

1. Transforming Conflicts with Religious Dimensions: Explorative Workshop Overview

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Introduction

“Most of the world is religious, and therefore what religious leaders say and do has great resonance, whether the minority of secular people likes it or not.” Marc Gopin, one of the workshop participants, pointed out the central role religion plays in the world, and therefore also in conflict and conflict transformation. The aim of this explorative overview of the Zurich workshop is to identify some of the practical lessons from the workshop discussion and the seven cases. The first, somewhat shocking, realization was that this small group of workshop participants were often talking with each other, but not understanding each other. The diversity of motivations, conceptions and practical approaches towards working with conflicts with religious dimensions is mind-boggling. All participants combined a more academic, reflective hat, with a practitioner one. Yet we had some people who were religiously motivated peacemakers, while others were much more academically-oriented conflict resolution practitioners. Some of the engagements worked with religious actors who seek peace, others targeted religious actors who seek war. We had one idea to organize a mystic musical festival with 100,000 participants across the conflict lines, while others aimed to arrange small working groups of 10 people on a “Law about Religion”. One of the workshop participants had spent four years living in a Buddhist monastery, while another worked in the office of a Foreign Ministry. The practical experiences were also geographically diverse, including cases from Algeria, Canada, Denmark, Israel, Palestine, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Syria, Tajikistan, and the USA.

With such diversity, what was the common denominator of the group? There were two: the acknowledgement of the importance of religion in conflict transformation, and everyone's focus on practical conflict transformation activities. It was not an academic workshop for the sake of academia. Rather it focused on improving policy and practice, yet using conceptualizations of a more academic nature. At the start of the workshop, we more or less agreed on one common denominator, which was: “In some cases, religion plays a key role in conflict and conflict transformation, which cannot be reduced to other factors, e.g. psychological, political, economic etc.” In other words, religion has a role to play in conflict and conflict transformation in its own right. It is not just a symptom of some other driving factor in escalating conflict, or transforming conflict. This implicit agreement in the group was the starting point for examining religion, and the fallback position if divergence became too great. We never could agree on a single common definition of religion or conflict transformation. What we could do, however, was map out some of the diversity, and come to the surprising realization that some of the conflict transformation activities we engaged in were not so different from each other, even if we argued for them from a very different angle. Accordingly, the factors that saved the discussion were often practical experiences in dealing with conflicts with religious dimensions. For this reason, one of the central parts of this workshop report are the seven cases studies that provide examples of practitioners' activities, when engaging with conflicts with religious dimensions (section three). When the concepts and theories became confusing, it was often effective to ask a person what they actually do when they are working in the field. Their concrete experiences often clarified the concepts.

Nevertheless, to communicate, explore and develop more general lessons, some conceptualization can help. For this reason, two conceptual frameworks are introduced below to cluster the practical experiences. One framework structures different concepts of religion, while the other structures the different approaches to conflict transformation. These concepts are not necessarily in agreement with those used or proposed by the workshop participants. The pros and cons of the “constructivist” approach as compared to the “experiential” approach were debated during the workshop, and a summary of this dialogue was transcribed and edited for this workshop paper (section two). The aim of the other more theoretical overview in this conference working paper by Moncef Kartas (section four), is to map out the diverse theories and concepts that were used by the workshop participants in their written workshop papers, prepared before the workshop began. This explorative overview ends with ten tentative lessons on approaching conflicts with religious dimensions.

Clustering Approaches to Religion

For structuring the cases presented in this paper, the three models or theories of religion referred to by Lindbeck² are used. After briefly introducing the three models, the cases later presented in this report, fitting the “theory of religion”, are highlighted:

First, there is a **“propositional” understanding of religion**, where religion entails absolute truth and validity claims that give us “right” and “wrong” answers about key questions we are confronted with. Religion as a source of validity claims was not used by anyone at the workshop, yet one could imagine people in conflict using religion in this way, famously sung by Bob Dylan in “With God on our side”.

Second, there is an **“experiential” understanding of religion**, which focuses on an inner, spiritual experience, where religious symbols and practices give expression to a universal, inner experience of love. This inner, experientialist form of religion is often used by religiously-motivated peacemakers. Marc Gopin refers to the difference between the propositional, validity type of religion and the experiential type as the difference between an inner and outer understanding of religion with the following words: “There are choices in prophetic Judaism, and in experientialist Islam and Christianity, that religion is primarily an inner experience, a morally-bounded experience, wisdom, love, compassion, justice. And there is an external, territorial notion of religiosity about conquest, about land, about ownership and control of space. These have been two streams all along, for thousands of years.”

Both Marc Gopin (Middle East) and David Smock (Nigeria) refer to inner, spiritual experiences in their work with the actors they are dealing with, forming the first cluster of cases contained in this workshop report. In Nigeria, the experiences that the Imam Mohammed Ashafa and the Pastor James Wuye went through, which transformed them from using violence to becoming mediators, is described in this experiential way: “At the time, there were series of spiritual awakenings... they had their epiphany³ at about the same time.” In his written contribution to the workshop report, Smock used a constructivist approach to analyze religion, thereby highlighting how the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. In his work in the Middle East, Marc Gopin describes how difficult it is to grasp in words the kind of experience that he and others have come across: “The person who really got through to me was this

² Lindbeck G. 1984. *The Nature of Doctrine. Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. Philadelphia:Westminster Press.

³ “A revelatory manifestation of a divine being”... “A sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something.” <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/epiphany>

spiritual Sheikh, Sufi Sheikh, who was out of this world.” The experiential approach to religion leaves a lot of space for mystery, in the sense that it gives space to not being able to put a nice construct or theory on every reality and experience we encounter.

Third, there is a social or cultural **“constructivist” understanding of religion**. In this perspective, there are different branches that can all be more or less subsumed under the label of “constructivist” (see section four by Kartas for more details), which Lindbeck expands on as a cultural-linguistic model. Religions are matrices “ [...] that deal with all that can be considered as being the most important, the ultimate questions about life and death, about what is just and what is wrong, about chaos and order, about what has meaning and what does not have meaning.”⁴ He uses a very simple metaphor which asserts that religion relates to how people live as grammar relates to how people make sentences. In this sense, unlike the propositional understanding of religion that distinguishes right from wrong in all times and places, the constructivist, linguistic model sees religion like the grammar of a language, setting the malleable rules within which the formation of attitudes and actions are possible. Religion as grammar does not prescribe specific actions, in the same way that the grammar of a language does not prescribe specific sentences. Similarly to the role of grammar in language, the religious “grammar” can be used in eternally changing realities, while at the same time remaining “true” or faithful to its narrative or constitutive discourse. Grammar changes, but at a much slower pace than the sentences it produces. Opposition between various religious rules can then often be surmounted not by altering them, but by specifying when, or how, or where they apply. For example, the “rules” of driving on the left or right are both clear in meaning albeit clearly opposed to each other – except when one specifies that one is valid in Britain and the other in the United States.⁵ One advantage of the constructivist approach is that it can be used to understand actors who use religion, whether to make war or peace. In this sense, it is possibly more neutral than the propositional model (which tends to fit the war-maker) or the experiential model (which tends to fit the peace-maker). However, the constructivist approach also misses something, possibly precisely because it tries to rationalize and make sense of experiences, that cannot be comprehended fully.

Jean-Nicolas Bitter (Tajikistan), Michelle LeBaron (Canada and USA, pro-life, pro-choice), Abbas Aroua (Danish “Faces of Mohammed” Cartoons Crisis), Hagen Berndt (Sri Lanka and Algeria), Azhar Hussain (Pakistan) employed variations of the constructivist approach in their work and during the conference. Bitter and LeBaron describe conflict transformation approaches that are based on an exploration and understanding of how the respective communities “constructed” their reality in Tajikistan and the USA and Canada respectively. They form the second cluster of cases in this workshop report. Aroua, Berndt, and Hussain, who form the third and last cluster of cases in this workshop report, specifically refer to the different ways of understanding religious texts and how this question of discussing religions concepts and redefining them lies at the heart of conflict transformation. They also demonstrate various types of co-mediation and mediation as “translation” between worlds – one of the golden paths in dealing with religious conflicts.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the experiential and the constructivist approaches are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to be spiritually motivated, but to apply constructivist approaches to the work. It is possible to experience intuitions, dreams, and meaningful coincidences that are hard to make sense of within the constructivist model. Drawing on his work with the Mozabites in Algeria, Berndt describes how “building trust took a long time and was supported by circumstances and events outside our control.” The subsequent section

⁴ Lindbeck G., *The Nature of Doctrine...* p. 40.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 18.

outlines the debate on “experiential vs. constructivist approaches” between Marc Gopin and Jean-Nicolas Bitter and highlights some of the nuances and similarities of the two approaches. While Bitter argues that the experiential model leads to peace activities which lack focus as if one was “throwing water into the ocean”, Gopin expresses his reflection on spirituality being an unending source of inspiration and reconciliation, and the experiential model being an approach where the peace activist is “scooping water from a limitless freshwater source”. The dialogue is instructive, because it also shows that the use of one or the other model can lead to a different conflict transformation engagement. However, if it leads to the same kind of engagement, it is then argued for in a very different manner.

Clustering Approaches to Conflict Transformation

There are numerous ways of structuring the different approaches and ways of dealing with conflict. The terminology is confusing, as conflict resolution, conflict management, conflict transformation⁶, peacemaking, peacebuilding, mediation and facilitation mean different things to different people. The “Reflecting on Peace Practice Project” (RPPP) used a pragmatic approach, a matrix where broadly conceived peacebuilding engagements are clustered into those that aim at changing “hearts and minds” or “structures and institutions” on the one axis, and engagements targeting “more people” or “key people” on the other axis. The idea behind the matrix is that peacebuilding efforts must address all four quadrants of the matrix in order to be sustainable.

Table 1: Examples of the workshop cases structured within the RPPP framework⁷

	<i>More people</i>	<i>Key people</i>
<i>Structures and institutions, socio-political level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hussain: Madrasa curriculum reform (constructivist) • LeBaron: Pro-life, pro-choice dialogue (constructivist) • Mayer: Media work with Religioscope (constructivist & experiential) • Uthup: AoC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bitter: Tajikistan project (constructivist) • Berndt: Buddhists in Sri Lanka (constructivist) • Aroua: Danish “Faces of Mohammed” Cartoons Crisis (constructivist) • Hussain: Madrasa curriculum reform (constructivist) • Uthup: AoC
<i>Hearts and minds, individual, personal level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gopin: US-Syria inter-faith dialogue, broadcasted to millions of people on TV (experiential) • Smock: Film of the Pastor and the Imam in Nigeria (experiential & constructivist) • Mayer: Media work with Religioscope (constructivist & experiential) • Uthup: AoC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gopin: US-Syria inter-faith dialogue (experiential) • Smock: the Pastor and the Imam co-mediating in Nigeria (experiential & constructivist) • Hassan & Kahlmeyer: GTZ Tajikistan dialogue • Uthup: AoC • Hussain: Madrasa curriculum reform (constructivist)

⁶ Conflict transformation was used widely at the workshop, more or less following John Paul Lederach (1995. *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press), where dealing with conflict is not just referring to dealing with material issues and interests, but relationships, empowerment of individual actors, and the change of societal structures are also addressed.

⁷ Mary B. Anderson and Lara Olson. 2003. *Confronting War: Critical Lessons for Peace Practitioners*, Cambridge: The Collaborative for Development Action, Inc.

Many of the cases described in this paper have elements of all four quadrants. However, there seems to be a primary focus, which allows the cases to be clustered. To illustrate this point, four cases are described in more detail: At first, Azhar Hussain's work at enhancing the curriculum of Madrasas in Pakistan fits best with "key people" on the level of "structures and institutions at the socio-political level", but it is now being enlarged with a training of trainers program. Over 2,000 people have been involved in his workshops, which makes it a good example of a project that targets "more people" on the level of "structures and institutions at the socio-political level". Jean-Nicolas Bitter presents a project in Tajikistan for which three working groups of about 10-20 people each have been formed and which work, among other issues, on the formulation of recommendations to change the law on religion in the country. This is a good example of a case that targets "key people" aiming at "structures and institutions at the socio/political level". At the levels of "hearts and minds" and addressing "more people", Marc Gopin cites the example of a mystical music festival in Pakistan attended by some 100,000 people. Finally, the cooperation of Marc Gopin and David Smock with religious leaders are examples of initiatives that target "key people" on the "hearts and minds" level.

From the experiences shared at the workshop, there seems to be a close tie between the experiential use of religion and the "hearts and minds approach" to conflict transformation, as illustrated by Gopin and Smock. The constructivist approach to religion, on the other hand, tends to focus more on "structures and institutions". Both constructivist and experiential approaches to religion, in contrast, seem to relate to working on both the "key people" and "more people" levels. Jean-François Mayer, for example, shows the importance of media work with his Religioscope project that targets "more people". Religioscope's database (www.religion.info) contains reports that are written both from a constructivist as well as from an experiential angle. In the "constructivist-experiential" dialogue between Marc Gopin and Jean-Nicolas Bitter, the question of top-down work with "key people" or bottom-up work with "more people" is a recurring question; do you work with the leaders who "lead" the people, or do you work with the people who "push" the leaders?

Practical Lessons from the Workshop

The following ten lessons are identified as a tentative initial attempt to draw out some answers from the discussion and cases with regards to the workshop question: how do you deal with conflicts with a religious dimension? The number of cases in the workshop was very small, and the contexts of the cases were very diverse, so the lessons are preliminary and need to be consolidated by further research.

1/ Religion can play a role both in the escalation of violent conflicts as well as in the peaceful transformation of conflicts. From a normative point of view that seeks to minimize violence and injustice, religion is a "neutral" factor that can be used either negatively to make war, or positively to make peace. The challenge of dealing with religion in conflict transformation concerns how to "redefine" or "transform" the role of religion from a source of violence into a constructive way of dealing with societal differences. This is well illustrated in the change of heart and practice of the Pastor and the Imam in Nigeria.

2/ Religion plays many different roles in conflict and conflict transformation. Awareness of what specific role religion plays in a conflict is important to address it adequately. Religion may play a role as inspiration or justification for war or peacemaking. Religious differences between groups may incorporate value differences that cause conflict. However, religion may also be used as an identity marker, or may be instrumentalized by political elites to forge group unity. Furthermore, religious language may be used to communicate, which eventually might lead to miscommunication. Many of the workshop participants also

stressed the fact that not all conflicts have a religious component, which is important so as not to over-emphasize its role. For example, in the case of the Danish “Faces of Mohammed” Cartoons Crisis, the religious language and symbols were part of the miscommunication, but the conflict was actually driven by military, economic and political differences. In the USA-Syria relationship, religion was also not driving the conflict, but the inter-faith dialogue was used as a cover to discuss political issues in a positive, constructive manner. This leads us to assert that religion can be part of the solution even if it is not part of the problem.

3/ Avoid trying to change values, focus on bridging practical incompatibilities that arise from value differences through jointly agreed activities. Not all religious or value contradictions entail practical contradictions. However, there are cases where differences on the value level lead to conflicts over practical issues. The role of conflict transformation in such cases is not to address the value level head-on, but rather to help solve conflicts on the practical level. This is illustrated in the case describing the dialogue between adherents of “pro-life” (against abortion) versus those of “pro-choice” (allowing abortion). In some cases inter-religious dialogue clarifies issues, especially when both communities are capable of understanding the worldview of the other, as they live in the same context. When this is not the case, inter-religious dialogue may bring cognitive clarification, but not practical clarification – hence the need for co-creative solutions. Communication is difficult between very different “worlds” and their different ways of creating meaning. Yet conflicts can be transformed in such cases if the parties can agree on joint actions that deal with the conflict issues. This “dialogue through praxis” has been referred to as *diapraxis*, and the Tajikistan project of the Swiss FDFA was developed using this idea.

4/ Ideology does not necessarily hide an agenda. In many cases, ideological or religious differences are perceived by the other side to hide some “evil”, “psychopathological” or “power-obsessed” agenda. The view is that people are hiding behind their ideology or religion. Using “ideology as pretext”, however, is dangerous, as it hinders engagement and seeking constructive ways forward. This does not mean that ideologies are not ever misused by some elites for their own purposes. Bitter argues for accepting ideology or religion for what it is, as “their belief, their ideology, nothing more.” Elites are accountable to those who follow them “against the background” of their discourse. This is the characteristic of “religious” or “ideological following”, and not pure demagoguery. The US and Europe seem to make the similar mistakes confronting Islam as they did confronting terrorism.⁸

5/ “Spiritual awakenings” is a reality for some, even if it is not for others. From an experiential point of view, spirituality is one of the keys to building trust and relationship. For others, this does not make sense rationally. From the experiential point of view, however, academic and scientific proof does not matter. Experientialists would argue that a deaf person watching people dancing to music, can see the dance, but cannot make sense of it, as they cannot hear the music. In a similar manner, someone with a strong rationalistic outlook could observe someone going through a “spiritual awakening” in a conflict transformation process, but not make sense of it. Both Gopin and Smock refer to such experiences in their work. Gopin mentions the difficulty of writing about it: “I barely wrote about it in my books, because it is so outlandish.”

⁸ The analysis and many of the lessons from the book *The Ugly American* by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer (1958) fit one to one in the question of how to deal with Islamic societies.

6/ A constructivist and an experientialist tend to engage in different activities. The kind of conflict transformation activities a constructivist engages in tend to be more focused on structures and institutions than an experientialist-oriented peace worker, who would focus more on hearts and minds and building relationships on a personal level. If they would do the same activity in a given case, they would argue for it along very different lines. Some peaceworkers focus on enhancing the positive, strengthening those who want peace, while others work on the obstacles to peace. The difference is between constructing peace or removing obstacles to peace. At least in the Gopin-Bitter dialogue, it seems that the experientialist tends to construct peace, while the constructivist tends to try and remove the obstacles to peace.

7/ Work with the “radicals” to deal with the “extremists”. There are different kinds of actors one can engage with. The primary aim is not to engage with “moderate” actors, in the sense of actors who have developed a discourse to please those who define what is moderate. The kind of “radicals” that can be constructively engaged in a conflict transformation process are “radicals” who are ready to discuss, but who remain committed to their worldview; and their community defends itself through that worldview. The US and EU policy of listing armed non-state actors as “terrorists” is problematic as it isolates them and strengthens their non-listed opponent, which may lead to a military escalation (e.g. Sri Lanka). As a form of pressure, which is needed in many cases, listing is hard to use in a fine-tuned manner, as it is very difficult to get actors de-listed if they change their behavior. Once the tooth paste is out, it is hard to get it back in again. By avoiding engagement with radicalized groups with a national liberation agenda such as Hamas, space is given to more extremist tendencies such as Al Qaida, with a universal, anarchic vision. So many participants of the workshop argued for working with “radicals”, in order to help them transform themselves politically while keeping their constituencies, instead of letting their constituencies shift to more “extremist” groups.

8/ Media work is vital for reaching the masses and clarifying misperceptions about religious actors. Policies need acceptance from a wider population, and their perception of religious actors, for example the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East, is greatly shaped by the media. The events of 9/11 and the way they were utilized in the US and Europe simplified the nuanced perceptions of differences between Islamic actors in the West. Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood, Taliban, Al Shabaab were all collated with Al Qaida. In some cases, local militant groups also used the label of “Al Qaida” to gain weight and reputation. Jean-François Mayer therefore argues for non partisan information on religion and religious actors.⁹ He also highlighted how objective information can be used effectively, and how powerful a simple movie can be: “I was at a conference on terrorist issues and there was a new coordinator for counterterrorism in Pakistan. He showed a movie they did in a village where a Shiite mosque was bombed by a suicide-bomber during a festival. They did not make a lot of comments in the movie. They just let people who had experienced it speak about what happened, people who are now crippled in bed, ladies who lost sons and husbands. He told me a few weeks before we met, they arrested three suicide bombers who were actually on their way to their mission. They showed the three suicide bombers the movie. Two of them broke down weeping: ‘I did not realize’ they said, they were totally shaken. Highly ideological people, but still human beings, because they can relate and realize: ‘those [people] could be my brother or mother’. One of them did not react like that, the movie had no impact on him, but still, it shows the enormous power of media.”

⁹ See the website www.religion.info

9/ Religious texts are powerful tools for peacemaking. Because religious people trust their religious text and use it as their anchor and main point of reference, peacebuilders can enter into dialogue with them on their religious texts. Berndt speaks about “redefining traditional concepts in light of present day needs”. Hussain shows how “One can counter extremism by utilizing Islamic principles of peace and coexistence to engage those who use violence while calling themselves defenders of Islam.” He added at the workshop that he found it easier to work with religious actors than secular ones, because of this possible meeting point in the religious texts. This kind of work clearly needs in-depth knowledge of the religious texts. However, it seemed to be an advantage for Berndt not to be Buddhist to enter into this dialogue with Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka because they would engage with and outsider on their religious concepts, while for Hussain it seemed essential to be Muslim to enter into dialogue with Madrasa leaders in Pakistan, in order to have legitimacy and gain their trust. Consequently, the degree of religious and cultural familiarity of the “outsider” to the parties in conflict varies, and different degrees of proximity and distance have their advantages and disadvantages.

10/ Co-mediation is needed to deal with conflicts with a religious dimension. When the two religions or “worlds” are very different, then a mediator needs a very deep understanding of both “worlds” (such as 20 years living in these “worlds”) or preferably has to work together with someone from that other world in a co-mediation team. Without the deep understanding that comes together in the co-mediation team, it is not possible to understand the underlying goals and interests and “translate” them to the other side. As Aroua says: “I should not rely on what is said, I look at what is meant. What they want to say is different from what they actually say.”