Religious organisations and conflict resolution

SUMMARY

The role of religious groups in conflict and conflict resolution is at the centre of lively academic debate on the definition of religion, and of conflict, and on the link between intra- and inter-faith conflicts. Understanding these issues is key, as the number of people professing a religion in the world is set to increase in the next 40 years and the population share of the world's different religions will be affected by major demographic changes. Studies show that, in recent decades, the number of civil wars with a religious dimension has increased significantly. Nevertheless, many religious organisations are active in the field of conflict resolution and reconciliation, in Mozambique, Burma, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and at a more global level.

International organisations, states and think-tanks are giving increasing consideration to the religious dimension of conflict resolution. In 2016, the European Union appointed its first ever Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union. The European Parliament is meanwhile attentive to freedom of religion and belief in its resolutions. In recent years, the subject of engagement with local religious leaders has grown in importance for think-tanks, universities and governmental agencies in the USA.

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Examining violence in religion

At first glance, religion may seem to be a key component in many violent conflicts around the world. In fact, it is highly difficult to distinguish between conflicts triggered by religious causes and conflicts in which religious differences have become salient over time. From a sociological, rather than theological, point of view on the relationship between violence and religion, Jon R Hall[1] notes that a distinction can be drawn between different forms of possible violence in relation to religious groups. These are connected with:

- efforts to impose correct interpretation of dogma;
- group boundaries;
- individual self-destructive behaviour, and even suicide attacks.

These various forms of violence can be found throughout Europe's long history. During the Middle Ages, Europe experienced all three forms: the crusades during the 11th to 13th centuries were violent attempts to enlarge the boundaries of the Christian religious group; in the 13th century, the French crusade against the Cathar heretics in the South of France was a typical case of violence over interpretation of dogma; and the Flagellants, a 14th century European sect, practiced public self-flagellation.

These three types of religious violence have occurred in different regions during various historical periods and still continue today on a large scale. This can be seen in the civil war in Syria, where ISIL/Da'esh is fighting Sunni Muslims on dogma and non-Muslims on the group's boundaries, while also using suicide as a preferred form of violence.

Religious conflict around the world

Changes in religious demography

The 21st century will be religious: according to surveys of the Pew Research Center, the proportion of non-religious people (atheist, agnostic or indifferent) will decrease (from 16 % to 13 %) by 2050. Islam will progress until it reaches parity with Christianity, and 10 % of Europeans will be Muslim. All the main religious groups will grow in number, with the exception of Buddhists. By 2050, 40 % of all Christians will live in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although a change of religion through conversion can be a trigger for religious violence, in future this is not likely to be the case since it will occur mainly as a result of Christians becoming non-religious.

Trends in religious conflict

The fact is that a wide variety of causes can be found in all conflicts. In cases of inter-state violence, like in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) or the Indian-Pakistani dispute, religion can be just one aspect of the conflict, which may also have national or economic roots.

In the post-Westphalian world, most conflicts are state-based and as very few states in the world have been theocracies, it is difficult to ascribe a purely religious cause to a conflict. However, since 1946 more and more conflicts have been civil wars. In the case of an internal or transnational civil war, the religious dimension can be more salient. Using a database, Toft[2] demonstrates that religious civil wars[3,4] represent a third of all civil wars (44 of 135), with an increase in recent decades. Think-tanks like the Pew Research Center also note an increase in religious violence, but they do not provide a general explanation.

From a scientific perspective, one should acknowledge that the main triggers for these conflicts are not always religious. Juergensmeyer[5] argues that political theology, meaning the kind of political arrangement with the state proposed by the dogma of a religion, is not always at the centre of the conflict. Wars and conflicts, as with any social behaviours, have a wide variety of causes, be they economic or identity-related, and the religious aspect of any war is only ever one dominant feature among others. One British Academy report underlines the extent to which the role of religion is dependent on the local context.

Figure 1 – Religious civil wars among civil wars in the world since 1940 in percentage
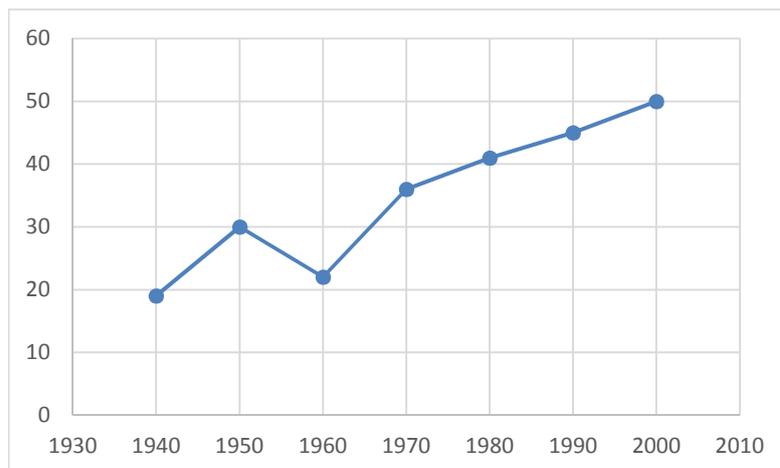
Data source: Toft, 2007.

State restrictions and violence

In cases of national or transnational religious civil war, violence can break out either between religious groups or with the state. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2014 around 25 % of the world's states were experiencing a high degree of violence between religious groups. The same year, it appears that 27 % of states had a high level of restrictions concerning religion, including China and Saudi Arabia. The two groups of states (those experiencing societal violence and those where there was state violence against certain religious groups) add up to 39 % of the total number of states in the world, and are home to 77 % of the world's population. These conflicts can oppose different groups from the same religion over the definition of dogma, different religious groups, as in India, or religious groups opposed to non-religious people. They can be perpetrated by, with the tacit consent of, or against state police forces, when the state identifies itself with a particular religion, as does Iran or Saudi Arabia, or is an atheist state, such as North Korea or China.

This multiplicity of situations, with varying numbers of actors and potential state roles, explains why it is almost impossible to agree on any causal relationship or typology of violence caused by or involving religious groups.

Religious organisations and individuals engaged in conflict resolution

The rise in religious civil wars in recent decades should not however detract from the specific contribution of certain religious leaders or groups to the resolution of conflicts, be they of a religious or non-religious nature. Civil wars and international conflicts are addressed in a variety of manners by the international community.

Prevention

Some religious players at local level can prevent the development of violent conflicts through their daily activities. They can also foster dialogue between religious communities, as is the case of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies in Jordan. This institute, established in 1994 by Prince Hassan Bin Talal, provides a rare venue for inter-religious dialogue and regular seminars in this region. The institute's director is Majeda

Omar, a British educated woman, and it is especially engaged in the dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

At local level, religious communities can have a strong impact on peacemaking and conflict prevention. Studies show that in Indonesia the density of religious institutions correlates with a low intensity of non-religious conflicts, meaning that local work can have a very positive impact. In Sri Lanka, AT Ariyaratne established the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in the late 1950s. It became the biggest NGO in the country and provides development assistance for local communities. It also helps to defuse religious tensions by means of peacebuilding programmes, including public inter-faith meditation sessions.

In India, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi provided one of the most outstanding examples of violence prevention in the name of religious values. After his studies in England and a formative experience in South Africa where he became a civil rights activist, Ghandi came back to India and devoted himself to the movement for Indian independence. During his long struggle for independence he theorised and advocated non-violent action in line with his religious beliefs. This proved to be a key element for a movement that could have taken a violent path, and it became an inspiration for many other independence struggles in the world.

Mediation
Religious groups and individuals are sometimes involved in efforts to mediate between the parties engaged in a conflict.

Sant'Egidio in Mozambique
In Africa, catholic and protestant religious communities have been involved in several peace resolution processes, in Angola, Malawi and, currently, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The conflict in Mozambique lasted for more than three decades (1977-1992). After winning independence from Portugal in 1975, the Frente da Libertacao de Mocambique (Frelimo) one-party-state faced opposition from local movements, supported by Southern Rhodesia and South Africa. Foreign-supported opposition united under the Resistencia Nacional Mocambicana (RenaMmo), but in return Mozambique welcomed and trained South-African ANC anti-apartheid fighters. In 1984, a treaty was signed between Mozambique and South Africa and the latter began to act as an official mediator between Mozambique and RenaMmo, but with little resolve to achieve peace. Violence increased in 1985. Protestant and Catholic churches called for dialogue from 1984 onwards, but with little success. Nevertheless, they began an informal dialogue with both parties.

The San'Egidio Catholic community gradually became more closely involved in the peace process. Founded in 1968, San'Egidio is recognised by the Catholic Church as a 'Church public lay association', active in inter-faith dialogue and conflict resolution. The community has been active in Mozambique since the early 1980s and instrumental in negotiating the release of hostages and providing humanitarian aid in all regions. In 1988 they also helped to organise a papal visit, which played a role in the dialogue between the parties. The Italian government and the Holy See decided to support San'Egidio's efforts to facilitate a peace agreement and a first meeting was organised at the headquarters of the community in Rome in 1990. After a number of negotiation rounds and the nomination of on-site verification missions by each party, the process led, with

the help of the UN and regional powers, to the Rome General Peace Agreement that ended the civil war in Mozambique.

Peacemaking

In some cases, local religious authorities become engaged in the peacemaking process.

Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone

The civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002) resulted in 70 000 casualties and 2.6 million displaced people, and was characterised by various atrocities. The majority of inhabitants were Muslim (over 60 %), with large Christian (15 % to 20 %) and traditional religious minorities. The war was the result of the predatory nature of the state, the competition for control of mineral resources, a deep economic crisis and the involvement of regional powers. The Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (ICSL) was formed in 1997 and gathered the various religious leaders to provide a forum to foster peace initiatives. The Council's efforts relied on the fact that the various warring parties all were very religious and trusted in religious leaders' impartiality. They launched a mediation process between the government and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels. They also liaised with the Liberian authorities, which were involved in the conflict, and as a result the RUF invited the Council to its pre-negotiation consultations in Lomé. The Council was instrumental during the conflict with its go-between role, but also in the post-conflict period when it provided a forum for a public hearing to air the different sides' grievances and promote forgiveness.

Reconcil**iation**

Religious groups and individuals are sometimes spurred by their religious values to become successfully engaged in the reconciliation process.

Daisaku Ikeda, the 'citizen diplomat'

As a young Japanese teenager during the Second World War, Daisaku Ikeda experienced the difficulties of war. Aged 19, in 1947, he met a prominent Nichiren Buddhism master, Josei Toda, and began to practice this form of Buddhism. In 1960, he became head of the movement in Japan. Later, in 1975, he was a leading force behind the establishment of a global association (Soka Gakkai International) to unite Nichiren Buddhists around the world and promote peace. Over time, the links between the Japanese and the global group became strained because of a conflict over religious interpretations. Nevertheless, Daisaku Ikeda and Soka Gakkai International have developed various activities in the fields of education and peace promotion all over the world. Daisaku Ikeda worked for many years together with the Simon Wiesenthal Centre to fight anti-Semitism in Japan by means of exhibitions. He also developed a form of 'citizen diplomacy' based on his practice of Buddhism. He organised more than 7 000 public dialogues during the Cold War with prominent politicians from both sides: Kissinger for the USA, Kosygin for the USSR. He also promoted peace alongside Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, a half-Japanese early founding father of European integration, and became an early promoter of good relations with China. Through the Soka University in Japan, he organised the first student exchanges between the two countries. His movement also issues recommendations for peace to the United Nations every year and champions denuclearisation. Over the years, Daisaku Ikeda has been awarded many prizes for his 'citizen diplomacy'.

Charles Maung Bo and religious minorities in Myanmar/Burma

Some 95 % of the 56 million-strong population of Myanmar/Burma are Theravada Buddhists. The religious minorities are composed mainly of Christians (4 %) and Muslims (4 %). In the last decade, both minorities have faced state-sponsored harassment,

especially the Muslim Rohingya. Of the 800 000 Rohingya in the country, all of them without passports since 1982, 140 000 are displaced. After 25 years of military regime and before the general elections of 2015, the UN warned of the risk of further marginalisation of non-Buddhist communities and the Rohingya in particular. For years, the religious activities of Christians and Muslims have been subject to strict authorisations, inspections and the destruction of places of worship. They are also an obstacle to land ownership.

The new democratic government launched a citizenship verification exercise to permit the Rohingya to restore their citizenship, but the situation is improving only slowly and the new government has been criticised for favouring the Buddhist majority. For example, a draft law restricting inter-faith marriages has been discussed. Inter-religious violence is on the rise, as is human trafficking, according to the UN.

Charles Maung Bo has been head of the Burmese Catholic Church (representing 1 % of the Myanmar/Burma population) since 2011 and was made cardinal last year. Coming from a very modest background, he advocated for the rights of all Burmese people during the dictatorship and has continued to do so since the transition began. He opposes state-imposed religious restrictions and defends the right of all Rohingya to restore their citizenship. He is an active participant in the reconciliation peace process and he advocates reconciliation based on recognition and forgiveness, to contrast with the way justice has been administered in Cambodia.

International organisations, international actors and religious conflict

The EU 'Guidelines on the protection and promotion of freedom of religions and belief' state that the free exercise of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief contributes directly to peace and stability: 'Violations of freedom of religion or belief may exacerbate intolerance and often constitute early indicators of potential violence and conflicts'. In this perspective, international organisations have been showing more interest, over the last two decades, in the way religious communities and religious leaders can help to foster peace and reconciliation in post-conflict situations.

The European Union
In recent years, the European Union has not tended to rely on religious groups on the ground to foster conflict resolution. Nevertheless, it is committed to defending freedom of religion through its foreign policy.

Following a call by the European Parliament in connection with the dire situation of religious minorities in ISIL/Da'esh-controlled regions, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker appointed Ján Figeľ as the first Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union.

The European Parliament

In many of its resolutions, the European Parliament has addressed the question of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and has been attentive to the situation of religious minorities. In 2015 and 2016, the EP defended the right to believe or not to believe in a number of cases: in China, in Bangladesh and in North Korea for instance.

In its 2014 resolution on EU foreign policy in a world of cultural and religious differences, the European Parliament noted that 'in many non-European countries, even where diverse religious expressions are tolerated, secularism and atheistic or agnostic views are nevertheless often subject to legal or social discrimination' and that atheists were 'facing threats, pressure and danger and should be afforded the same protection as religious or other minorities by EU

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programmes and policies'; it also pointed out that 'freedom of religion and conscience implies the right to both religious belief and practice and to the absence thereof, the right to choose or promote religious beliefs as an integral part of freedom of expression, and the right to change or abandon one's belief', and expected all of these aspects to be 'present in the EU's initiatives for intercultural dialogue'.

Since 2007, annual High-level Meetings with religious communities have been hosted by the European Commission and co-chaired by the President or relevant Vice-President of the European Parliament and the European Council President. The European Parliament also regularly welcomes prominent religious leaders such as the Pope, the Dalai Lama or the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, and awarded the 2001 Sakharov Prize to Dom Zacarias Kamwenho, an Archbishop from Angola, and president of the Inter-Church Committee for Peace in Angola, who has played in important role in the peace process in the country.

The USA

In contrast with the European Union, in the USA a number of research institutes and universities are focusing an increasing amount of attention on the need to include religious groups as partners in conflict resolution. Drew University for example provides training for young religious leaders from all over the world in inter-religious understanding and dialogue and conflict transformation. George Mason University, American University and Eastern Mennonite University all offer master's degrees in religious peacebuilding. In 2000, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) developed a whole programme on 'religions and peacebuilding', and investigates how religious factors can be both part of conflict and part of any peacebuilding action. USIP is leading initiatives with Pakistan, Iraq, Myanmar and Nigeria, and on 'women, religions and peace'. They offer advice and training for international affairs professionals.

More and more US governmental bodies and agencies are engaged with religious leaders. In 2009, the Obama administration launched a mapping exercise to determine how and when religious leaders could be key to advancing US interests. Several working groups at the White House or State Department levels have been created, and the rules of engagement with religious groups within the boundaries of what is permitted by the US constitution have been clarified. The State Department offers pre-deployment training on engaging religious leaders locally. USAID has also stepped up inclusion of this dimension in the training of US officials in the field and has issued a toolkit on challenges and on opportunities to engage religious actors in the agency's work.

Main references

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Endnotes

[1] John R. Hall, 'Religion and violence from a Sociological Perspective', *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, 2013.

[2] Monica Toft, 'Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War', *International Security*, Volume 31, Issue 4, pp. 97-131.

[3] Religious civil wars are defined as civil wars engaging at least one group motivated by religion.

[4] Civil war is defined as involving at least two combatant factions, the state being one of them, and resulting in at least 1 000 battle deaths.

[5] Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993

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