

# MEDIATING CONFLICTS WITH RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS

Conflicts involving religious dimensions often seem more difficult to resolve due to the indivisible and non-compromising nature of religious identities and issues. Nevertheless, mediation has the potential to facilitate negotiations between conflict parties, which can lead to peaceful co-existence. The key is to look for practical solutions that address the involved parties' concerns and that are compatible with their worldviews and values. To do this, mediators need to avoid judging parties' religious worldviews and understand that religions shape behaviour, but they do not dictate it.



*Religious symbols under fire: A Muslim woman in front of a destroyed mosque in Bosnia.*

Religious beliefs and actors play a role in several of today's violent, political conflicts, such as in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kashmir, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Nigeria, Somalia, and Sri Lanka. Religion is also seen as a prime motivating and legitimising force behind terrorist activity at the international, regional, national, and community levels. How to effectively engage with religiously inspired political actors in violent conflicts remains a central challenge to local and global peace and security.

Religions can be understood as worldviews held both at the individual and collective level. People use religious worldviews to give coherence and meaning to their lives and the world they live in. Moreover,

religious worldviews often relate to the transcendent, pointing to a spiritual reality that lies above the materialism of the present, temporal world. Throughout history, the power of religious worldviews has motivated people in all religions – whether Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, or others – to behaviours of extreme violence, as well as of extreme non-violence and peace.

Conflicts are never caused by one factor alone. Economic, security, political, and socio-cultural factors generally interlink and shape a given conflict. With this in mind, it is nevertheless useful to look at the specific role that religion can play in conflict. Religious differences can shape conflict as

an identity marker, where an actors' adherence to a religion is used to mobilise and create group cohesion against the "other". In other cases, religion plays a more substantive role in the conflict, and an issue such as competition over sacred space is one of the topics the conflict parties are fighting over.

Many approaches have been suggested for dealing with conflicts that involve religious dimensions. Secularist policies aim to separate religion and politics and then only deal with the economic and political factors of the conflict, ignoring the religious ones. Alternatively, inter-religious dialog focuses on understanding the various worldviews, but ignores the political dimensions. All of these approaches have their limitations, however, as they do not adequately address the interplay between religion and politics.

A third approach is based on negotiations between the involved parties, at times supported by an impartial mediator, that accept the interplay of religious and political factors. Negotiations – understood as joint decisionmaking, strategising, and action between the conflict parties – can help parties reach mutually acceptable outcomes, without one worldview being dominated by the other. How far can mediators facilitate negotiations between religiously inspired conflict parties? This question calls for a closer look at the way religion shapes both the identities and issues in a conflict, as well as an exploration of principles and practices of mediation.

### Religion as identity marker and issue

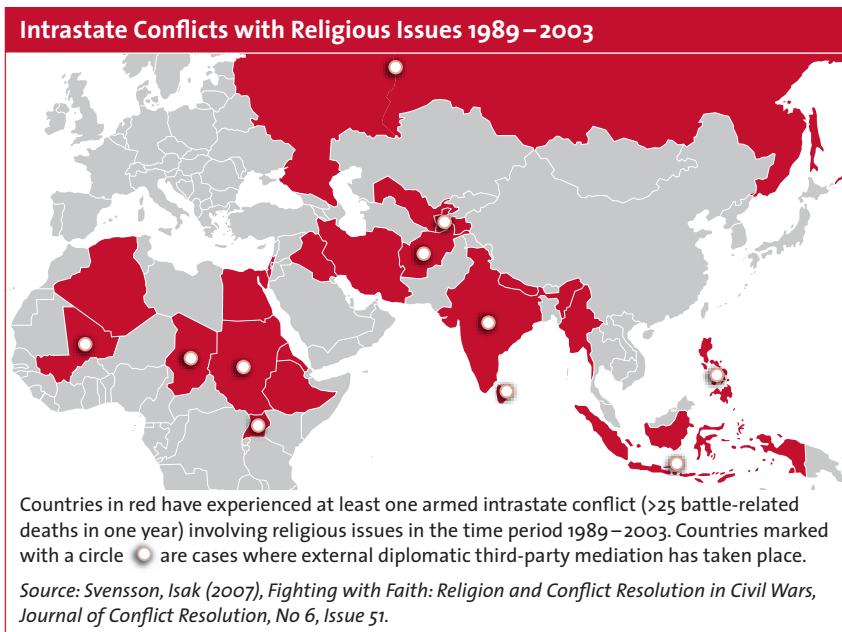
In most conflicts where religion enters the equation, it does so at the levels of both identity and issue. Nevertheless, clarifying to which extent religion is an identity marker and to which extent a substantive issue is a first step towards designing appropriate mediation approaches.

Due to the central place of religious traditions in individual and group identity, they have often played the role of identity marker at times of conflict. In the Bosnian War of 1992–5, for example, belligerents made their claims in the name of ethno-religious groups. Religious identities became central to discourses on war and nationalism. The large number of mosques destroyed by Serbian militias in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war points to the religious framing of the conflict. Another example is the conflict in Northern Ireland. Here too, religious issues per se were not the primary drivers of the conflict, but religious identities served as the basis for recruitment, mobilisation, and targeting of the enemy. Discourses denigrating the faith of the opponent target the very worldview and identity of the other community. Intense hatred and mistrust on both sides is often the result.

In other cases, religious differences between the conflict parties may actually be one of the core issues driving the conflict, and as such would be one of the issues on the negotiation agenda (see map). The will of the parties to compromise on the religious issue at stake is often limited, as the religious issues are frequently seen as being indivisible and non-negotiable. Examples of incompatibilities include the religious or secular nature of the state, the nature of the legal system, control over sacred spaces and holy sites, and the general place of religion in society. In the Israel-Palestine conflict, for example, religious understandings of a Jewish right to “Judea and Samaria” clashes with the Islamic religious duty not to give up land endowed to Muslims (*waqf*), consecrated for future Muslim generations until Judgment Day. For both sides, the indivisibility of land and sacred spaces is one of the major stumbling blocks in the long-drawn and, until now, fruitless peace process.

### Limits of secularism and interreligious dialog

What approaches exist to deal with such conflicts, and how far are they effective?



In Europe, the secularist idea of separating religion and politics, where religious beliefs are delegated to the private sphere and the political sphere is “freed” from religion, was historically useful to ease tensions over religion. Secularism as a worldview tends to lead to conflict resolution policies that separate the religious from the political, in order to subsequently focus on the economic and political nature of conflict. However, it is dangerous to project this approach onto other cultures, for extreme forms of secularism are seen by certain Muslim and Christian groups as incompatible with their religious teaching.

Another approach to deal with tensions over religious issues has been to promote inter-religious dialog. The religious community of Sant’Egidio, for example, organises inter-religious meetings for religious leaders from around the world to promote mutual understanding and dialog among religions. The universality and humanity common to religious worldviews is seen as the basis on which to build trust between parties from different religions. Although inter-faith dialog has its benefits, the risk of such approaches is that the political dimensions of the conflict are ignored. Inter-religious dialog may be useful for creating understanding, but in and of its own, it is also unable to prevent or solve violent conflicts because it often does not address the practical concerns of the involved people. Theological differences alone are rarely the source of political violence. Just as the secularist approach denies the religious, the inter-faith or theological approach shuts out the political.

Ultimately, what both approaches fail to do is to address the *interplay* of the religious and the political. The first step towards dealing adequately with conflicts involving religious issues is therefore to understand that the religious and the political can shape each other. The fact that a given issue is expressed in religious terms does not mean that it is apolitical. Likewise, if a political or economic grievance can be identified, it does not follow that the religious worldview in which it is embedded becomes insignificant.

### Principles of mediating conflicts with religious dimensions

Rather than separating religion and politics a priori, negotiations that take the interplay between religion and politics into consideration seem more promising. Negotiation and mediation involve numerous approaches that are all characterised by the parties themselves deciding on the content and solutions. Due to the complexity, lack of trust, frequent power asymmetry, and risk of escalation, negotiations are challenging. For all these reasons, they are generally two to five times more effective if they are assisted by impartial mediators than if they are not. Mediators may help and shape the process, yet they do not have any decisionmaking power on the content of negotiations. It is not for the mediator to judge or condemn the various worldviews and values at stake. This leads to greater acceptance and autonomy on the side of the parties. In the specific context of conflicts with religious dimensions, the goal of negotiation and mediation is therefore not to negotiate values

or worldviews, but to negotiate practical ways of peaceful co-existence between the conflict parties that are compatible with their various values and worldviews.

Two principles can help in this regard: The first principle is to consistently follow a non-judgmental approach. Mediators need to try to understand all parties, and if they are religious, to see the use of religion from the conflict party's point of view. Actors within a conflict often experience religion as a source of inspiration and strength to fight for what they perceive as a just cause. Take, for example, certain Islamist organisations and parties active in the Middle East. Over the past decades, these movements have been one of the principal sources of opposition to authoritarian regimes in the region. Islam provided a political vocabulary rich in ideas of justice and community and the promise of a political system free of corruption and stemming from the local culture as opposed to imported Western-based models. Mediators need to be aware of this kind of logic so as to avoid ignoring or condemning religiously inspired political actors.

In this context, the approach adopted by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) not to list armed, non-state movements as terrorist organisations allows Switzerland to talk to religious-political actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and thereby seek to at least understand these actors. This gives the Swiss a comparative advantage in mediation relative to the US and the EU, whose lists of terrorist organisations make a non-judgmental and inclusive approach difficult.

A second principle when mediating conflicts with religious dimensions is to understand religion as a worldview that is flexible, even as it remains coherent over time. Mediators need to question the very idea that "religious conflicts are more intractable", as religions do not prescribe specific behaviour. The very same religious teaching can be interpreted by an actor as a call to resistance and violence, or as a mandate for peaceful co-existence. The term *jihad*, for example, has been interpreted to mean inner spiritual struggle as well as outer defence of the community. In the case of religiously sanctified land in the Israel-Palestine conflict, religious authorities on both sides have postulated principles based on their religious teachings that allow for negotiations to proceed. On the Jewish side, religious teach-

ings have been used to show that life is more important than land. On the side of Hamas, a Palestinian state on the borders of 1967 co-existing with Israel is religiously possible if justified with the Islamic concept of *hudna*, which refers to a long-term, jointly agreed ceasefire.

Recognizing the internal flexibility of religious doctrines does not mean that mediators work directly on such issues, but it does allow them to be aware of religion's bridging potential in a negotiation process. How a religion is used, either towards creating division or to bridging differences, is a question that is clarified through *intra-faith* dialog within a religious community. Mediators from similar religious contexts can sometimes be of help as a non-judgmental dialog partner, and by sharing experiences. External mediators, however, can do little to support this intra-faith dialog, yet they need to be aware of its existence, as many solutions negotiated between the parties will be based on the way religion is used within a community.

### Practices of mediating conflicts with religious dimensions

Based on the above principles, there are various more operational approaches to mediating conflicts with religious dimensions:

*Religious-political translation:* In cases where political grievances are expressed with religious languages and symbols, mediation can focus on a back-and-forth translation of meaning from the religious to the political. Positions expressed in religious terms can be explored in order to understand the practical, political implications underpinning them. Solutions to these political impasses, if found, have to then be retranslated or reformulated into a language compatible with the religious worldview of the parties in order to facilitate their acceptability. "Human rights", for example, may be a term that is better understood as "human dignity" in certain religious contexts. Translating between the religious and the political realm requires knowledge of the parties' religious worldviews and language. Resorting to a mediation team that reflects both sides of the conflicts can provide the mediators with the necessary resources.

*Approaches beyond the rational:* Conflicts with religious dimensions are often hard to mediate due to the depth of emotions, intuitions, and myths at play. Arts-based

approaches, if used and contextualized well, can help actors go beyond the rational and analytical. If talking together does not work, jointly engaging in an artistically creative activity may highlight the complexity and nuances of the people one is dealing with, humanising them, and thereby allowing negotiations to develop. Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) work according to the same logic: If there is insufficient trust to negotiate, some low-risk joint activity that benefits both sides may allow the minimum degree of trust to develop. In the Sudan North-South Peace pro-

#### Further reading

- Swiss FDFA program on Religion and Conflict: [☞](#)
- Religioscope: [☞](#)
- Politorbis No. 52 "Religion in conflict transformation" [☞](#)

cess, where both sides shared a passion for football, watching the football games on TV together helped ease tensions and humanised the atmosphere.

*Diapaxis:* Another way of working towards peaceful co-existence is to use the method of diapaxis or "dialog through practice". The idea is to address practical questions that people are affected by through jointly agreed activities. In so doing, trust, will and understanding can be built between the parties. In Tajikistan, the Swiss FDFA brought together secular and Muslim elites into a dialog-through-practice process. One working group jointly developed a curriculum for madrassas in the country, which integrated elements of religious and civic education into its curriculum.

### Moving beyond words

Religion is only one of many factors shaping a conflict. In some cases, religion mainly plays a role as identity marker, leading to greater community coherence against the "other". Mediating the underlying political and economic concerns can ease tensions in such conflicts. In other cases, religion plays a more substantive role in the conflict, and issues related to the divergent worldviews need to be addressed. In such cases, ignoring differences in values and worldviews between actors is as detrimental as only focusing on these differences. Generally, it is better to avoid discussions on values and worldviews head-on, and rather to focus on finding practical solutions that address the involved parties' concerns.

Along these lines, negotiations, often effectively supported by mediators, can lead to peaceful co-existence of the involved conflict parties. Minimal conditions for negotiations to start are the parties' dissatisfaction with the status quo and their willingness to listen to the other side. Principles for mediators supporting such processes include to avoid judging actors and their religious worldviews, to be ready to talk with all relevant parties, and to understand that religions shape behaviour, but they do not dictate it. Mediators can clarify such conflicts by translating between the religious and political. Moving beyond words, various approaches can help to humanise the other, and build trust and understanding through joint practical activities. The goal is to deal with religious-political conflicts without contradicting the parties' core religious values and worldviews. This leads to more legitimate, sustainable, and non-violent outcomes.

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