



Centre

Changing Perspectives

“Religion and Mediation”

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In a world that is seeing more and more conflict in the international sphere and where conflicts often acquire a distinct religious connotation, understanding the religious dimension and dealing with it in a constructive way has become ever more compelling. At the same time, in predominantly secular surroundings the factor religion as a component of societal change is controversial as never before (Stein 2011).

The study of religion in politics and international affairs, especially in relation to its security dimension, has flourished for over more than a decade, mainly in reaction to the impact of religiously motivated terrorism. Efforts to incorporate the religious factor into conflict transformation and peace building, however, have been less obvious (Mason 2011).

Here, the question we have to address is: how can we effectively engage with religiously inspired political actors (RIPA's) in situations of conflict and ensuing mediation efforts?* To start answering this question we will try to unwrap it by asking three subquestions:

1. What complexity do questions of religious identity and controversy add to the analysis of conflicts?
2. How does the religious dimension interplay with the mediation process?
3. How do we deal with differing world views between contestants in a mediation process?

Let us consider them one by one:

1. When analysing conflicts, religion constitutes a factor in its own right, in need of specific attention. It is counterproductive to state that 'it is not about religion' when religious discourse or symbolism are clearly influencing the leverage of key players in a conflict, the framing of contentious issues or are even part of central claims in the conflict. The other extreme, seeing religion as the root cause of all conflict, is obviously equally unhelpful (Svensson 2012).

Having said that, it is important to stress that any valid conflict analysis is a multidisciplinary effort. All relevant factors have to be acknowledged and weighed. Conflicts are never only about religion but religious considerations can play an important role at many levels. Moreover, the religious dimension is not necessarily part of the contention, and rarely the central issue of disagreement (Frazer 2013).

The term 'religion' itself is not uncontested and the use of 'religion' as a category is sometimes even rejected. Careful research and analysis are thus needed to establish what counts as religion in a particular context, and in what ways. To simplify, just as economic factors are registered and analysed from an economic point of view, and political factors are studied and interpreted from a standpoint informed by political science, the religious dimension is not adequately understood unless analysed from the perspective of religious studies. Three main uses of the term are currently dominant: religion as identity, religion as belief/meaning, and religion as structured social relations (Hock 2002).

For a clear understanding of religion's role in a conflict, one has to establish the forms in which it appears and how it interacts with developments. A classical starting point for the analysis of a conflict, is breaking it down to its three main components: 1. actors, 2. content and 3. context to help studying and monitoring the dynamics at play. Religion can be of relevance to each one of the components.

Conflict actors can be religiously motivated (one has only to point to the current wave of violence by religiously motivated insurgents in the Middle East and Africa), issues can directly relate to religious questions (e.g. how religious law should be reflected in national law), and the wider context can be (partly) shaped by religious factors (there can be historical animosity

between different religious groups or foreign support for parties to the conflict can be based on religious identity). It is crucial to map these different aspects and monitor any changes in the course of the mediation process (Frazer 2013).

2. Mediation process design benefits from clarity about any religious stakes in the conflict. When religion is a factor in a mediation effort, in all elements of the process, religion should be given due attention. This includes the selection of participants, recognition of (in)formal authority, attention to pragmatic but symbolically charged details etc.

In a mediation process, religion can be present in roughly three guises: 1. as an identity marker, 2. as a world view and 3. as a resource (inspiration, resilience, compassion, forgiveness). It is essential to distinguish between the varieties of the religious factor in different stages of conflict.

Where the religious dimension goes beyond being a mere identity marker, the dynamics of the religious factor require special attention and a step-by-step approach. The framing of the key contention issue, the analysis of the mechanisms playing out in the conflict context and instruments to be deployed in the transformation of the conflict, all have to take into account the relevance of any religious elements.

Religion as a world view or value system e.g. informs the way parties prioritise claims. Claims linked to basic tenets of a religious tradition are likely to be perceived as unnegotiable. But, while remaining sensitive to the concerns of parties that interpret realities from a different world perspective (from theological language and positions to observance of specific religious - ritual, territorial etc. - boundaries), one has to carefully disentangle positions and interests. When addressed in the proper religious language some issues can become more accessible and open to negotiation (Bitter, Transforming, 2011).

This has been the experience of the Swiss MFA which has a tradition spanning 10 years of hands-on involvement in dialogue and negotiations with so-called 'difficult actors'. To accommodate sensitivity to the religious

dimension in contestation, the use of safe mediation spaces and the application of 'diapraxis' and 'action mediation' is advised.

Dialogue through praxis is the joint action that contesting parties engage in in order to overcome divisions and to develop a new relationship. 'Action mediation' aims at systematically differentiating between incompatibilities in value systems and incompatibilities in courses of action. It strives to find 'com-possible actions', actions that are compatible with mutually contradictory value systems, transforming the fears of the respective actors and changing their narratives (Bitter, Mason 2014).

3. The role of narratives or story-telling is an important element in a mediation process involving religious world views. Stories can uncover the patterns of conflict and violence and reveal the full dimensions of crimes. Sharing biographies is a way to diminish the distance between fact and person. Religious leaders of a certain status can help overcome prevailing perceptions by persuading others with their stories, by making people take another, second look. Story-telling helps to cross divides between world views.

Mediation efforts can allow for a wide range of world views and their accompanying discourses. Although it is key to uphold the international legal framework as a primary point of reference, various world views can be acknowledged and analysed in order to understand the perspective of the different interlocutors and to be able to follow their ways of reasoning. Taking this effort seriously should help to be aware of sensitivities and to seize opportunities for mediation.

Religious belonging as such does not determine violent behaviour. In fact, one has to distinguish between values and actions. To a large extent, people's convictions with regard to religion and societal change are based on a simplified framework of analysis that links outcomes to perceived causes. More or less in line with that perceived causality, the analysis then suggests options for action. Research into RIPA's willingness to use violent action e.g. shows how their thinking can cascade into choices both for and against violence.

Clarification of how participants understand religious issues is necessary at an early stage of the mediation process. One does not have to go into minute detail, but, having an overview of the positions at the table will help to avoid pitfalls and hasty conclusions. It is crucial to open up discussion for all stakeholders of the analytical framework in order to explore beforehand how the same data can be interpreted differently and how that impacts preferences for different courses of action.

Relatedly, it is important to understand how people perceive individual responsibility. And whether this responsibility is more family-oriented, clan-based, civic or otherwise. Clarifying loyalties is important because these often remain implicit not only in discourse and behaviour but also to stakeholders themselves. The loyalty component is a strong incentive for people to condone, support or promote actions. And it is a key to have people commit to a mediation process.

As the inclusion of religious language can open up a host of underlying assumptions, perceptions and emotions, it can be helpful to create some sort of epistemological map of the stakeholders. One option is to conduct preliminary interviews or conversations to gauge the fundamental premises that drive the interlocutors. Key is the kind of agency people identify in the world, e.g. intrinsically theistic or more of a human nature. But as stakeholders can hold secular, agnostic, atheist or a variety of religious positions that are more or less articulated, just categorising people into religious or secular is insufficient.

In conclusion, then, when conflict involves a religious dimension, religious literacy is a precondition for a fruitful mediation process. It is a general awareness of the force of religion in society and people's lives and a curiosity to learn and understand more. Stakeholders of all world views can be accepted as legitimate interlocutors as long as a framework is provided of respect for each person's freedom of conscience and a genuine interest in how people strive to fulfill their responsibilities.

The objective of 'diapraxis' and 'action mediation' is not so much a common vision as a common ground. The approach helps the different stakeholders to establish a common language to express oneself and to listen to unfamiliar ways of interpreting events. Doing so builds a nucleus of key

actors, possibly from different tracks, who can be helpful in future challenges. Involving actors with distinctive, religious worldviews can thus provide an opportunity to create alternative, personal early warning networks to prevent and mitigate tensions and conflict.

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- This article is a reflection in very condensed form of the first EDA Religion and Mediation Course that took place from 9-14 November 2014 in Bossey near Geneva, Switzerland. organised by the Swiss ETH Zurich / Center for Security Studies.

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