mention rates are substantially higher for respondents in the India corpus, but of course a meaningful proportion of these mentions bring up religion in the context of group identity rather than individual belief.

A second important difference between the corpora is the religious makeup of the interview pools. Chicago respondents were not recruited on the basis of religious affiliation, but 77% of the sample reported attending religious services at least occasionally. The overwhelming majority of those who attended religious services were members of protestant Christian churches, including various Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), and Pentecostal congregations. All of the church-going respondents were members of some Christian denomination. Respondents for the India corpus, on the other hand, were recruited based on their membership in the religious community targeted in the 1984 pogroms; all respondents self-identified as Sikh and all reported attending religious services at least on occasion, with nearly 3/4 of respondents reporting weekly attendance at religious services.<sup>6</sup> Sikh respondents in the corpus are more devout than the Sikh population at large. Nearly one in three respondents had taken Amrit (a sacrament taken by a small proportion of Sikhs) and the majority kept Kesh (unshorn hair, worn under a turban for men). Even though Indian respondents are, as a whole, more religiously devout than Chicago respondents, organic mentions of religious *belief* (vis. identity) are prevalent across both corpora, and actually slightly higher in Chicago than in India.

Third and finally, respondents in the Chicago corpus and the India corpus are reflecting on experiences of violence at a different temporal distance from the interview. Respondents in Chicago were interviewed between

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<sup>5</sup>About one in three respondents mention what I categorize as “structural” factors when discussing why their relative was killed. Only one respondent made an explicit connection between racial identity and victimization: “I do see the government has a lot to do with that. With school closings and stuff like that. It’s like eugenics.” (Respondent 96).

<sup>6</sup>“Attending services” at a Sikh Gurdwara and a Christian church are not precisely interchangeable proxies for religious practice. Sikhs attend Gurdwara by dropping in (even briefly) on a continuously-running kirtan (singing of scripture). Large temples even outside of India are open for worship for hours every day. One temple where I conducted interviews in California has 10 hours of kirtan even on weekdays.

6 and 36 months after the killing of their family member. At the time of the interview, some respondents were still attending court dates related to their relative’s murder, which created ongoing trauma. Respondents in the India corpus, by contrast, were reflecting on experiences with violence some 30-35 *years* in the past. The simple passage of time might lead to different patterns in the invocation of religious language across the two corpora. Chicago respondents are observed in a relatively acute phase of coping and meaning-making, sometimes less than a year removed from a traumatic loss. India respondents, many of whom are still clearly troubled by experiences in the distant past, are nonetheless past what we would expect to be the acute stage of meaning-making and recovery. More details on respondent recruitment and the interview corpora are in Appendix A

Because India and Chicago respondents differ from each other on a number of dimensions, the purpose of the analysis below is not to isolate the effect of a single contextual factor on the invocation of religious ideas in interviews. Instead, the purpose of presenting these dissimilar cases together is to show that religious framing is prevalent and seemingly important across diverse settings (Seawright and Gerring, 2008): criminal homicide as well as inter-group political violence, Protestant Christianity as well as Sikhism, and acute phases of coping and recovery as well as long-term meaning making. More details about the makeup of the interview samples in both contexts are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

### **3.2 Measuring Mentions of Religion**

Neither interview protocol included prompts for respondents to discuss religious beliefs (aside from closed-ended demographic questions about church attendance and religious identity). Instead, discussion of religious doctrine, metaphysical beliefs, and religion-informed judgments about right and wrong arose organically, when respondents chose to invoke it to answer questions about why they thought violence had happened to them (or their family), how they managed during and after violence, their beliefs about what justice should look like, or who they turned to for support in the wake of a traumatic experience.

As a result, discussion of religion is scattered across the transcripts of interviews and must be recovered and labeled before patterns can be analyzed. I use a combination of human research assistant coding and automated text classification with a large language model (LLM) to find and categorize references to religion across the 60 transcripts.

I developed a coding schema for both India and Chicago interviews based on nine different types of religious mention. The categories, detailed in Table 1, were developed inductively based on my interview notes and reading of the transcripts. The categories encompass mentions of religion as an identity, ritual, or social

practice (in keeping with much of the political science literature on religion mentioned above) but also mentions of religion that relate to specific beliefs or doctrinal prescriptions for behavior. A research assistant used this coding schema to identify and categorize mentions of religion in the interview transcripts. Her efforts covered all 60 interviews and returned 1,029 passages mentioning religion, or an average of 17 mentions per interview.

To verify the labels, I repeated the coding with an automated LLM-powered classification pipeline. The pipeline used a two-stage process. First, a less resource-intensive model (Claude Haiku 4.5) segmented the transcripts into paragraph-equivalent chunks and scanned each passage for any religious content. Second, any passages flagged as containing religious content were passed to a more discriminating model (Claude Sonnet 4.6) for classification into one of the nine pre-determined coding categories. RA and LLM labels were applied independently, without knowledge of the other coder’s results. I describe the LLM pipeline and related privacy considerations in Appendix C.

Finally, adapting best practices from Pangakis, Wolken and Fasching (2023) and Than et al. (2025), I performed an adjudication step. I exported *all* passages for which RA and LLM labels disagreed, plus a random 10% sample of passages where RA and LLM agreed, to an annotation interface for adjudication (Montani and Honnibal, 2018). I resolved all disagreements, and the post-adjudication label is used in all analyses below.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Pre-adjudication agreement was moderate, as expected for a fine-grained multi-category coding scheme applied to naturalistic speech. For the India corpus, Cohen’s  $\kappa = 0.40$  across 592 matched passage pairs (52.9% raw agreement); for Chicago,  $\kappa$  ranged from 0.51 to 0.58. The lower agreement on the India corpus likely reflects additional ambiguity introduced by multilingual, translated speech. Because all disagreements were resolved through adjudication by the PI, pre-adjudication  $\kappa$  serves as a diagnostic of coder consistency rather than a measure of final coding reliability.

**Table 1:** Religious theme coding categories

Frame	Description	Example
Coping/Consolation	Religion invoked for emotional healing, comfort, or meaning-making after violence; focus on psychological/spiritual recovery.	“All you can change when somebody has a crooked mind is just doing prayers. Just praying for nobody to have that kind of sick mind. They should all value humanity.” (R012, India)
Divine Justice	God or divine power as punisher of perpetrators; invokes divine accountability for those who caused harm.	“It’s definitely karma. Sometimes you put the seed in the pot, and some fruit comes within a year, some after many years.” (R014, India)
Forgiveness/Restraint	Explicit religious basis for forgiving perpetrators or refraining from retaliation.	“God says vengeance is his, it’s not mine.” (R15, Chicago)
Moral Retribution	Retaliation framed as correct on moral or religious grounds — perpetrators deserve retribution, or religious tradition demands a response in kind.	“Do like Guru Gobind Singh did — he told his Sikhs, you can protect yourself . . . the sixth Guru took the swords left and right. That’s why we do our best.” (R014, India)
Providence/Fate	Violence (or survival) attributed to divine plan, destiny, fate, hukam, or karma; objectionable events cast as divinely ordained or inevitable.	“The force above us — God, if you want to call it that — that’s how he or she has planned life and death of people.” (R004, India)
Heritage/Community	Descriptions of religious community solidarity, institutions, organizations, or collective memory invoked in response to violence.	“Our identity is forged around the notion of standing up for justice.” (R103, India)
Practice/Symbols	Mention of specific acts of worship or religious objects — prayer, scripture, kirtan, ceremonies, sacred objects.	“My cousin in Texas actually had a church vigil, a prayer vigil.” (R091, Chicago)
Identity/Discrimination	Respondents emphasize religious identity (rather than belief or doctrine) to justify behavior; religious identity is invoked as the reason violence occurred or the reason specific victims were targeted.	“You’ll never see a Sikh respond to these violent acts by saying ‘you just got your hatred wrong, we’re not Muslims.’ You’ll never hear that. Because we will always stand up.” (R003, India)
Corruption/Betrayal	Betrayal or corruption by religious leaders; failure of religious institutions to protect the community.	“I feel that the Sikhs had genuine grievances about what the Indian government did with the attack on the Golden Temple and the killing of young Sikh men.” (R106, India)

In addition to the nine categories labeled by the RA + LLM pipeline, I used an LLM-only pipeline to measure three additional religious themes that emerged as common objects of disagreement between the LLM and the RA because they did not fit cleanly within the original nine-theme coding scheme. After adjudicating ambiguous mentions into the most appropriate category from the original nine-category scheme, I conducted a second LLM-only pass to identify and categorize mentions of three additional themes independent of the original nine-category coding. Discussions of theodicy, as well as specific references to particular pieces of scripture, and specific references to the relative agency of God versus humans are

discussed below as additional categories that are not necessarily mutually exclusive with the nine themes described in Table 1. Additional details on the extra themes are in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Additional religious categories identified during adjudication

Frame	Description	Example
Theodicy	Questioning God’s judgment and actions, especially failure to protect innocent or religious people.	“I just didn’t understand why God took my sister and not me. I was expecting to die.” (R33, Chicago)
Divine Agency	God actively intervening in events. Distinct from Providence/Fate, which invokes a passive divine plan rather than an active agent.	“He is a god-sent messenger. Being a police officer, he knows everything which is going on.” (R102, India)
Scripture/Doctrine	Explicit appeal to religious texts, historical religious figures, or formal doctrine to interpret, justify, or respond to violence.	“I tell myself every morning: ‘to lean not to my own understanding, but in all your ways acknowledge God and he will direct your path’ [Proverbs 3:5]. Because my own understanding says that never should’ve happened to my baby.” (R23, Chicago)

I then use the passage-level labels to construct three measures of religious speech in the interview transcripts. First, I sum all labeled passages and normalize by the length of the interview transcript (in passages) to calculate a respondent’s religious mention density, a measure of how much religion was discussed in the interview in any form. Second, by dividing the number of passages labeled in each category by the same denominator, I construct a “rate” measure for each religious theme or coding category: The proportion of the entire interview a respondent spent discussing moral retribution, or coping, or divine agency, etc. Third and finally, I construct a variable for the share of a respondent’s total religious mentions that fall into each category, i.e. of all labeled religious mentions, what proportion were labeled “Providence/Fate.” The resulting respondent-level measures for “rate,” the main measure used below, are shown in Figure 2.

### 3.3 Political Outcome Measures

The expression of religious beliefs matters for political scientists to the extent that it is related to politically relevant attitudes and behaviors. In the course of interviews in both India and Chicago, I measure a range of politically-relevant constructs that the meaning-making literature hints might be shaped by religious beliefs. As I show below, interviews suggest that religious framing and certain opinions related to violence and victimization co-vary, even after accounting for religious practice as a confounder. I examine five groups of post-violence attitudes and behaviors. The outcomes of interest differ slightly between India and Chicago because some questions that are very interesting in one context (e.g. support for separatism)

are non-sensical in the other.

First, I measure respondents' emotions in both India and Chicago using the PANAS battery (Watson, Clark and Tellegen, 1988). Invocation of different aspects of religious belief is robustly associated with respondents' self-reported emotions at the time of the interview as well as their recalled emotions at the time they experienced violence. The primary outcomes of interest here relate to religious beliefs and coping: Change in anger, fear, and overall positive/negative affect between the immediate aftermath of violence and the time period of the interview.

Second, I measure respondents' attribution of blame for the violence they experienced in both India and Chicago. I use open-ended questions such that respondents could attribute blame to any party or combination of parties they chose, which I would later categorize. Respondents in Chicago blamed parties like the perpetrator of the murder (unsurprisingly), but also the victim's friends, the police, or even themselves. In India, respondents blamed the state or central government, political leaders (including Sikh leaders), or the security forces as institutions.

Third, I measure respondents' present-day political engagement and sense of political efficacy. For political engagement, I use a common battery of political actions like voting, talking to neighbors about politics, boycotting, etc. and ask respondents to report whether they have (or would) engage in those actions. For efficacy, I create an index from respondents' agreement/disagreement with the statements: "People like me don't have any say about what the government does," "I don't think the government cares much what people like me think," and "people running the government don't really care what happens to me."

Fourth, I measure punishment preferences as a Chicago-specific political outcome. I focus on respondents' preferences about how the perpetrator of their relative's killing should be punished (and who should be responsible for administering that punishment). I elicit this opinion through an open-ended question about what happened to the perpetrator, and whether that matched respondents' preferences for what *should* happen. I coded their responses into categories based on who should do the punishing (the state, the victim's family and friends, no one, God), and what the punishment should be (violent, carceral, or up to God). Respondents' religious beliefs seem especially likely to bear on this question.

Fifth and finally, I measure India respondents' attitudes about Sikh political autonomy and Sikh community safety. I ask respondents to agree or disagree with statements about whether Sikhs would be better off in an independent state, whether the community is misunderstood in India or elsewhere, and whether Sikhs in India or in other countries are safer.

Descriptive statistics covering these outcomes, as well as the demographic profiles of interview respondents, are shown below in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: India: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD	<i>n</i>
<b>Demographics</b>			
Birth year	1963.90	11.36	29
Male	0.62	0.49	29
Located California (vs. India)	0.62	0.49	29
≥ Weekly Worship	0.55	0.51	29
<b>Affect (1 = Not at all; 5 = Extremely)</b>			
Anger at time of violence	3.08	1.40	28
Anger at interview	3.41	1.23	26
Fear at time of violence	3.01	1.57	29
Fear at interview	4.00	1.35	28
<b>Blame attribution</b>			
State or central government	0.46	0.51	28
Security forces	0.07	0.26	28
Political leaders	0.11	0.31	28
Other	0.18	0.39	28
<b>Political action (1 = Have not, would not; 4 = Done in past year)</b>			
Vote	3.82	0.39	28
Sign petition	3.22	1.12	27
Boycott	1.96	1.34	27
Attend demonstration	2.41	1.30	29
Attend meeting or rally	2.28	1.22	29
Contact politician or government	2.62	1.32	29
Donate	2.24	1.43	29
Contact media	2.07	1.25	29
<b>Social media</b>	<b>2.25</b>	<b>1.40</b>	<b>28</b>
Efficacy			
<b>Political efficacy index (1–5)</b>	<b>2.27</b>	<b>1.34</b>	<b>28</b>
Sikh political views (1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree)			
Sikhs better off independent	5.07	2.23	29
Sikh independence viable	2.00	1.52	28
Sikh community misunderstood	4.14	2.55	28
Sikhs safer outside India	5.24	2.20	29

Proportions shown for binary items. Political action coded 1 (have not and would not) to 4 (done in past year); Efficacy index: mean of 3 items, higher = higher efficacy. Sikh views: 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

#### 4 Patterns in Interview Evidence

Interview evidence shows a striking amount of diversity in the way religion is invoked, even among people who are part of similar faith traditions and have experienced similar violence. In fact, assumptions based on the religious practice and identity of interview respondents are often belied by the specific beliefs they invoke in conversation. This variation is interesting in its own right for understanding the ways that religion can support coping and meaning-making after violence, but it is also important for political scientists because respondents' own testimony suggests that religious ideas and beliefs help structure their attitudes, desires, and behaviors in ways that are hard to capture by measuring their church attendance or similar proxies for faith.

In Chicago, the contrasting religious frames invoked by two respondents illustrate the point nicely. One couple who lost their son to a stray bullet outside their home on a Sunday morning brought up their faith when discussing their emotions immediately after their son was killed and his alleged killer was arrested. By the types of measures we typically use in political science, Mr. A and Ms. K are highly religious: They pray regularly, they attend services at a Baptist church weekly, they report socializing with members of their congregation at and outside of church, and they attend religious events *beyond* Sunday services (e.g. Bible studies, prayer breakfasts, etc.).

Ms. K and Mr. A's Christian beliefs and practices exist in tension with their desires in the months following their son's death. Ms. K in particular described wrestling with the problem of theodicy: The bullet that killed her son was not aimed at him, so why did God allow it to hit him? She talks about first blaming God for what happened to her son. She briefly stopped going to church, but by the time of our conversation she and Mr. A were attending again. They had come to the understanding, Mr. A says, that "God gave us enough time with [our son], and that was it."

I asked them, as I asked all interviewees in Chicago, who they thought should be responsible for punishing their son's killer, if it were up to them. Mr. A answered immediately: "Me.... I'd beat him until I got tired. Would that result in murder as small as he is? I hope not. I don't hate him." I pushed: "You don't hate him but you want to hurt him?" and Mr. A explained further.

"Yes I want him to hurt. I really want him to hurt. I'm not gonna lie to you man.... I just pray to God that he'd give me enough restraint to hold back and let him [live], you know? .... I know it's wrong, it's not the right thing to say as a Christian, but God already knows how I feel."

Mr. A and Ms. K both "thank God" that their son's killer was caught, not because they prefer the

justice system to run its course, but because they are grateful the option to punish the killer themselves was taken from them. Ms. K thinks of relatives, including Mr. A, and says “I thank God that it worked out the way it worked out. I probably wouldn’t have had my husband here.”

Across the length of the interview, Mr. A and Ms. K raise religious beliefs and practices in many different ways. Out of 30 interviews in Chicago, they mention religion more than any other respondents. This is what we might expect from devout religious people talking about a loss that tested their faith. Figure 1, which shows the density and thematic distribution of religious speech in their interview, shows that about one in five segments in the transcript contain some reference to religion at least in passing. They discuss theodicy, they refer to scripture, they talk about the role the church plays in helping them cope, they talk about their faith community, and about God’s un-knowable plan as well as their faith that he will see justice done for their son.

Table 4: Chicago: Outcome Variable Descriptives

	Mean	SD	N
<b>Demographics</b>			
Male	0.10	0.30	31
Gang-affiliated victim	0.23	0.43	31
Years since homicide	1.45	0.62	31
≥ Weekly church attendance	0.37	0.49	30
<b>Affect (1 = Not at all; 5 = Extremely)</b>			
Anger at time of violence	3.39	1.03	29
Anger at interview	3.86	1.24	25
Fear at time of violence	2.88	1.22	29
Fear at interview	3.62	1.35	25
<b>Blame attribution</b>			
Perpetrator	0.42	0.50	31
Victim's associates	0.29	0.46	31
Self	0.26	0.44	31
Government or police	0.10	0.30	31
Victim	0.10	0.30	31
<b>Political action (1 = Done in past year; 4 = Have not, would not)</b>			
Voted in 2016	0.79	0.41	29
Sign petition	1.76	0.99	29
Contact representative	2.45	1.21	29
Contact media	2.93	1.16	29
Attend demonstration	2.79	1.05	29
Attend rally	2.86	1.19	29
Boycott	3.07	1.07	29
Social media	3.00	1.36	29
<b>Donate</b>	<b>2.97</b>	<b>1.05</b>	<b>29</b>
Efficacy			
<b>Political efficacy index (1–5)</b>	<b>1.94</b>	<b>1.28</b>	<b>28</b>
Punishment preferences			
Punishment satisfaction (1–5)	3.42	1.65	31
Prefer violent punishment	0.29	0.46	31
Locus: family	0.20	0.41	30
Locus: community	0.03	0.18	30
Locus: justice system	0.57	0.50	30
Locus: higher power	0.20	0.41	30

Proportions shown for binary items. Political action coded 1 (done in past year) to 4 (have not would not). Efficacy index: mean of 3 items, higher = higher efficacy.

Variable	Ms. V	Ms. K / Mr. A
Weeks since Homicide	40	108
Self-reported Anger	5/5	2/5
Perpetrator Known?	Yes	Yes
Denomination	Baptist	Baptist
Church Attendance	~ Monthly	Weekly
Punishment Preference	God	Self/Community

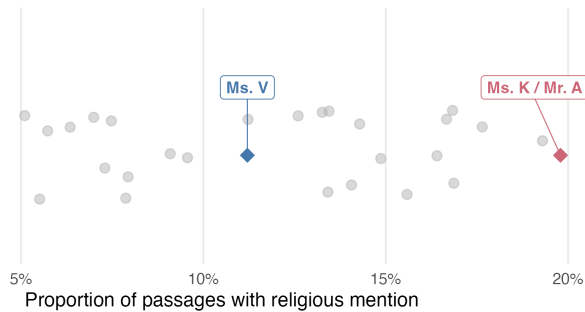
**Table 5:** Comparing background conditions, church attendance, blame, and punishment preferences for two interviews in the Chicago corpus.

Another interview respondent, Ms. V, talks extensively about religion as well, but with a very different

**Ms. V vs. Ms. K / Mr. A: Religious Speech**

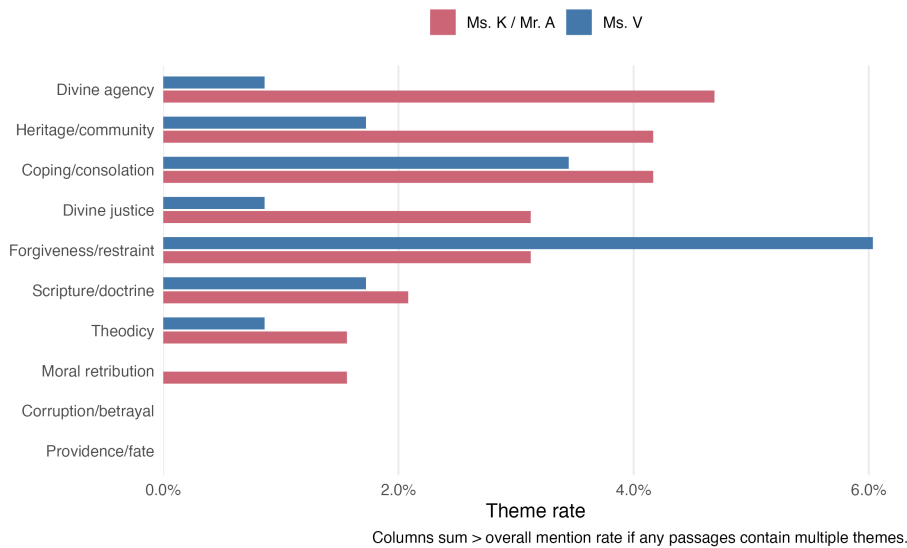
**A. Overall religious mention rate (all respondents)**

Diamonds = Ms. V and Ms. K / Mr. A; dots = all others



**B. Theme-by-Theme Comparison**

Ordered by Ms. K / Mr. A rate (descending)



**Figure 1:** Comparing religious speech measures for two interviews in the Chicago corpus. The top pane shows the overall rate at which the two interviewees bring up religion, relative to other interview respondents in Chicago. The bottom pane divides those religious mentions by theme and compares the rate at which different respondents surface different themes.

focus. We spoke less than a year after her son was killed by a stranger in a robbery gone wrong. At the time of our conversation, Ms. V attended a Baptist church irregularly—Sunday services around once a month, and no socializing with the congregation beyond that—but she didn’t call herself a Baptist, instead responding “no religion.” Ms. V believes in a God that looks familiar to many Black Protestants and she was raised in a Baptist church; her relative lack of engagement with the identity reflects frustration and disagreement with the human-operated social institution.

Going by church attendance and religious self-identification alone would meaningfully underestimate the role that God and religious belief play in Ms. V’s process of coping. Where the regular churchgoers Ms. K and Mr. A mention religion in about one in five passages, the un-attached Ms. V still mentions religion in over one in ten passages. At the same time, the particular religious beliefs that arise in her process of coping with her son’s death are distinct from the themes that Ms. K and Mr. A surface. Ms. V focuses almost entirely on two aspects of Christian teaching: The requirement that Christians forgive those who have harmed them, and the belief that people, including the person who killed her son, can be either redeemed or punished by God—of the two it’s not entirely clear to me which Ms. V would prefer.

Ms. V’s faith is an important part of helping her cope with her son’s passing, the challenge of seeing his killer on trial, and a feeling of conflict and alienation from pre-existing communities that is extremely common after suffering violent loss. Ms. V says she initially blamed the man who killed her son, but shifts quickly to a more structural view of what happened. The perpetrator, she says, is the product of a “social wreck” of an environment, in contrast to her son who she lovingly called “just a regular yuppie little kid.” Ms. V blames the gun dealers, the city, the Mayor (Rahm Emmanuel at the time), and the shooter’s parents. That she didn’t blame the alleged perpetrator, on trial for her son’s murder at the time we spoke, comes down to her conviction that forgiveness is an important Christian principle, and that failing to forgive would hurt her.

“I know he [had] a choice, and I know everyone has a choice, but I have to forgive him.... I can’t blame him all the way. I can blame him for pulling the trigger, but mentally there’s a lot more to it....Even though his mistake was horrific, he killed my son, in the Bible it says you have to forgive. And I know that helps me get through it. When I go to court, I can look at him and say ‘you can’t hurt me anymore.’ I’m not going to let him put that devil [on me]...put in me again all that negativity.”

Ms. V was convinced that the outcome she wanted was for her son’s killer to face what he had done,

to experience “the punishment of being able to see and feel what I feel, being able to feel the loss.” When she looked at him in court she saw a young man who was starting to be burdened by the reality of his situation. Rather than violence, or even life in prison, she wanted him to serve time and then change his life, and let God sort out the rest. Church people were telling her that “God is going to take care of it,” but she still worried that was just something people said. Ms. V hoped that God would bring justice for what happened to her son, but she wasn’t sure she expected her hope fulfilled. “I believe in God,” she explained, “but I don’t believe in what people say.”

Measurements of identity and ritual practice give us very little leverage to distinguish the role that religion plays in the post-violence experiences of Ms. V, Ms. K, and Mr. A. Only by looking at the specific beliefs that they raise in describing their experiences and thoughts do we get a fuller sense of how ideas about forgiveness, justice, and retribution in Christian teachings influence their attitudes. In the rest of this section, I introduce broader patterns in the way that survivors of violence in India and Chicago talk about religion, and the associations that obtain between different religious themes and important political and social outcomes.

#### 4.1 How Survivors Invoke Religion in Different Contexts

Both within and across corpora, survivors of violence vary substantially in the extent to which they invoke religious ideas when describing their experiences, and in the particular religious themes they surface. Figure 2 summarizes the religious speech of respondents in the two interview corpora. The top panel (A) plots the proportion of each interview that contains any references to religion, separately for India and Chicago interviews. The median interview about violence in India raises religion in over 30% of passages, compared to roughly 11% for Chicago interviews. This gap is partly an artifact of context: by far the most common religious theme surfaced by India respondents is identity-based discrimination or targeting. This makes some sense: Anti-Sikh pogroms and violence related to a Sikh separatist insurgency are, by definition, events where religious identity is highly salient. Removing simple references to religion as an identity category, and references to the social politics of religious organizations (probably the aspects of religion that are most well-studied in the comparative politics literature and have least to do with belief) shows that respondents in India are talking about religion in other ways as well. The median rate of religious mention, excluding identity and corruption discussion, is still 18% of passages.<sup>8</sup>

The second panel (B) shows how discussion of religion is distributed within each corpus, revealing substantial

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<sup>8</sup>Comparing the *means* in a T-test suggests that the overall rate of religious mention in Chicago is not significantly lower than the rate in India, once identity mentions are excluded ( $p \simeq 0.07$ ).

differences between and within corpora. In Chicago, the religious themes that appear most frequently are about individual spiritual experience and the way that God has acted in the world, either on their behalf or in taking something away from them. These themes make sense in a context where interviews were about coping with violent loss. Respondents in Chicago discuss divine agency (mean 3.7%), and the role that religion plays in coping and consolation (mean 2.2%). They talk about forgiveness and restraint (mean 1.8%), and they quote specific pieces of scripture or religious doctrine (mean 1.3%). In India, even after excluding mentions of religious identity as a targeting criterion for violence, the social and institutional dynamics of religion still dominate discussion. Mentions of religious community occur in 6% of passages in the average interview, followed by descriptions of religious practices or symbols (3.8%), and scripture and doctrine references (3.3%). Themes related to coping and forgiveness, which dominate religious speech in Chicago, are relatively rare in India, whereas themes like the discussion of revenge (1.2%) and fate (1.2%) are modestly more common.

These patterns suggest that elements of a person's environment and the context in which they face violence, make different parts of religious thought relevant to the process of meaning-making. Violence organized around religious identity, like the violence faced by Sikhs in India, surfaces religion as a social and political category in a way that non-group targeted violence in Chicago does not. Conversely, in Chicago, where interview respondents are making sense of a loss that is particular to them and often profoundly isolating,<sup>9</sup> discussion of religion is on average more inward-looking, focused on comfort, forgiveness, and the agency of God rather than on religion as a social and political community. The type of violence and the preexisting relationship between conflict narratives and religious identity seem to shape which part of religious vocabulary is relevant to survivors. Notably, however, religion is a relevant frame for meaning making to many people in *both* contexts. Rates of religious discussion across the corpora shown in Figure 2A suggest that a religious cleavage or identity based conflict is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to make religious faith part of the meaning-making process for survivors.

Comparing between Chicago and India masks substantial variation within groups, which ultimately is more analytically interesting for understanding the role that religion plays in responding to violence and coping with its aftermath. Figure 2 makes it clear that within both groups there is substantial variation in a) the extent to which different respondents talk about religion, and b) the religious themes that get raised, conditional on talking about religion. Some respondents barely discuss religion at all; some talk about it

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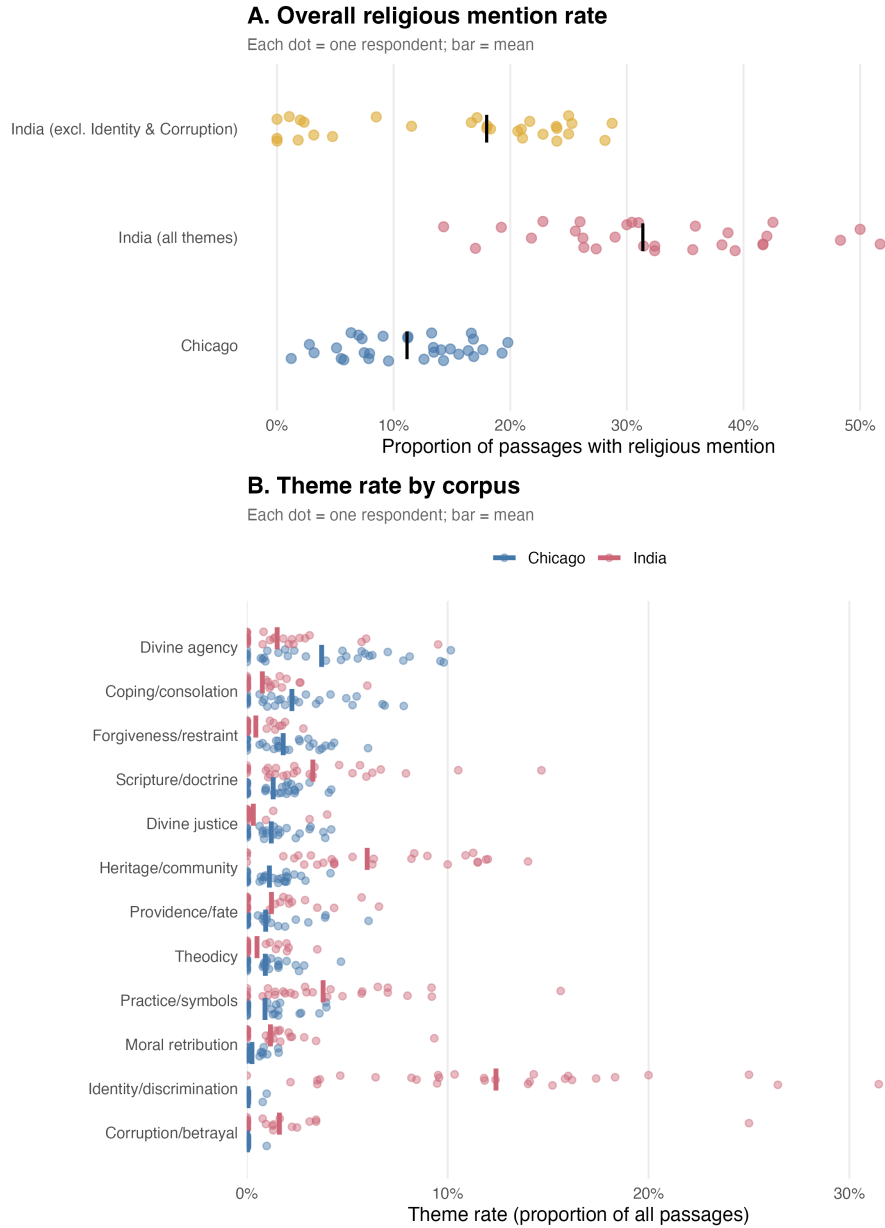
<sup>9</sup>Over 1,500 people were killed in Chicago in the years covered by my interviews (Asher, 2017), but many people experienced the death of a family member as an event that creates distance from other members of their community.

consistently, with two respondents in India mentioning religion in nearly 30% of the passages in their interview. Each particular theme, likewise, has respondents who do not mention it at all, and others who mention it regularly across the interview. This within-group variation is only partly explained by straightforward measures of religious practice. Figure 3 shows the null relationship between overall religious mention rate and frequency of organized worship across the two contexts.<sup>10</sup> The rate of religious discussion is not wholly a proxy for more church attendance. In the rest of this section, I turn to the consequences of this variation and how discussion of different religious frames is associated with political attitudes and behaviors like blame for violence, engagement in politics, emotional affect, etc. that reach beyond the context of the interviews.

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<sup>10</sup>Looking separately at Chicago and India paints a slightly different picture, with regular church attenders in Chicago significantly but modestly more likely to talk about religion, and the opposite in India, but only when excluding identity-only mentions.

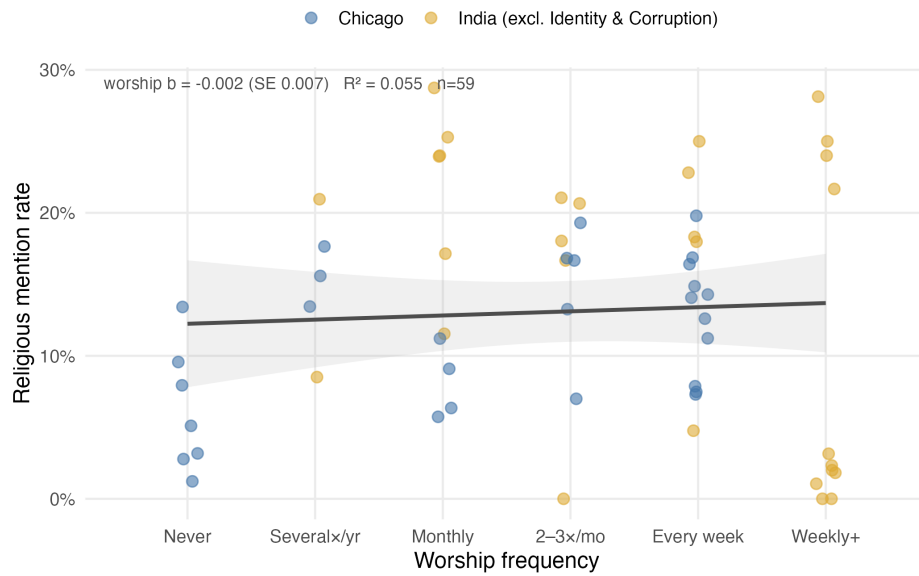
## India vs. Chicago: Religious Speech Profiles



**Figure 2:** Comparing religious speech measures across the India and Chicago corpora. Overall rates of religious mention are plotted twice for the India corpus in sub-figure A. The top facet plots the overall rate of religious mentions in India interviews *excluding* mentions of violence being targeted based on religious identity and mentions of corruption in the religious leadership of Sikhs. These mentions are unsurprisingly quite common in discussion of religiously targeted violence, but they are not the main focus of this paper. Identity and social network are precisely the aspects of religion well-covered in existing political science literature.

### Worship frequency and religious mention rate

Pooled OLS line controls for India vs. Chicago. India rate excludes identity/discrimination and corruption.



**Figure 3:** Worship frequency and overall rate of religious mentions in interview transcripts. Pooling across both contexts yields a null association. Within Chicago alone the relationship is positive and significant, but explains a modest amount of variance in discussion of religion. Within India alone, the relationship is negative and significant at conventional levels, but still explains a modest amount of variation. Including mentions of religious identity in the India rate calculations yields a null result within India alone, by dramatically changing the respondent-level scores for a handful of highly-devout respondents who happen to *only* discuss religion in relation to being targeted by religious identity.

## 4.2 Religion and Political Attitudes in Chicago

The religious concepts and beliefs that interview respondents bring up in conversations after violence are correlated with a number of politically-relevant outcomes from emotion experiences, to blame attribution, and political engagement. In this section, I demonstrate these patterns using simple models that draw on the religious mention labels described in Section 3, and illustrate them with quotes from interview respondents. To support the claim that these patterns tell us something about the invocation of religious belief, rather than the respondent's religious identity or devotion, all models in this section adjust for respondents' church attendance, and hold religious identity relatively constant (since almost all religious respondents in Chicago were Protestant Christians and all in India were Sikhs).

### 4.2.1 Emotions

Patterns in the mention of particular religious beliefs are first visible in respondents' self-reported emotions. Across interviews in Chicago, respondents who invoke religious beliefs and doctrine to discuss forgiveness have *higher* positive affect at the time of the interview, 1-3 years after their relative's death. Ms. V, introduced above, makes the link clear, saying "Why am I going to live in misery my whole life? I've already lost my son. Sometimes, God [says] you have to forgive, that's what life is about." (R22, Chicago). A number of respondents drew similarly explicit links between Christian forgiveness and their own wellbeing. Ms. P, whose teenage son was killed near her home on Chicago's west side in 2016, describes forgiving her son's killer even though she feels like he hasn't showed any remorse or regret in his court appearances. To get closure, she says: "I have to forgive him as a Christian, because I don't want to be angry. Anger doesn't do anything but make you sick, and I don't want to be sick" (R91, Chicago). Ms. P got around to forgiveness and diminished her anger by praying. Reflecting on the difference between the feelings she recalled immediately after her son was killed and the feelings she reported during our interview, I asked her when they had started to change. She pulled out her phone and showed me: "When I started interacting more in the prayer apps, reading the word.... This is what uplifts me." She read from Psalms "who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Psalm 103:4-5, NRSV).

On average, respondents who invoked religious ideas about forgiveness and restraint had significantly higher scores on positive affect at the time of the interview. This correlation holds, adjusting for church attendance, both for the rate of forgiveness mentions across the entire interview ( $p=0.013$ ) and for the

rate of forgiveness mentions as a *share* of all religious mentions ( $p=0.004$ , see Appendix Table A1).

Respondents' emotions also correspond to religious ideas that locate their suffering within a larger divine order. Talking more about theodicy, the challenge of integrating suffering with the belief that God has a benevolent plan, was associated with significantly less anger at the time of their relative's death ( $p=0.001$ ). Testimony from an interview respondent named Ms. B, who lost her son in 2017, shows how concern about theodicy can displace more active, higher certainty emotions like anger (Lerner and Keltner, 2001): "Why are we suffering for something when we tried to do right? That's why I thank God for my church and my pastor, because they showed me that when bad things happen to good people, that doesn't mean you did something bad. That gives me a little comfort and strength" (R23, Chicago). Likewise, respondents who talk more about providence and fate (which we might see as a resolution to the problem that Ms. B describes) evince significantly less anger at the time of the interview ( $p=0.025$ ), though, interestingly, marginally higher anger at the time of the homicide ( $p=0.058$ ).

#### 4.2.2 Blame

References to religion are also associated with patterns in who respondents in Chicago blame for the homicide that killed their relative. The strongest and most robust correlation is between *not* blaming the victim's friends and associates for their death, and discussion of providence and fate. Respondents who discuss the idea that events in their life are divinely ordered are significantly less likely to blame their relative's social circle for what happened ( $p < 0.01$  share of religious mentions,  $p=0.01$  rate of mentions in interview, see Appendix Table A2), and instead focus blame on other targets including the perpetrator, the state, or no one at all.

There is also an association between discussing the morality of retribution and revenge and respondents blaming themselves for what happened to their family member ( $p=0.004$ , share of religious mentions). Ms. O, the sister of a man who was killed in 2016, talked about retribution and revenge in religious or metaphysical terms. Ms. O, who did not attend church but identified as Catholic, used the term "Karma" repeatedly to describe what was coming for her brother's killers. She sees some sort of higher power already at work on the killers, saying "It's funny, because karma is a total bitch. A few weeks after [brother] passed away, two of the guys were shot. One of the guys accidentally shot himself and the gun that he shot himself with was linked up to a murder so now he's locked up for that murder....Everyone who was involved either got shot, or is getting locked up, or something is happening to them" (R83, Chicago). This is exactly what Ms. O wants, and what she is asking God to deliver. She would do it herself, she admits: "If I was to

ever see one of them on the street—none of them know where I live now—I would definitely attempt to do something to them. I would run their asses over. Repeatedly run them over. Back up, forward. Back up, forward. Back up, forward. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.”

At the same time, even though she says she “hates” the guys who killed her brother, she doesn’t blame them. They had it in for her brother and had plans to kill him, and she sees them as irredeemable, or forces of nature. Ms. O expresses her grief as a desire for the perpetrators to suffer, all the while believing that she had the last best chance to keep her brother from being killed. She told her brother the guys planned to kill him, but he didn’t believe her. She regrets not forcing the issue, she feels she “should’ve taken him out of there, should’ve made him leave.” As much ill as she wishes her brother’s killers, she plants the blame closer to home. “I pray every single day for them to suffer. But do I blame them? I don’t blame them. I blame *us*.” Ms. O, who, once again, is not a church-goer or very religious, turns to religion to try and regain control of a situation where she feels like she made a mistake. She is focused on revenge and retribution seemingly because it provides a way to regain power, and contributes to absolving herself in her own eyes.

### **4.2.3 Political Engagement**

Where emotional experiences and blame have textured and subjective relationships to religious beliefs expressed by interview respondents in Chicago, the relationship between religious coping and political engagement is relatively more straightforward and centers on forgiveness and community. Individuals who are more likely to contact media about violence they experienced focus their discussion of religion significantly more on forgiveness, or the need to forgive, than on other religious topics ( $p < 0.10$ , coefficients in Appendix Table A3). The same respondents also show significantly stronger agreement with the idea that “people running the government don’t really care what happens to me,” suggesting that their willingness to engage in politics exists in spite of (or because of) a lack of power. A number of respondents made this connection, through the idea of needing to change or reinvest in their communities. Respondents whose religious discussion touched more on heritage and community were also marginally more likely to report political engagement ( $p = 0.076$ ).

Ms. M, who lost her son in 2016, initially wanted to kill the woman who killed her son. Her plan to do so was one of the more concrete and feasible I heard across interviews in Chicago: she had a weapon and she knew where to go to find the perpetrator. Once she thought it through, her religious beliefs were what stopped her: “I thought it out and, I trust in God through the whole process... I believe Jesus died and rose again for me. I also know that God says vengeance is his and not mine” (R15, Chicago). After her son’s funeral came and

went, Ms. M became more resolved in her belief that her family did not need another tragedy. Recovering and focusing on restraint, she grew closer to her community, especially her block club. Her reported political engagement, in keeping with re-investment in community, is the fourth highest of all interviewees.

#### 4.2.4 Punishment Preferences

The final role that religion seems to play in shaping the meaning-making process for surviving family members of homicide victims in Chicago is visible in their preferences for how the people who killed their relatives should be punished. The presence of three different religious themes, focusing on retribution vs. focusing on theodicy vs. focusing on doctrinal prescriptions, are associated with significantly different preferences for how the perpetrators of crimes are punished. Respondents who spend more of their interview talking about retribution and the morality thereof are substantially and significantly more likely to report that they wish the perpetrator could be punished extralegally, by the victim's family and community ( $p < 0.001$ , coefficients in Appendix Table A4), and violently ( $p < 0.001$ ). They are significantly less likely to report a preference for punishment through the justice system ( $p < 0.001$ ). These associations are estimated using each frame's rate of mention; when conditioning on respondents with any religious content (a share specification), the preference for violent punishment remains significant ( $p < 0.10$ ) while the extralegal and justice-system associations attenuate, reflecting the small sample of respondents with non-zero religious mention. Conversely, respondents whose religious mentions include a larger share of text questioning God's power and benevolence are significantly less likely to prefer violent punishment. The theory of justice that resonates most with respondents depends, unsurprisingly, on how they make moral sense of the crime and the perpetrator: when they register what has happened as the failing of a specific person who has broken the law and a moral code, the relevant response falls somewhere between expressive, cathartic punishment and personal accountability. When people locate accountability with God, they resonate less with violent and punitive theories of justice.

Calling back to the opening examples in the paper, respondents seem to leverage scripture and doctrinal prescriptions to both of these ends. Focusing religious discussion more on specific aspects of scripture is significantly associated *both* with a higher likelihood of preferring violent punishment, *and* with higher reported satisfaction with the punishment that has actually taken place (almost all non-violent). Rather than trying to justify violence, the respondents represented by these correlations are more often using scripture to talk themselves down. Like Ms. K and Mr. A described above, these respondents may want violent punishment for the people who have taken their children away from them, but many also believe

they are wrong to feel that way. Surfacing the proscription of vengeance from Deuteronomy 32—probably the scripture I heard most across 30 interviews—is a way of regulating attitudes and desires they know are immoral, and making their peace with the legal punishment that has taken place.

### 4.3 Religion and Political Attitudes in India

Indian Sikhs who survived violence in the 1980s and 1990s bring up religion in ways that both match and diverge from the patterns of religious mentions observed in Chicago. There are meaningful parallels, for example, in the connection between religious community and political engagement. The differences, however, are more obvious and are potentially traceable to differences in the political and social context in which respondents in Chicago vs. India faced violence. Discussion of religion among respondents in India is, unsurprisingly, more entangled with political and social identity, creating different connections between religious discussion and outcomes like blame, political engagement, and even personal emotions. As in the Chicago section above, all results described in this section come from models that adjust for respondents' frequency of gurdwara attendance.

#### 4.3.1 Emotions

In Chicago, the most consistent emotional pattern is what we might call “downward regulation”: Focusing on religion, especially teachings about forgiveness or beliefs about fate, is associated with positive affect and less anger. In India, the relationship between discussion of religion and emotion is nearly the opposite. Discussing theodicy more, as a share of overall religious mention is associated with *more* current negative affect ( $p < 0.05$ ; coefficients in Appendix Table A5) even reflecting on violence three decades after the fact. A greater share of religious discussion concerning providence and fate is associated with more current anger ( $p < 0.10$ ) and less recalled positive affect at the time of the violence ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Why does metaphysical discussion in India correlate with more negative emotions than in Chicago? Looking into specific mentions in interviews suggests that respondents who raise theodicy- or fate-related questions in India, simply find them harder to answer than in Chicago. Indian Sikhs who question why God has allowed violence may find it harder to conclude that what they experience as suffering fits into a broader plan unknown to them, because for some, the violence they experienced and witnessed included the burning of Gurdwaras, and the deliberate targeting of men who were more visibly faithful—mobs in anti-Sikh pogroms in 1984 found turban-wearing men to be especially easy and visible targets.

One woman, Ms. N, who survived the 1984 anti-Sikh pogroms in Delhi, raised the combined issues of

fate and theodicy in questioning why the Sikhs were attacked: “The same thing happened with Sikhs again? The one thing we don’t want, why did that happen with our religion, people from our religion suffers! Why? And Sikhism itself is a peace-loving religion” (R106, India). She recalls sacrifices that Sikhs, especially the Sikh gurus, made on behalf of Hindus and reports her own acts of respect to Hindu faith like doing puja and saying prayers to Vaishnavite deities. Her confusion about the karmic balance between the actions of Sikhs (as she presents them) and the actions of the primarily Hindu mobs seem to be a source of persistent frustration even decades on.

Another respondent, Mr. D, reflected on his father’s death in the 1984 pogroms chalking it up to fate: “When people came [to riot/protest] — whatever was meant to meet you, would meet you. That is the game of fate (kismet di khel). That’s fate’s way — look at it through fate’s lens...” (R105, Delhi). Mr. D is angry *at* losing the game of fate, at the bad luck of not being able to perform funeral rites for his father, and at generally feeling like he had no power to change the situation. He reports feeling “extremely” angry when he thinks about 1984, even 36 years later.

One other religious theme pulls in the opposite direction of theodicy and fate. Respondents who discuss divine agency — the direct intervention of God in human affairs — report substantially less anger recalled from the time of the violence ( $p < 0.001$ ). Ms. S, who survived the 1984 pogroms in Delhi, illustrates the alternative path. Her father turned to religious practice during the violence — “from morning to evening there was devotional music being played in my house... and he was praying, I guess” (R008, California) — while the family received reports of Sikhs being killed and women being targeted. Seeking God’s presence in the middle of violence had the effect of soothing Ms. S’ family, even as violence raged around them.<sup>11</sup>

Another respondent Mr. C explicitly contrasted luck—he says Sikhs don’t believe in luck—with the protection of the lord, and claims that when he experienced ‘luck’ in the timely arrival of a police officer during the 1984 pogroms, it was actually that “God sent a messenger” to protect him. Focusing on God, rather than people, as agentic plausibly dampened Mr. C’s anger at the perpetrators who were trying to kill him. He expresses anger at political leaders like Indira Gandhi for setting off the conflict by attacking the Golden Temple in Amritsar, but the mobs in the pogroms that occurred after Indira’s death seem to be forces of nature in his telling, not humans with agency (R102, Delhi). Others voiced a similar sentiment, avowing that the genuine believers have nothing to fear even in death (R014, California; R106, Delhi).

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<sup>11</sup>Ms. S herself looks back on this with skepticism many years later, saying that when she went to marry she looked for a partner who had the resources to protect her “better than this ‘praying to a superior being.’”

### 4.3.2 Blame

Blame attribution in India differs structurally from Chicago because the perpetrators of the violence respondents describe were primarily aligned with the state: Indian Army soldiers during Operation Blue Star, mainly-Hindu mobs organized and sometimes led by local politicians during the 1984 pogroms, and, in exception, both police forces and anti-state militants in the later insurgency. Against this backdrop, certain religious ideas are associated with more or less explicit attribution of blame to the state and security forces. Respondents whose religious discussion focuses more on corruption and betrayal—the sense that Sikh leaders failed or actively harmed their community—are significantly more likely to assign blame to state security forces for the violence they experienced ( $p < 0.05$ , share specification; coefficients in Appendix Table A6). Invoking narratives of betrayal by those in power extends naturally, for Sikh survivors, to the police forces that stood aside during the 1984 pogroms, or the majority-Sikh counterinsurgency police in Punjab. The pattern runs opposite to Chicago, where religious discourse tends to redirect blame away from identifiable agents. In India, where the actors responsible for law and order were sometimes implicated in causing (or failing to stop) the violence, religious narratives that name betrayal and corruption are associated with placing blame precisely there.

### 4.3.3 Political Engagement

The relationship between religious ideas and political engagement in India is, in most respects, the opposite of the patterns observed in Chicago. Respondents who discussed theodicy more reported significantly lower political engagement on the mean political action index ( $p < 0.001$ , coefficients in Appendix Table A7). Focusing on corruption and betrayal by religious and political leaders also predicts lower overall political engagement ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The association between theodicy and demobilization has a logical connection: If respondents are referring to theodicy to process violence—asking why God allowed or accepted it—they are implicitly rejecting or overlooking the kind of locally-focused anger that would drive conventional political participation (Bateson, 2012).

The connection between political disengagement and corruption/betrayal discussion is less intuitive, especially given that the same theme is associated with blaming state security forces for violence against Sikhs. This inconsistency could be driven by a small sample, in which a few individuals with peculiar combinations of views might have high leverage, but it is also worth considering for the sake of theory generation. Disillusionment with corruption would work as a mechanism to explain both findings. This mechanism has been observed in other developing-world democracies and is plausible in India (De Micheli

and Taylor, 2026). Following this logic, naming the perpetrators and blaming them does not imply confidence that political action will be a path to accountability.

Ms. W, a respondent from a rural Punjab village who came to the United States in the 1990s, described this exact tension reflecting on her feelings after Operation Blue Star, the 1984 Indian Army siege of a Sikh holy site in Punjab that killed hundreds of militants and civilian pilgrims. She describes feeling some shame, because the betrayers were “the government we trusted, the people we elected, they did that to us.” At the same time, she said, “We know we can’t do anything. Nobody’s there to listen to us.” Ms. W felt betrayed by the moderate Sikh politicians and government that she had supported (India’s President at the time of the operation was a Sikh from Punjab). She blamed them very unambiguously for targeting a religious site, but simultaneously recognized that she had no power and thus that there was no point engaging further (R012, California).

#### 4.3.4 Sikh Safety

The final set of outcomes I examine for India respondents concerns their views on Sikh community safety: whether Sikh independence is viable, whether the Sikh community is misunderstood in India or elsewhere, and whether Sikhs are safer living outside India. Interview respondents disagreed substantially on how to answer these politically sensitive questions, but predictors of where each respondent landed can be found in the way they related to their religious identity and beliefs in other parts of the interview.

By construction, all respondents in the India corpus are Sikhs of North Indian background. All report attending Gurdwara at least occasionally. Though their experiences of the 1980s and 1990s varied somewhat, they all lived in either Delhi or Northern California—both places with large, established Sikh communities—at the time of the interview. All the same, their views on Sikh safety and the way forward for their community differed substantially.

Respondents who focus more of their religious discussion on Sikhs as a community and a source of heritage/tradition are *less* likely to believe that Sikhs are safe in India relative to in the diaspora ( $p < 0.10$ , coefficients in Appendix Table A8), as are respondents who spend more time talking about corruption and betrayal by Sikh leaders ( $p < 0.05$ ). These same respondents are also less likely to view Sikhism as misunderstood in the United States ( $p < 0.10$  for “heritage”,  $p < 0.05$  for “corruption”).

Respondents who discuss Sikh heritage and community tend to invoke a long arc of Sikh history that includes periods of political power and periods they recognize as inter-communal harmony in the past. That historical awareness appears to sharpen rather than soften concerns about safety in India related to violence

in and after 1984. Ms. J, a California respondent, is representative of the aggregate pattern. She focuses more than most respondents on religious heritage and community, and talks about how the experience of violence in 1984 and afterward alienated her from even relatively cosmopolitan Indian society: “1984 changed everyone’s perception of how Sikhs were regarded. . . I began hiding my religious identity in the Hindu circles I moved in. And I remember only being proud of my identity after I settled [in California]” (R008, California). She strongly disagrees that Sikhs are safe in India, even today.

Mr. B, a student activist who fled to California after being tortured in police custody, draws similar conclusions focusing on the long arc of Sikh history in South Asia. He described the reign of Ranjit Singh, the Sikh king who ruled a united Punjab in the early 1800s and led a religiously-integrated army.<sup>12</sup> In Ranjit Singh’s empire, Mr. B says, “everybody was equal. And we want a raj like that, we want a country like that.” Given his experiences of detention and torture in India, it is not surprising that Mr. B thinks India is far less safe for Sikhs than California—a view that accords with the aggregate pattern among heritage-focused respondents (R018, California).

Importantly, neither religious theme predicts whether respondents think Sikhs would be better off in an independent state. The desirability of a Sikh state—the political goal of the separatist insurgency in the 1980s and 1990s—does not align at all with the particular religious themes that resonate with respondents after the fact.

On the issue of safety in the more immediate during-violence sense, a number of respondents in India and California pointed to the *kirpan*, a dagger or sword worn by observant Sikhs as a divinely-authorized instrument of defense. In their understanding, Sikhs should not wait for God to save them because He gave Sikhs the means and the license to save themselves and others. About one in six respondents in the India corpus have at least one religious mention in their transcripts that specifically refers to the *kirpan*. Two respondents I interviewed in Delhi (one of them Mr. C) described the sword’s use in the 1984 pogroms to repel mobs. A respondent, Mr. F, saw the *sevadar* of his local Gurdwara take his sword and use it to fight a crowd of dozens. Mr. F celebrates this as a religiously authorized defense of a sacred object (R101, Delhi). Mr. C concurs as a general principle: During the 1984 pogroms, his family rejected offers of pistols, saying that the sword was the weapon that “our guru has given us” to protect ourselves. Again returning to the theme of contingent effects, not all Sikhs feel the same way about the *kirpan*. Another Delhi respondent whose discussion of religion focuses far less on retribution and divine justice than Mr. C

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<sup>12</sup>Mr. B was part of a political organization that was a major source of militant recruits, but he does not say he participated in violence during the Punjab crisis. Historical scholarship including Kaur (2019), however, suggests the police did not necessarily attend to these distinctions.

or Mr. F and instead almost exclusively on religious identity and community heritage, mentions the *kirpan* as well, but to reject its use, saying it was not worth keeping a sword *or* a gun in his house (R103, Delhi). Again, the relation of this context—many Sikhs are technically armed by virtue of religious practice—to attitudes about the use of weapons depends on which religious themes are invoked.

Findings in this section suggest that religious themes can shape the way people make meaning out of violent experiences, but that the themes themselves do not have fixed political valence across contexts. The same resources from faith traditions and religious beliefs—ideas about divine agency, forgiveness, coping with loss, and religion as a community and identity—pull violence survivors in different directions depending on how those beliefs and considerations interact with the political context in which they faced violence. In Chicago, where violence was mainly registered as interpersonal and where the state was, in theory, a source of succor and justice, religion mainly functions to regulate emotion and blame and redirect preferences about punishment. In India, where the state has at best an ambiguous relationship to the harms suffered by Indian Sikhs in 1984 and afterward, the same religious themes work very differently, pushing blame more toward the state and shaping considerations about political engagement and prospects for future safety. Consistent across both contexts: religious ideas, above and beyond intensity of religious practice or doctrinal identity, shape the meaning-making process and the political attitudes that emerge from it.

## **5 Some Hypotheses about Religious Belief and Violence**

The patterns demonstrated above do not nearly exhaust the questions raised by the way that individual interview respondents raise religious themes in the process of sense-making, but they are consistent enough within individual contexts to generate propositions that might be useful for thinking about the role of religion in other post-violence contexts. In *ending* this essay with hypotheses, I aim to be clear that these ideas are developed inductively from over 100 hours of conversation with religious people using their faith—to varying degrees and in various ways—as a tool to understand horrible things that happened to them and around them. The analyses above are meant to generate theory that motivates future testing.

Broadly, the variation explored above raises the possibility that different religious themes and ideas interact with political context to activate *distinct theories of justice, causation, and restoration*, that then inform attitudes. Religious ideas that come up frequently in Chicago and locate accountability in human communities tend to pull survivors toward interpersonal and more violent avenues of achieving justice. Locating accountability in divine agents, or letting human agents be forgiven, then consistently supports

emotional wellbeing and suppresses interest in seeking justice by personally punishing wrongdoers.

**Hypothesis 1.** *Religious ideas that locate agency and accountability in divine agents will demobilize, and lower expectations of redress in the social and political world.*

The clearest and most consistent pattern among respondents in Chicago concerns preferences for punishing the individuals who killed respondents' relatives. People who spent more time talking about the religious morality of retribution were substantially more likely to prefer community-based (i.e. extralegal) punishment, and violent punishment specifically. When accountability is instead located in non-personified or divine agents, the reverse seems to hold. Respondents in Chicago who focused more on questioning God's logic, or trying to understand the plan that had led to their relative's death, were significantly less likely to prefer violence as redress. In India, an analogous pattern is visible in the relationship between religious ideas and political engagement. Discussions of theodicy and divine agency are strongly associated with less political involvement, again, consistent with the logic that if justice is God's to deliver, there is not much urgency in helping it along yourself.

**Hypothesis 2.** *Religious beliefs regulate negative emotions and support wellbeing only when human agents are either forgiven or able to be held accountable.*

Many respondents in both the Chicago and India corpora are encouraged to pray or to get closer to God as part of their healing process. The relationships between religious ideas and emotions that I find in their interviews, however, suggest that this only works conditionally.<sup>13</sup> In Chicago, certain religious themes do seem beneficial for respondents' emotional state: Focusing on forgiveness as a Christian value, for instance, is associated with higher positive affect at the time of the interview. It's also potentially easier to do in a setting where it is possible to forgive *and* see justice done by the state. More "negative" religious themes like theodicy are actually associated with less negative emotion as well. The thread that binds them is a lack of culpability assigned to a person.

The same theme of theodicy, however, is associated with the opposite emotional outcomes in India where some Sikh respondents question why God allowed human beings, and a nominally secular government, to desecrate temples and kill the faithful. Absent forgiveness or indemnification for human perpetrators, talking about theodicy is perhaps raising unanswerable questions. Religious considerations, then, don't necessarily regulate emotion by themselves. If at all, they seem to require that the political context make forgiveness or accountability possible.

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<sup>13</sup>And to be clear, the design of this paper is not sufficient to say which is causing the other.

**Hypothesis 3.** *The content (and cognitive availability) of religious belief can incrementally explain variation in post-violence attitudes beyond what is explained by religious identity and practice.*

All the associations introduced in this paper obtain after adjusting for the role that worship/church attendance might play in both a) directly shaping beliefs and b) shaping the extent to which people use religious ideas in describing their experiences and thoughts. The same religious themes seem to be doing different work depending on the political context of the violence discussed in interviews, but religious ideas regularly *add* to the explanation that social scientists could get from identity and ritual practice alone.

## 6 Conclusion

Patterns in the ideas and beliefs discussed by violence survivors in India, California, and Chicago have three implications for the study of religion in political science. First, the interviews show that similarly religious people from the same faith traditions often reach for *different, and even contradictory aspects of their faith* when trying to make sense of violent experiences. The standard approach in political science, which, as Rich Nielsen points out in a forum with [Tabaar et al. \(2023\)](#) is a predominantly secular field, is to capture whether religion is present and perhaps how intense it is. There are, however, varieties of belief held and expressed by similarly devout people in the same faith tradition and similar contexts.

Second, evidence from these interviews builds on voting behavior work by [McClendon and Riedl \(2019\)](#) and on combat efficacy work by [Hassner \(2016\)](#) to advance the idea that the content of religious messages could shape a wide range of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes beyond turnout or operational choices in warfare. The invocation of religious beliefs by people who have experienced violence appears to shape (or be shaped by) their emotional responses to trauma, their level of political engagement and feelings of efficacy or inefficacy, and the ways they direct blame and seek retribution, which recent work has argued is a pivotal issue in politics not only after violence ([Tsai, 2021](#)).

Third, this paper demonstrates that religious beliefs and opinions could easily become a bigger part of social science theorizing and theory testing, because the raw material for belief measurement is not very hard to acquire. The interview evidence about religion analyzed in this paper was volunteered by respondents answering questions that did not require them to mention their faith. This likely reflects that many people around the world feel little to no compunction about discussing religious concepts when they come to mind. The prospects for data collection on religious attitudes and beliefs are, therefore, very positive, whether in carefully designed surveys and experiments, in less-structured conversations, or in recorded testimony and archives.

These connections, which, of course, this paper does not disentangle such that I can say much about causal relationships, open up interesting possibilities for future testing. One especially tantalizing possibility is that careful use of religious symbols and appeals to belief among the faithful could be used to encourage blame attribution and punishment preferences that are de-escalatory and socially beneficial (H1). Previous attempts to evaluate the effect of religious messages on attitudes toward peace and conflict have found mixed results on support for violence and positivity toward out-groups, perhaps because they have often tested the effect of encouraging respondents to think about religious identity without specifically directing them toward a belief or an attribute of doctrine that is theoretically linked to reconciliation and support for peace. As [Grossman, Nomikos and Siddiqui \(2023\)](#) and [Blair et al. \(2021\)](#) observe, pro-peace messages from moderate religious figures are a common and widely-promoted peacebuilding intervention in group-based conflicts. Beyond leveraging religious leaders as “trusted authorities” ([Blair et al., 2021](#)), the hypotheses I introduced above contend that the effect of their authority on public opinion, norms, and conflict dynamics, depends on whether they use that authority to prime religious individuals to think about beliefs or obligations that promote peace vs. struggle.

Another interesting possibility, which circles back to the literature on religion and coping cited above (reviewed in [Park, 2005](#)), is that religiously-informed interventions to promote reconciliation and social meaning-making after conflict might be effective as part of a broader post-conflict peacebuilding repertoire (H2). Especially for conflicts that are *not* fought across religious cleavages, priming beliefs associated with divine justice, forgiveness, and providence might be a useful way to cultivate more forbearance, or more restorative and less retributive theories of justice in communities recovering from conflict.

Religious belief, as a cause of political phenomena, is under-theorized in most areas of political science even as more researchers are answering Anna [Grzymala-Busse \(2012\)](#)’s call to take religion more seriously as an identity and social practice. The case for taking *belief* seriously, especially in the wake of violence, is that the content of the religious ideas that people reach for in difficult or unusual times might shape the progress of political and social recovery after violence: Different religious ideas in different faiths might lead people toward the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation or away from it. They might inspire people to wait for justice to be divinely delivered, or agitate for it to come about in the course of politics. They could inspire people to raise arms in defense or retribution, or trust that they will be protected from harm. A more complete account of the role religion plays in politics will require attention to these contingent invocations of different facets of religious teaching and practice, how they come about, and what they mean for subsequent behavior.

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# Appendices

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## A Interview Data Collection

**NOTE:** Material in this section is adapted from the text and appendices of Milliff (2023, 2024), the articles that originally introduced the interview corpora re-used here.

### A.1 Interview Protocols

**Chicago.** Interviews were conducted in January 2018 in partnership with Chicago Survivors, a nonprofit victim-services organization that provides free case management and psychological support to families of homicide victims killed in the city of Chicago. Before conducting interviews, I spent two weeks with Chicago Survivors staff—attending office hours, accompanying Family Support Specialists (FSSs) on home visits, and observing meetings across the full lifecycle of a case from death notification to ongoing support. This observation period informed the interview guide, and it allowed FSSs to see firsthand how I approached sensitive conversations, which later translated into introductions to their clients.

To develop the interview guide, I worked with Chicago Survivors staff to identify questions they found relevant to understanding their clients' needs, and separately consulted trauma psychologists working in the same communities to ensure questions were phrased in ways unlikely to cause distress. Before beginning formal interviews, I ran practice interviews with several FSSs, most of whom were social workers or LCSW-qualified clinicians. Because a number of FSSs were themselves survivors of homicide victims these sessions both refined the instrument, and gave FSSs direct evidence of how I handled sensitive discussions. This later supported their willingness to introduce me to clients. FSSs provided a list of slightly over 100 clients who had completed the six-month course of case management services (starting immediately after the homicide), and who the FSSs believed would be unlikely to suffer psychological harm from participating. I contacted all 100 to secure 30 interviews.

Outreach to prospective respondents began with a brief phone conversation in which I identified myself as a political science researcher working with Chicago Survivors, and explained that parts of the research would be shared with Chicago Survivors to inform how the organization understood and served its clients (but no individual would be identifiable in the products I shared). I was clear in these conversations that participation was entirely voluntary and carried no consequences for the respondent's existing relationship with Chicago Survivors. A number of respondents followed up with their FSS between my initial call and agreeing to an interview, but unless respondents told Chicago Survivors themselves, I did not provide the organization information about which individuals from the roster participated. Eventual interviews were

semi-structured and lasted 60-90 minutes; all respondents consented to audio recording.

**India.** Interviews were conducted in two waves, in the San Francisco Bay Area (California) and New Delhi (India), with Sikh survivors of the November 1984 anti-Sikh pogroms and other violence related to the Punjab crisis. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted 60–120 minutes; most respondents consented to audio recording. The interview guide covered respondents’ experiences during and immediately after the violence, their interpretation of those events in religious and political terms, and their current emotional state and political attitudes. In both Delhi and California, I gave respondents the option of conducting interviews in either Punjabi (with a research assistant to provide simultaneous translation) or in English. I did not speak Hindi during interviews unless a respondent initiated in Hindi—a decision made in consultation with my research assistants, reflecting the politically sensitive status of Hindi in Punjab and among Punjabi-speaking communities in the aftermath of the Punjab crisis.

Two harm-mitigation strategies were employed in the India fieldwork. First, interview questions and recruitment materials were reviewed with community consultants with experience in the Sikh communities in California and Delhi before fieldwork began. Second, each IRB protocol included explicit contact procedures for respondents who experienced distress during or after interviews. No monetary compensation was offered to respondents; small tokens of appreciation (postcards, stress-relief items) were distributed at the conclusion of interviews.

## **A.2 Sampling**

**Chicago.** The sample was drawn from Chicago Survivors’ archived client list, which includes families of homicide victims from 2015–2017. Interviews were stratified across CPD North, Central, and South detective areas; the resulting geographic distribution tracked administrative homicide data closely, with the North area modestly underrepresented. That gap reflects a language constraint: North-area families are disproportionately non-native English speakers, and the study required that at least one household member be able to conduct a full interview in English. Solved cases referred for prosecution (“cleared” cases) made up 24.5% of the sample, closely tracking the citywide cleared-case rate for the period (26.41%). Given Chicago’s residential segregation patterns, this geographic distribution corresponds roughly to moderate oversampling of Black homicide victims and moderate undersampling of Latinx homicide victims.

**India.** The India sample was constructed via stratified convenience sampling across two geographic sites. In the San Francisco Bay Area, the sampling frame consisted of four strata: congregations at the three

largest Bay Area Gurdwaras (El Sobrante, Fremont, and San Jose) plus a community contacts stratum for respondents recruited through personal and professional networks. In New Delhi, the sampling frame was organized around five neighborhoods identified by the Nanavati Commission Report as most severely affected by the 1984 pogroms, further stratified by a wealth index constructed from Delhi Municipal Valuation Committee property tax brackets to ensure variation in socioeconomic status across neighborhoods. Interviews were conducted in English ( $n=21$ ) or Punjabi with live translation ( $n=11$ ).

### **A.3 Human Subjects Review**

The Chicago study was approved by the MIT COUHES under protocol #1707023191. The India study was approved under protocol E-1623, with a subsequent amendment under E-1994 covering expanded fieldwork. All respondents provided written informed consent before interviews began; consent was reaffirmed verbally at multiple points during interviews, and respondents were reminded that they could stop at any time. Respondents' names are not recorded in the data.

### **A.4 Translation**

Eleven India interviews were conducted in Punjabi, with live interpretation into English provided by research assistants. I worked with two research assistants in Delhi—one from North Delhi, and one from Ferozpur District in Punjab—and one Punjabi-heritage research assistant in California. Their different regional backgrounds provided useful community connections for navigating respondents' trust. All Punjabi interviews were transcribed in Punjabi and then translated to English by the same research assistant who was present for the live interview.

## **B Regression Results**

### **B.1 Chicago**

#### **B.1.1 Emotions (C1)**

**Table A1:** Chicago (C1): Religious Themes → Emotions

	P2 Pos. Affect (rate)	P2 Pos. Affect (share)	P1 Anger: Theo. (rate)	P1 Anger: Theo. (share)	P2 Anger (rate)	P2 Anger (share)	P1 Anger: Fate (rate)	P1 Anger: Fate (share)
(Intercept)	9.972*** (2.989)	10.967*** (2.871)	3.395*** (0.277)	3.347*** (0.295)	4.383*** (0.321)	4.208*** (0.304)	3.180*** (0.264)	3.300*** (0.265)
Forgiveness/restraint (rate)	279.840* (144.429)							
Forgiveness/restraint (share)		25.574* (13.570)						
Theodicy (rate)			2.014 (16.440)					
Theodicy (share)				0.797 (1.567)				
Providence/fate (rate)					-56.969** (23.638)		22.445* (11.299)	
Providence/fate (share)						-4.601** (1.748)		1.254 (1.444)
Weekly church attendance	0.549 (3.943)	0.734 (4.143)	-0.079 (0.443)	-0.069 (0.448)	-0.123 (0.452)	-0.064 (0.479)	0.050 (0.418)	-0.004 (0.437)
N	30	30	28	28	25	25	28	28
R <sup>2</sup>	0.196	0.140	0.002	0.006	0.295	0.228	0.063	0.023

\* p &lt; 0.1, \*\* p &lt; 0.05, \*\*\* p &lt; 0.01

HC2 robust SEs in parentheses. \* p &lt; 0.10, \*\* p &lt; 0.05, \*\*\* p &lt; 0.01. P1 = at interview; P2 = recalled at time of violence

### B.1.2 Blame Attribution (C2)

**Table A2:** Chicago (C2): Religious Themes → Blame Attribution

	Blame Friends (rate)	Blame Friends (share)	Blame Self (share)
(Intercept)	0.502*** (0.139)	0.470*** (0.133)	0.274** (0.110)
Providence/fate (rate)	-10.741** (4.061)		
Providence/fate (share)		-0.886*** (0.313)	
Moral retribution (share)			1.841** (0.803)
Weekly church attendance	-0.267 (0.166)	-0.256 (0.169)	-0.204 (0.142)
N	30	30	30
R <sup>2</sup>	0.153	0.131	0.249

\* p &lt; 0.1, \*\* p &lt; 0.05, \*\*\* p &lt; 0.01

HC2 robust SEs in parentheses. \* p &lt; 0.10, \*\* p &lt; 0.05, \*\*\* p &lt; 0.01. DVs are binary (1 = named as responsible).

### B.1.3 Political Engagement (C3)

**Table A3:** Chicago (C3): Religious Themes → Political Engagement

	Contact Media (share)	Pol. Engagement (share)
(Intercept)	3.489*** (0.281)	3.072*** (0.172)
Forgiveness/restraint (share)	-2.783* (1.367)	
Heritage/community (share)		-2.211* (1.194)
Weekly church attendance	-0.254 (0.452)	-0.279 (0.249)
N	29	29
R <sup>2</sup>	0.152	0.210

\* p < 0.1, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01

HC2 robust SEs in parentheses. \* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01. DVs coded from 1 (have not, would not) to 4 (done in past year).

### B.1.4 Punishment Preferences (C4)

**Table A4:** Chicago (C4): Religious Themes → Punishment Preferences

	Extralegal (rate)	Violent (rate)	State (rate)	Violent (share)	Violent (share)	Violent (share)	Satisfied (share)
(Intercept)	0.078* (0.039)	0.062 (0.041)	0.620*** (0.119)	0.081 (0.062)	0.359*** (0.125)	0.011 (0.093)	3.406*** (0.500)
Moral retribution (rate)	69.045*** (11.504)	59.151*** (12.017)	-57.315*** (13.309)				
Moral retribution (share)				2.525* (1.272)			
Theodicy (share)					-1.901*** (0.670)		
Scripture/doctrine (share)						1.240*** (0.313)	2.717** (1.297)
Weekly church attendance	-0.043 (0.120)	0.176 (0.162)	0.139 (0.164)	0.253 (0.160)	0.155 (0.163)	0.229 (0.170)	-0.857 (0.593)
N	29	30	29	30	30	30	30
R <sup>2</sup>	0.592	0.416	0.287	0.325	0.186	0.255	0.173

\* p < 0.1, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01

HC2 robust SEs in parentheses. \* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01. Rate: mentions per passage. Share: mentions per religious passage.

## B.2 India

### B.2.1 Emotions (I1)

**Table A5:** India (I1): Religious Themes → Emotions

	P2 Neg. Affect (share)	P2 Anger (share)	P1 Pos. Affect (share)	P1 Anger (rate)	P1 Anger (share)
(Intercept)	2.916*** (0.631)	2.266*** (0.669)	2.721*** (0.514)	2.310** (0.873)	2.413*** (0.833)
Theodicy (share)	2.981 (3.582)				
Providence/fate (share)		0.475 (4.734)	-1.330 (3.152)		
Divine agency (rate)				0.003 (0.156)	
Divine agency (share)					-2.765 (1.997)
Worship frequency	0.168 (0.158)	0.312* (0.176)	0.155 (0.154)	0.218 (0.202)	0.234 (0.199)
N	28	26	29	28	28
R <sup>2</sup>	0.054	0.119	0.035	0.046	0.111

\*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

HC2 robust SEs in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ . P1 = at interview; P2 = recalled at time of violence.

### B.2.2 Blame Attribution (I2)

**Table A6:** India (I2): Religious Themes → Blame Attribution

	Blame Sec. Forces (share)	Blame Sec. Forces (rate)
(Intercept)	0.108 (0.164)	0.116 (0.161)
Corruption/betrayal (share)	1.464** (0.672)	
Corruption/betrayal (rate)		3.526** (1.511)
Worship frequency	-0.028 (0.034)	-0.029 (0.033)
N	28	28
R <sup>2</sup>	0.438	0.444

\*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

HC2 robust SEs in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ . DV is binary (1 = blamed state security forces or police).

### B.2.3 Political Engagement (I3)

**Table A7:** India (I3): Religious Themes → Political Engagement

	Pol. Action: Theo. (share)	Pol. Action: Corr. (share)
(Intercept)	2.859*** (0.336)	2.767*** (0.319)
Theodicy (share)	-9.034*** (2.763)	
Corruption/betrayal (share)		-0.943* (0.539)
Worship frequency	-0.047 (0.091)	-0.049 (0.090)
N	29	29
R <sup>2</sup>	0.161	0.028

\*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

HC2 robust SEs in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ . DV = mean political action index (1: would not, to 4: done past year).

## B.2.4 Sikh Safety Views (I4)

**Table A8:** India (I4): Religious Themes → Sikh Safety Views

	Safer in India	Misunderstood US	Independence	Safer in India	Misunderstood US	Independence
(Intercept)	2.396*** (0.844)	7.155*** (0.938)	4.496*** (1.435)	1.638* (0.828)	6.328*** (0.948)	4.688*** (1.240)
Heritage/community (share)	-4.732* (2.690)	-5.430* (3.125)	-0.129 (3.688)			
Corruption/betrayal (share)				-1.607** (0.717)	-2.681** (1.236)	-2.888 (4.369)
Worship frequency	0.124 (0.216)	-0.269 (0.250)	0.166 (0.325)	0.120 (0.241)	-0.273 (0.264)	0.139 (0.314)
N	28	29	29	28	29	29
R <sup>2</sup>	0.146	0.103	0.011	0.030	0.042	0.031

\*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

HC2 robust SEs in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ . DVs coded 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

## C LLM Coding Pipeline

### C.1 Pipeline Overview

The LLM identified and categorized passages discussing religion using a two-stage pipeline, implemented independently of the human research assistant coding described in the main text. First, a lightweight model (Claude Haiku 4.5) scanned each paragraph-equivalent chunk of each transcript and labeled it **explicit** (unambiguous religious reference), **implicit** (religious content present but indirect), or **none**. Next, any chunk labeled explicit or implicit was passed to a more deliberative model (Claude Sonnet 4.6) for classification per the codebook (See Table 1). At both stages, the LLM was instructed to return responses as structured JSON, with category labels and confidence levels. Prompts were constructed after feeding the LLM few-shot examples drawn from the RA’s labeled data (59 examples for India, 53 for Chicago), using

proportional-with-floor sampling across categories to ensure all categories were represented. The prompt file is included in the replication data.

## C.2 Privacy

The pipeline was carefully structured to minimize threats to respondent privacy when using the Anthropic Claude API for labeling religious mentions.

First, I strictly limited LLM access to respondent data in the labeling pipeline to containers/interfaces in which Anthropic is *disallowed* from using session data to improve their models. All labeling, for instance, was done by API call which, according to Anthropic’s terms and conditions, are not used for training/improving models by default.

Second, to reduce the risk of respondent re-identification, I stripped IDs and file names from transcript chunks before sending to the API. API calls were segmented at the paragraph level, and paragraphs were “shuffled” before sending to API such that reconstructing a single respondent’s transcript *via* labeling order would be impossible.

Third, to avoid leakage of personally identifiable information, transcripts in both corpora were de-identified *by hand* at the time of transcription to remove names and specific locations that would have eased re-identification (e.g. a respondent mentioning the cross streets where they lived, or their job title and place of work).

## C.3 Prompts

**Stage 1: Detection.** The detection stage system prompt read as follows:

*You are coding qualitative interview transcripts about violence. Identify passages where religion or spiritual belief is used to interpret or respond to violence. Religion may be explicit (God, prayer, church, Waheguru, hukam, Guru, scripture, karma) or implicit (divine justice, providence, destiny, fate, spiritual order, moral reckoning, Sikh/Christian identity, religious community organizations, religious heritage). Return one record for every passage provided, labeling it **explicit**, **implicit**, or **none**. When uncertain, prefer ‘implicit’ over ‘none’. The coder’s threshold is broader than God/prayer only.*

**Stage 2: Classification.** The classification stage system prompt provided the nine category definitions plus a “boundary guide”: specifying how to distinguish between adjacent categories. The boundary guide

was the primary mechanism for disambiguation; an excerpt covering three commonly confused pairings is reproduced below:

***divine\_justice:** God or divine power will punish the perpetrators. Speaker invokes or expects divine accountability for those who caused harm.  $\neq$  **providence\_fate** (which is about God’s plan for the victim/survivor, not perpetrator punishment).  $\neq$  **moral\_retribution** (human or social framing of deserved punishment). Key signals: “God will punish them,” “they will answer to God,” “divine reckoning for the killers.”*

***religious\_heritage\_community:** Sikh (or other religious) community institutions, shared history, or collective solidarity. Emphasis is on the community as a source of support, identity, or shared experience.  $\neq$  **religious\_identity\_discrimination:** here the emphasis is on religious identity as a target—the reason the speaker or their family was harmed.*

***providence\_fate:** God’s plan or fate as an explanation for why violence happened to the victim. Accepts the event as part of a larger divine order rather than as a wrong to be punished.  $\neq$  **divine\_justice:** providence is about acceptance or meaning-making; divine\_justice is about accountability and punishment of perpetrators.*

The full prompt text and few-shot example files will be available in the project replication archive.

#### C.4 Sample Adjudicated Passage

In the adjudication step, I used the labeling interface `prodigy` (Montani and Honnibal, 2018) to resolve all RA–LLM disagreements plus confirm a random 10% of agreements. The following illustrates a typical disagreement and its resolution.

**Passage:** “I’m inclined to say it was mistaken identity. I think he probably thought Sikhs were Muslims.”  
(India corpus)

**RA label + notes:** `religious_heritage_community` — Sikh identity invoked as a collective characteristic; the passage reflects on what Sikhs are as a group.

**LLM label + justification:** `religious_identity_discrimination` — The passage explains that Sikhs were targeted because of their religious identity (LLM confidence: 0.80).

**Adjudication:** The LLM label was retained. The main purpose of this passage is explaining targeting logic—perpetrators mistook Sikhs for Muslims—which fits the discrimination frame better than the community/solidarity frame. The RA label reflects a reasonable reading (the speaker is technically describing what Sikh identity is), but religion matters primarily for explaining why the respondent’s family was singled out.

Disagreements between `heritage_community` and `identity_discrimination` most often arose when a respondent invoked Sikh identity in a passage that both described the community and explained targeting; in such cases I prioritized the dominant function of religion in the passage.