WHY RELIGION MATTERS

AN INTRODUCTION

*Christine Schliesser,
S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana,
and Pauline Kollontai*

At a conference on poverty alleviation a couple of years ago in Salzburg, Austria, I (Christine Schliesser) presented a paper on the religious factor in development. During the Q&A session, a renowned economist from Frankfurt, Germany, stood up, saying: “I am surprised that you would bring religion into this context. We all know that religion is a private affair and has no bearing on public issues such as development”. “I am surprised that you are surprised”, I replied, “Because we all should know that religion matters in global affairs”. Religion matters, indeed. Not only does it affect the everyday choices, behavior, and action of countless people worldwide, but religion also has an impact on global issues and challenges, including conflict and conflict resolution, development, and climate change.

THE QUESTION IS NOT IF, BUT HOW RELIGION MATTERS. OR: THE FAILURE OF THE SECULARIZATION THESIS

Much of public and academic discourse in the past decades was dominated by the so-called “secularization thesis”, claiming that modern societies would become more and more secular, while

religion was retreating. The secularization thesis was reinforced by the post-Enlightenment proposition that religion belongs to the private sphere, while all matters of public, let alone global concern, ought to be treated as purely secular (and this conviction is still very much alive, as the economist from Frankfurt cited above demonstrates). Recent years, however, have seen signs of an impending paradigm change. Instead of a “disenchantment of the world” (Max Weber), we find a renewed interest in the role of religion in the making of modern societies. A “return to the question of religion” (Freeman 2012: 1), even a “deseccularization of the world” (ed. Berger 1999), is now being proclaimed. Along with the failure of the secularization thesis to explain the resurgence of religion in many societal and political processes worldwide, this thesis is further contested by recent empirical findings. According to a 2015 study conducted by the Pew Research Center, the 21st century will be a religious one. All main religions—except for Buddhism—will experience growth in numbers. By 2050, the number of Muslims will have increased to equal Christianity and 10 percent of Europeans will adhere to Islam (Pew Research Center 2015).

The increasing awareness of the significance of religion on global issues has become apparent not only in academics, but also amongst practitioners and policy makers. Paradigmatic for this is the 2016 European Union’s appointment of the first ever Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union. This appointment stands for the recognition of the link between the right of freedom of religion, conscience, and thought, on the one hand, and public issues such as stability and peace on the other hand. As the Council of the European Union states: “Violations of freedom of religion or belief may exacerbate intolerance and often constitute early indicators of potential violence and conflicts” (Council of the European Union 2013: 1).

The question is therefore no longer *if* religion makes a contribution in processes of social change, but rather *of what kind* are these contributions and what are their specific potentials and problems. In order to better understand the impact of religion on different issues of public concern, various national governments in secularized, Western countries have started to establish special units. The United States, for example, created the “Office of Religion and Global Affairs” at the State Department, while the UK set up

the CONSENT strategy at the Home Office, with an emphasis on understanding the role of religion in promoting radicalization and terrorism, and Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs' Human Security Division formed a task force on "Religion, politics and conflicts".

BRINGING TOGETHER ACADEMICS, POLICY MAKERS, AND PRACTITIONERS

With academics, policy makers, and practitioners becoming increasingly aware of the importance of understanding the religious factor in public and global affairs, it would seem only natural that all of these relevant actors join forces. Yet ignorance and suspicion on all sides remain high, further perpetuated by the divides between religious and non-religious actors and between actors of different faith traditions. This observation is part of the rationale behind this book and the entire book series. In view of the complexity and urgency of the challenges presented to us as global citizens, we simply cannot afford to ignore the wisdom, insights, and experiences by any one actor. Coming together from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith traditions, we want to connect the contributions of our respective religions and our respective disciplines. It is our aim and hope that this book series will help to build bridges across different faith traditions, different disciplines, and between academics, policy makers, and practitioners. We are encouraged to see more and more of these cross-boundaries initiatives emerge. One example is the 2016 conference "Partners for Change. Religions and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". This high-profile conference was initiated by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and brought together actors from politics, religion, and NGOs to jointly explore the role of religion in pressing issues such as peace, poverty, and climate change.

SITUATING OUR WORK: THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

To our great fortune, we thus do not need to invent a framework that situates our work. It is already present in that grand global task spelled out to each one of us in the 17 Sustainable Development

Goals (SDGs). These goals, adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015, include many of the world community's most pressing challenges, such as ending poverty and hunger, reducing inequality, and working for peace and justice. In achieving these goals, the SDGs call for a global partnership between both developed and developing countries, between the so-called Global North and the Global South. The SDGs further recognize the intrinsic relationship between the individual goals. Ending hunger, for instance, is linked to ending violent conflicts, currently the number one driving force of hunger. At the same time, efforts at reducing inequality will only be sustainable if they are connected to tackling climate change and efforts to preserve our forests and oceans. Describing this bigger picture, UN Secretary General António Guterres states: "We need a global response that addresses the root causes of conflict, and integrates peace, sustainable development and human rights in a holistic way – from conception to execution" (Guterres 2017). So while the different volumes of the series "Religion Matters" all address specific global issues—related directly or indirectly to the SDGs—we always need to remind ourselves that these issues are connected with one another and cannot be treated in isolation. This volume with its focus on conflict and conflict resolution relates most directly to SDG 16 ("Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions"), yet connects to a number of other SDGs such as SDG 1 ("No Poverty"), SDG 2 ("Zero Hunger"), SDG 3 ("Good Health and Well-Being"), SDG 4 ("Quality Education"), and SDG 17 ("Partnerships for the Goals"). Having said that, we need to turn to the task of finding a common language. This entails a working definition of what we mean by "religion" and by "conflict resolution".

WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT? DEFINING OUR TERMS

Religion. Religion is notoriously hard to define and is usually framed in terms of substantial (referring to some kind of content or dogma) vs. functional (referring to the function of religion, such as creating identities or in- and outsiders) definitions. We have found it most helpful to work with a pragmatic understanding of religion. This

means that we understand religion simply as what is described and understood as religion by our interlocutors and the communities we work with (Waardenburg 1986). We understand religion, furthermore, as inherently ambivalent. While it can be used to ignite and support strife and violence, it also contains potent resources for overcoming violence and for promoting reconciliation. With much of public and academic attention focused on the conflictive sides of religion, we also explore its constructive features.

In order to better operationalize the structural dimensions of collective religious actors, we work with the term FBO. With Julia Berger (2003: 1) we define FBOs as

formal organizations whose identity and mission are self-consciously derived from the teachings of one or more religious or spiritual traditions and which operate on a non-profit, independent, voluntary basis to promote and realize collectively articulated ideas about the public good at the national or international level.

Conflict Resolution. Conflict in and of itself is ethically neutral. It can be constructive, leading to fruitful individual and social change, yet it can also result in destructiveness and violence. It is the latter that we are concerned with here. The field of conflict resolution as a subject matter for academics, policy makers, and practitioners is continuously evolving (Kriesberg 2009). Up until now, we cannot boast of a single overarching theory or agreement on scope, approaches, and methods. Rather than as a distinct approach or a separate discipline, conflict resolution is best described as a mode of constructively dealing with conflict that aims for solutions beneficial to all sides involved, while minimizing the use of violence. It is interdisciplinary, makes use of a variety of approaches and engages both theory and practice. Other terms often encountered in this field include conflict transformation, peacebuilding, peacemaking, and reconciliation, with each having a different focus. Our understanding of conflict resolution is inclusive of all these concepts. By paying attention to different dimensions of violence—personal, structural, and cultural (Galtung 1969)—conflict resolution deals with preventing conflicts, stopping acute violence and post-conflict work.

DESCRIPTIVE OR NORMATIVE? UNIVERSAL OR PARTICULAR? ON BECOMING TRANSPARENT

We believe that any helpful approach to understanding the role of religion in global issues, such as conflict and conflict resolution, benefits from listening to the insights of state-of-the-art scholarship in these fields. Yet these theoretical insights need to be supplemented by practical examples of how these approaches, methods, or models play out in real-life contexts, or conversely, don't play out. This is why we include case studies. Our case studies on Israel, Rwanda, and Pakistan were chosen to provide examples of the role of religion in different cultural and religious contexts. They are conducted from our own specific points of view that we lay out below. This includes our own academic discipline, our cultural background, our experiences as on the ground, and the faith tradition we associate ourselves with. We don't believe in the possibility of absolute neutrality and objectivity—another example of post-Enlightenment propositions that the academic world has accepted for too long without questioning. Each scholar, each policy maker, and each practitioner is shaped in his and her perspectives by a variety of factors, including one's professional background, personal upbringing, and perception of reality. Instead of pretending that genuinely neutral, value-free judgments are possible (or even desirable), we rather argue for the need to make one's own particular perspective transparent.

Rejecting the possibility of a truly objective position does not mean rejecting the possibility of (self-)criticism. On the contrary, immanent criticism is very much part of the particular perspective. So while we acknowledge our own particular tradition—for instance, as a female, white, Jewish, Western academic-practitioner—we do engage in active self-criticism of this very tradition. Are, then, our case studies done from a descriptive or normative framework? We combine both. While we seek to provide the most accurate description possible of a certain context, such as through ethnographic methods, we also include normative claims. For instance, if certain theological concepts in pre-genocide Rwanda were abused to build tensions between the different ethnicities, these problematical hermeneutics

will be criticized from within the Christian-theological tradition. Normative reasoning thus supplements descriptive accounts.

OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

The outline of this book mirrors its approach in that it is interreligious, interdisciplinary, and international, with the explicit aim to be relevant to academics, policy makers, and practitioners. Preceded by an executive summary (Part I) and this introduction (Part II), the analytical heart of the book consists of two main parts (Parts III and IV), discussing both the conflictive sides of religion and its resources of overcoming conflict. After providing a general orientation into each field, we utilize three case studies to explore how this is spelled out in concrete conflict situations. Each case study discusses the role of one particular faith tradition in a certain conflict, critically analyzed by a representative of that religion. Through using the same case studies in Part III and Part IV, we emphasize the inescapable ambivalence of religion in containing both conflictive and constructive resources often at work in one and the same context (Appleby 2000). The final part (Part V) draws together the insights gained from the case studies and spells out concrete implications for academics, policy makers, and practitioners.

PART III: RELIGION MATTERS IN CONFLICT

ORIENTATION

Part III focuses on the conflictive dimension of religion and asks: Did religion do it? We discuss some of the most relevant models available for helping us to understand this role. We find the work of Owen Frazer, Richard Friedli, and Mark Owen particularly helpful (Frazer and Owen 2018; Frazer and Friedli 2015). By combining their approaches, we discuss six ways of thinking about religion, namely: religion as community, as a set of teachings, as spirituality, as practice, as discourse, and as institution. The work of Robert Eisen, like that of R. Scott Appleby, focuses on how the interpretation of religious foundational texts can inspire adherents to engage in either peace or conflict, and points out that the reading of these texts are

also dependent on external factors in the political, economic and social spheres (Eisen 2011). This orientation will be followed by three case studies, spelling out the concrete implications of religion in different conflicts.

JEWISH PERSPECTIVE: RELIGION IN ISRAEL'S LAND RIGHTS CONFLICTS

Kollontai's perspective is from the standpoint of religious studies. Using a Jewish lens, she discusses how Judaism in Israel, which is both a democratic and Jewish state, contributes to the state's continuing ideological struggle over land rights within Israel. Three issues are explored: (1) the nature of the relationship between Judaism and the state, (2) a theology of the land which abandons care for the stranger/neighbor, and (3) the Jewish establishment's discourse promoting and supporting state policy of further Judaization of land in Southern Israel. In presenting these issues, Kollontai will concentrate on the growth of hard-line political views amongst Israel's political leaders, accompanied by increasing influence of the Orthodox/Ultra-Orthodox Jewish establishments on government through political appointments and presence of their political parties in the Knesset. Opposition is being reinforced against a land for peace compromise whether with the Palestinians or Israel's Arab citizens.

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE: RELIGION IN PRE-GENOCIDE AND GENOCIDE RWANDA

Schliesser, coming from the perspective of Christian theology and ethics, traces the role of religion in helping to create and sustain an environment in which the Rwandan genocide could occur in 1994 in which up to one million children, women, and men were killed. She identifies four factors, including the (too) close relationship between Church and state, the churches' support of ethnic policies, power struggles within the churches, and a problematic theology that highlighted concepts such as obedience to authority, while neglecting responsibility and love of the neighbor. At the same time, Schliesser points out that it is too simplistic to view all religious actors as equally implicated. Rather, the picture is more complex as

numerous Church-led initiatives and individuals struggled for peace right up to the genocide.

MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE: RELIGION IN PAKISTAN'S INTERNAL CONFLICTS

Coming from a conflict resolution perspective, Muslim scholar S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana explores the relationship between religion and conflict within the context of Islamic tradition. More specifically, recognizing that Islam, like other religious traditions included in this book, embodies a dynamic and complex body of wisdom that is built on foundational resources such as the Quran and the Prophet's tradition, she investigates how groups like al-Qaeda and Taliban in Pakistan use and abuse Islamic tradition to justify violence and conflict. This section addresses: (1) conception of jihad in Islam from a historical and contemporary perspective, (2) the historical, social, and political context in which the Taliban and al-Qaeda emerged in Pakistan, and (3) how this context contributed to way these groups interpreted jihad to respond to modern social, political, and economic problems.

PART IV: RELIGION MATTERS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

ORIENTATION

Part IV is the sister of Part III. With Part III focusing on the conflictive side of religion, Part IV discusses religion's potent and often neglected constructive resources for conflict resolution and healing relationships. Our question here is: What are the potentials and specificities connected to religious peacemaking? What do religious actors have that others don't? Again, we first provide a general orientation to the topic by discussing the insights of recent scholarship (Schliesser 2019). While keeping in mind the vast diversity of religious actors in peacebuilding, certain specific characteristics emerge, both formal and content-based. Formal characteristics refer to competencies in building relationships, generating trust or being able to rely on extended and well-resourced networks. Content-based characteristics include certain concepts, for instance, the

Christian concepts of grace, forgiveness, and personal transformation or the Muslim concepts of mercy and doing good.

JEWISH PERSPECTIVE: RELIGION IN ISRAEL'S QUEST FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND RECONCILIATION IN ITS LAND RIGHTS CONFLICTS

Reality demonstrates that religion has an ambivalent or dual nature, whereby it can be used to promote both peace and violence. Therefore, can Judaism contribute to resolving Israel's conflict over land with the Palestinians and its Arab citizens? Can a solution be found by relooking at the founding texts in the Hebrew Bible which demand peace, justice, and freedom for all which in contemporary Israel are concepts and values, identified in the 1948 Declaration of the Founding of the State of Israel, as key to how all its citizens—Jew and non-Jew—will be treated? Focusing on the work of two Israeli organizations, The Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel and Rabbis for Human Rights, the role of religion in conflict resolution will be discussed in terms of their resources, methods, challenges, and achievements. This will be used to examine the potential of Jews to reclaim and assert the prophetic principles that combine to safeguard the existence and rights of people irrespective of race, ethnicity, or religion through compassion and empathetic understanding.

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE: RELIGION IN POST-GENOCIDE RWANDA'S QUEST FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND RECONCILIATION

With over 90 percent of the population adhering to the Christian faith, religious actors and especially Christian churches play a significant role in Rwanda's societal and political processes. Focusing on the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda, Schliesser traces the significance of religion in the government's official "National Politics of Reconciliation". The churches supplement the government's top-down strategies with bottom-up initiatives that are characterized by a focus on building long-term relationships, even with and between perpetrators and survivors and on disseminating Christian concepts such as forgiveness or grace. Next to the potentials apparent in the Christian churches' reconciliation efforts, certain problems surface. These include a problematic concept of justice, and a problematic

culture of remembrance and silence on the state's human rights violations.

MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE: RELIGION IN MUSLIM WOMEN'S PEACEBUILDING INITIATIVES IN PAKISTAN

Following the 9/11 attacks, Islam has been often associated with violence and extremism. However, Islam, similar to other religious traditions, as a religion and a tradition is replete with teachings and practices of nonviolence and peacebuilding, and Muslims—both men and women—have been empowered by them to resolve their conflicts peacefully and to establish just social, political and economic systems (Kadayifci-Orellana 2007: 85). In this section, Kadayifci-Orellana will explore the often under-explored work of Muslim women who are employing these values and principles to address conflicts in their communities and to respond to challenges of violence. Focusing on the work of Mossarat Qadeem, founder of PAIMAN, an NGO working to respond to violence and radicalization of youth in Pakistan, Kadayifci-Orellana will explore how these Islamic principles of peace and justice inspire and create unique opportunities for Muslim women to build just and peaceful societies.

PART V: NOW WHAT?

From our key observation of religion matters in conflict and conflict resolution emerge a number of concrete implications. These include: Integration of religious actors (individuals, congregations, institutions, FBOs, etc., both local and trans-local) in conflict resolution; Establishment of advisory groups within a given body engaged in conflict resolution that include religious leaders and experts on the role of religion in societal processes; Promotion of religious literacy within a given body (political, academic, or NGO/FBO) engaged in conflict resolution; Integration of women and youth in conflict resolution, for example through partnerships with local synagogues, churches, or mosques; Evaluation of religious peacebuilding work for better understanding its mechanisms, potentials, and problems.

REFERENCES

- Appleby, R. Scott. (2000). *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. doi.org/10.1177/106385120301200112
- Berger, Julia. (2003). "Religious Non-Governmental Organizations: An Exploratory Analysis", *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 14(1): 15–39. doi.org/10.1023/A:1022988804887
- Berger, Peter L. (ed.). (1999). *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Council of the European Union. (2013). *EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief*, Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Luxembourg, June 24, 2013, 1–18. Viewed from http://collections.internetmemory.org/haeu/content/20160313172652/http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/fiji/press_corner/all_news/news/2013/eu_guidelines_on_the_promotion_and_protection_of_freedom_of_religion_or_belief_%28june_24_2013_fac%29.pdf [Date accessed November 1, 2019].
- Eisen, Robert. (2011). *The Peace and Violence of Judaism: From the Bible to Modern Zionism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Frazer, Owen and Friedli, Richard. (2015). *Approaching Religion in Conflict Transformation: Concepts, Cases and Practical Implications*, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich. Viewed from www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/Approaching-Religion-In-Conflict-Transformation2.pdf [Date accessed November 1, 2019].
- Frazer, Owen and Owen, Mark. (2018). *Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding: Analysis Guide*. Washington, DC, United States Institute of Peace. Viewed from www.usip.org/sites/default/files/USIP_Religion-in-Conflict-Peacebuilding_Analysis-Guide.pdf [Date accessed November 1, 2019].
- Freeman, Dena. (2012). "The Pentecostal Ethic and the Spirit of Development", in Dena Freeman (ed.), *Pentecostalism and Development. Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–38.
- Galtung, Johan. (1969). "Violence, Peace and Peace Research", *Journal of Peace Research*, 6: 167–191. doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301
- Guterres, António. (2017). *Guterres Highlights Importance of Recognizing the Links Between Peace and Sustainable Development*. Viewed from www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2017/01/guterres-highlights-importance-of-recognizing-the-links-between-peace-and-sustainable-development/ [Date accessed November 1, 2019].
- Kadayifci-Orellana, S. Ayse. (2007). *Standing on an Isthmus: Islamic Approaches to War and Peace in Palestine*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

- Kriesberg, Louis. (2009). "The Evolution of Conflict Resolution", in Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kremenyuk, and I. William Zartman (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution*. Los Angeles: Sage, 15–32. doi.org/10.4135/9780857024701
- Pew Research Center. (2015). *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050*. Viewed from www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/ [Date accessed November 1, 2019].
- Schliesser, Christine. (2019). "Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding", in Jeffrey Haynes (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Political Parties*. London: Routledge, 126–138.
- Waardenburg, Jacques. (1986). *Religionen und Religion. Systematische Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*. Berlin: De Gruyter.