

## Religion and Conflict

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The role of religion in international relations and its relationship with conflict and with peacebuilding is increasingly acknowledged but remains disputed. Secular resistance to incorporating religion in public affairs has given way to numerous academic publications, discussion forums and public initiatives. Governments and international organisations are increasingly willing to examine religion and incorporate it, to some degree, when addressing emerging challenges across a number of domestic and international policy areas. However issues of how to discuss it and which parameters to use remain when engaging with the concept of religion.

It is helpful to understanding religion as responsive to historic, cultural and geographical contexts, rather than a fixed concept. Broadly speaking, religion is the sum of variables including: the presence of beliefs in the existence of a supranatural entity or God(s); sacred scriptures; divine norms and moral guidance based on scriptures and/or from the exemplary life of a prophetic figure; symbols; rituals bringing together individuals as a community (often under the guidance of a leader); and various sets of practices displaying adherence to these norms and beliefs. A particularly powerful feature of religion appears to be its ability to generate strong worldviews, which urge individuals to translate their values and beliefs in their daily lives, and make meaningful connections that bypass our limited mortal parameters and institutions.

Identifying a suitable lens to understand and tackle religion in current affairs and diplomacy is difficult because of the evolution of Western/Liberal discourse on religion and the notion of secularism over the past two centuries. This discourse assumes the secular mindset to be the only path to ensure freedom, democracy, and human rights. Such assumptions can cause blockages when seeking to connect with religious ideas and faith-based groups to devise policies, especially in non-Western contexts.

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Establishing a clear, scientifically rigorous relationship between violence and religion, or religion and peace, is difficult. One way to address the complexity of religion and its many layers is to focus on the variable role religion plays in different communities and cultural traditions. This means asking:

- Which aspects of religion are at play? In what ways?
- How do these aspects relate to existing historical legacies, power relations, access to and control of resources, ethnic identities, cultural repertoires, and political philosophies?

It also requires engagement beyond the 'usual suspects' of religious leaders, institutions or groups that boast an explicitly religious name or claim to work for an overtly religious cause. Of course, these actors should not be ignored. In fact, religious elites often have a privileged role in conflict and reconciliation; they frequently possess a respected social status, extensive social connections, sound understanding of the cultural-historical-regional context, and excellent communication skills. This means they are able to mobilise resources and people for the escalation of conflict or for transformative processes of peace, depending on the context. However these elites can often have vested personal interests and be driven by a search for power and such a focus neglects the ideas, voices, and practices of minorities and those competing, less powerful actors involved in non-organised and non-hegemonic groups. This expanded engagement may also give a clearer sense of the aspirations and grievances of those who might share a religious belief but disassociate themselves from specific political responses acted out in the name of that religion.

The incorporation of these nuances into the analysis of conflicts or peace processes involving religion should not be considered a purely abstract exercise. Disentangling the web of faith-based actors, ideas, discourses and processes in each context is of paramount importance to sustainably address protracted conflict through collective efforts that involve political elites and the international community. Some leaders and groups manipulate religion to generate cycles of violence to maintain their position and maximise their interests. This violence serves to demonise (or privilege) of specific religious communities and can, in turn, trigger further grievances and violence. Tackling ideologies and disempowering these leaders and groups may not be sufficient to bring an end to the violence. Instead of seeing religious groups as purely instrumental and turning to them only when normal diplomatic channels have failed, we need to develop a new reconstructing and rebalancing approach to conflicts with a religious dimension. This would aim to address structural needs and allow the positive potential of religious discourse and values to re-emerge so that human relations and dignity can be rebuilt.

## Key readings

**Reading 1:** Cavanaugh, W T. (2004). *The Violence of "Religion": Examining a Prevalent Myth.*, Working Paper no.310. Indiana, USA: The Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies  
<https://kellogg.nd.edu/publications/workingpapers/WPS/310.pdf>

This conceptual paper seeks to challenge the frequent assumption religious and secular violence are essentially because the former is 'absolutist, divisive and non-rational'. The author uses historical examples, ranging from the seventeenth century to the present day, to deconstruct the concepts of religion and secularism and argue that a distinction between these two types of violence is impossible because of the theoretical incoherence of the very terms used (religion and secularism).

While the paper acknowledges the role religious belief and practices have played in particular conflicts, it encourages more critical engagement with facts and theories.

**Reading 2:** Duffy Toft, M. (2007). Getting Religion? The puzzling case of Islam and civil war. *International Security*, 31: 4.

[http://live.belfercenter.org/files/is3104\\_pp097-131\\_toft.pdf](http://live.belfercenter.org/files/is3104_pp097-131_toft.pdf)

Why were so many religious civil wars between 1940 and 2000 related to Islam? This paper argues that it is the overlap of historical, geographical and structural factors, rather than theological or ideological underpinnings, which account for the higher representation of Islam in these wars. The paper also elaborates on the theory of 'outbidding', whereby elites attempt to outbid each other to enhance their religious credentials.

**Reading 3:** Smock, D. (2006). Introduction. In: *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking. When Religion Brings Peace, Not War* (ed. Smock, D.) Washington DC, USA: US Institute of Peace.

<http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PWJan2006.pdf>

This short extract introduces this e-book which explores the contribution of religion and faith-based actors in peacemaking. It offers a distilled overview of the key debates, arguments, and scholars in favour of including various dimensions of religion (ideas, practices, institutions and spiritual experiences) in peace-making. In particular, it encourages the consideration of a multiplicity of faith-based actors and the avenue of interfaith dialogue.

**Reading 4:** Philpott, D. and Cox, B. (2006). What faith-based diplomacy can offer in Kashmir. *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking. When Religion Brings Peace, Not War* (ed. Smock, D.) Washington DC, USA: US Institute of Peace

<http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PWJan2006.pdf#page=9>

This short chapter from the same publication above takes the case of Kashmir to highlight the advantages of including religion in track two diplomacy. It is based on observations and lessons learnt during a number of seminars involving civil society leaders from Muslim and Hindu communities in the region as part of an initiative of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy. It recommends that such initiatives should not substitute standard diplomacy nor diminish the responsibilities of individual governments.

**Reading 5:** Thomas, S. (2010). 'A Globalized God', *Foreign Affairs* November/December 2010.

[https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/global-commons/2010-11-01/globalized-god?cid=oth-partner\\_site-cfr-a\\_globalized\\_god-102610](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/global-commons/2010-11-01/globalized-god?cid=oth-partner_site-cfr-a_globalized_god-102610)

This article offers a condensed and updated synthesis of some key arguments of Scott Thomas' seminal book on the resurgence of religion in international relations. Contrary to identifying the resurgence of religion with the rise of fundamentalism and terrorism within Islam, it seeks to challenge a number of Western assumptions about the separation between religion and politics and the presumed wall of secularism. It invites the policy and diplomatic community to consider the benefits of engaging with religion to fulfil the goals of security, justice, social cohesion and democracy. It also highlights the growing presence of Christianity in Asia, Russia, and other parts of the developing world.

**Reading 6:** Silvestri, S. and Mayall, J. (2015). *The role of religion in conflict and peacebuilding*. London, UK: British Academy.  
<http://www.britac.ac.uk/news/news.cfm/newsid/1324>

This extensive literature review explores how the role of religion in conflict and peacebuilding has often been depicted in binary terms. It critically analyses the concepts of religion and conflict and examines the features of religion which are utilised in conflict situations. The literature review is complemented by in-depth analysis of three case studies: Mali, Bosnia and Israel-Palestine. The paper recommends the inclusion of religious actors in conflict transformation, but warns against engaging only with select religious actors, especially those in leadership positions.

### **Questions to guide reading**

- Why is it not enough to look at theologies and other religious ideas in order to appreciate the contribution of religion to particular conflict situations?
- In what ways (if at all) do religious leaders have a privileged position to exacerbate war and to facilitate peace?
- Why is it important to consider the relevance of the secular mindset and of Western liberal values when seeing to understand the potential role of religion in conflict and in peacemaking?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of engaging with religious actors in order to promote peace?