Mediating in Conflicts Where Political and Religious Dimensions Interplay

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Summary

Religious and political factors are intertwined in many contemporary conflicts, making them particularly violent and difficult to resolve, and complicating political and humanitarian negotiations and the implementation of agreements reached. Recent events provide immediate examples, such as those in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the East coast of Africa, and southern Thailand. The prevailing approach tends to deny this problem, believing that the invocation of religion in a political or humanitarian process is always an instrument of power. In practice, such a position often proves ineffective or even counterproductive. In the context of the discipline of conflict resolution, this article offers some guidelines for thinking and acting constructively in contexts where religious dimensions cannot be ignored.

1. Introduction

Religious and political spheres are intertwined, de facto if not de jure. The news reminds us of this every day. And the University of Uppsala, which maintains a database on violent conflicts around the world, confirms that 60% of these

conflicts have a substantial religious dimension, which cannot be reduced to a simple difference of label or affiliation[1]. This interpenetration of the political and the religious occurs when systems of constructing reality, or "worlds" or "religions" – these terms will be used interchangeably hereafter – meet, unfortunately all too often in the form of violent conflict. The problem for research and action in the field of "conflict resolution", understood as a practical and scientific discipline, is how to think about and understand the dynamics of interaction between the religious and the political, and when their interaction in a relationship between different worlds takes place in a violent manner, how to act in such a way as to find a peaceful outcome.

The chosen lens – that of the theoretical and practical discipline of conflict resolution[2] – allows for a contrasting construction of the problem. This paper examines the impact of values, religions, "worlds", or social constructions of reality in political or humanitarian negotiation processes. For conflict transformation and mediation of violent political conflicts, as well as for humanitarian mediation, the issues highlighted by the chosen approach are important. Let's mention just three aspects or moments in which the impact of religious factors should not be overlooked.

First, conflict resolution alerts us to the fact that the viability of an agreement generally depends more on the nature of the bargaining process that led to it than on its outcome. If the terms of the negotiated settlement were imposed on one of the parties, the settlement is unlikely to survive a change in the balance of power. A party's consent to a power relationship cannot be taken for granted: it may change over time. As circumstances change (these changes may be geographical, sociological, or cultural/religious), a negotiated settlement may become unacceptable to all parties over time. Therefore, to be sustainable, a negotiated solution must include a renegotiation or update clause.

But let's start with a short story that has the merit of putting the problem into a practical perspective. Some thirty years ago, the author asked an old hand in humanitarian action how, in his experience, a religious discourse – in this case Islamism – might affect the operations he was conducting in the field. He responded by commenting on a recent episode in which he had dealt with a senior Islamist political and military leader in a war-torn country in order to gain his agreement to deploy the humanitarian action. The Islamist leader gave him a speech that mixed practical issues with religious references. After the meeting, the Western delegate explained how he felt about his counterpart's reaction and religious rhetoric: "This is all politics. And so much the better [read: if we're dealing with a political reality, we can discuss it because it's a common game where we know the rules, ed]. Because if the other person really believes what

he's saying, then we're doomed". Thirty years have passed since that interview, but in practice there are very few players who are equipped to deal with this issue.

Is it really impossible to work with someone who truly believes what they say and lives in another world? This is a common opinion, and at first glance it seems logical. However, such an assertion does not seem to reflect what the author has actually experienced with others over more than thirty years in the field of encounters between different religions, cultures, or worlds. In fact, joint action between truly different worlds is not necessarily impossible.

However, available theories, including those of conflict resolution, often fail to take this complexity into account. There is a widespread belief that mediation is only possible by focusing strictly on the political terrain, on the "interests" at stake, leaving aside the religious or worldview dimensions. Mediation specialists generally recommend focusing on the underlying causes of the conflict, those that lie beneath the discourse of the actors.

However, when conflicts involve groups that claim different religious affiliations, it's the encounter between different "worlds" that is at stake. These "worlds" (or "religions") constitute different matrixes of social construction of reality. Far from being neutral, they intervene in the definition of interests and thus are instrumental in shaping disputes. Technically speaking, empirical research on negotiation expresses this fact as follows: "Values do shape interests, and therefore differences in interest cannot be satisfactorily resolved in a classical bargaining process"[3]. It is therefore important to consider the dynamics of the interaction between the religious and the political, values and interests. This will contribute to finding a way out of confrontations marked by such interactions.

The proposed approach is complex. This article does not pretend to go into it all, but rather to lay out some milestones in an approach developed elsewhere[4]. How can we think and act in contexts characterized by the interplay of political and religious factors?

2. Dealing with conflicts where political and religious factors interplay

2.1. How to think

The proposed model takes up and develops the work of the historian Christian theology George Lindbeck, who explains how doctrinal positions that were once contradictory may no longer be so; how doctrines, like values, can be both firm

and flexible; and how worlds committed to different values can coexist peacefully. Let's quote him in extenso:

“A religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought. […] It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (though it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities.”[5]

Like a language, a religion can be seen as a medium for constructing a reality whose grammar – dogmas or values – regulates practice. These rules are second-order realities whose function is to prohibit certain practices or actions and to permit others, without positively specifying or prescribing what is to be believed or done in the order of the game itself. The effect of a rule is neither to indicate nor to prescribe (except in the case of ritual observances, but these generally do not pose a problem in the order of politics), but to guide or direct action. According to this view, the encounter between two different or even contradictory systems of rules (dogmas or values) does not necessarily imply mutual exclusion in practice: everything depends on the contexts in which they are applied. To take Lindbeck's prosaic example, driving on the right on the Continent and on the left across the Channel does not cause collisions.

As a matrix for the construction of reality, religion functions as a system of orientation and thus security – Polanyi calls it a “fiduciary system”[6] – for the group of its adherents. “Like speech or vision aids, they enhance rather than limit our ability to cope with the world. They are the instruments that enable human beings to interpret and organize the raw material of social, personal, and intellectual life. They provide the principles of order by which we build a cosmos out of chaos, overcoming the sheer confusion and disorientation that is the greatest threat of all to human life and dignity.”[7]

What is at play here are the (transparent) rules or house laws (economy, ecology) of living communities. The survival and existence of the community as such is at stake. It is therefore understandable that an attack on such a “fiduciary system” can be experienced as a form of extreme violence. Hence the explicit reference to the prohibition of colonialism in the Islamic Declaration of Human Rights. According to Oscar Nudler, the imposition of a world is one of the worst forms of oppression, as can be seen from the violence of the reactions it

provokes[8]. From these considerations, four essential principles of conflict resolution theory can be derived:

1. Since the security of a community is closely related to the "religious dimension", the latter cannot be ignored.

2. Recognizing the solid and faithful dimension of doctrine and religion, which makes it possible to respect the values of the protagonists and, consequently, their identity.

3. Identifying the possibility of flexibility of rules within the context studied, opening a space for possible negotiation.

4. The neutrality of the approach adopted, both cognitively and practically, in the search for a solution.

This principle of neutrality implies approaching different "worlds" as one would read a geographical map, without endorsing or opposing the community teachings that are authoritative for particular religious bodies. Neutrality does not mean lack of commitment or abandonment of one's own values. Neutrality is a tool in the practice of conflict resolution. In such a process, however, all ingredients, including the reading grid used to analyze the conflict, must be acceptable to the parties involved. This approach is not intended to focus on religion per se, and as an end in itself. Rather, while acknowledging the role of religion, the goal is to work toward concrete solutions. How can we do this?

2.2. How to act

First of all, it's important to understand that interfaith – or interreligious – dialogue, where values or dogmas are debated, is not a panacea, especially in contexts of violent conflict. Indeed, empirical evidence shows that such dialogues between religious experts or dignitaries often produce, at best, declarations of good intentions. We must also not underestimate the risk of reifying the entities of "cultures" and "religions" in such undertakings, depending on how we define this enterprise. In this way, they could be given boundaries and content that make them objects of political instrumentalization, with the danger of creating divisions rather than promoting cohabitation.

Experience shows that in a context of tension, such a dialogue between different values and worldviews – cultural, religious or otherwise – can lead to mistrust if words are not followed by concrete action. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has intuitively understood this state of affairs and the inadequacy of awareness-raising work on the cognitive level alone by

adopting the motto “proof by action”. In other words: “Words are not enough, you have to ‘show’ what you mean”. To create trust, of course, but also to make people understand, through practical gestures, what is being expressed in a language not shared by the inhabitant of another world. From a pragmatic point of view, the meaning of a speech is its visible or tangible consequences. In fact, trust between the parties involved can only be strengthened through a process in which both sides get to know each other in relation to the violent conflict context and gradually show what actions flow from their words and representations.

Thus, while the debate over values and worldviews tends to divide, the search for practical, concrete, shared solutions that are possible and acceptable to all stakeholders leads to concrete results and creates or strengthens trust between parties. This process is called “dialogue through practice” or “diapraxis”[9]. What is at stake in a negotiation or conflict between worlds is an interaction of forces or powers that can be either participatory and coordinated or violent. Successful negotiation means achieving one or more compatible actions in two worlds, without those actions necessarily having the same meaning – or utility – for both sides.

To achieve this, languages and people are seen as resources for creating a shared solution, rather than as passive recipients of a solution to be analyzed or decided upon elsewhere and by others. Participation in the process will be measured by the extent to which each party is able to draw on its own linguistic and narrative resources to co-construct a solution to the conflict based on concrete actions acceptable to all. It will be a team effort, drawing on the creativity and specific rules of innovation, development and adaptation of each world.

A story that took place in Afghanistan, then ruled by the Taliban, perfectly illustrates the relevance of this method. In 1997, the ICRC entered into pragmatic negotiations with the Taliban in a spirit of “friendly confrontation” against a backdrop of media controversy over the lack of respect for human rights. Specifically, the ICRC delegate and the Taliban Minister of Health toured the dispensaries, the only medical structures to which women had access, and together observed that women did not receive the same care as in hospitals due to a lack of equipment. The delegate also learned that the prohibition of access to hospitals was not due to a rule that discriminated against women in terms of medical care, which would violate the human rights, but was the result of the need to comply with the rule of segregation of the sexes. In the context of crisis and war, priority was given to wounded soldiers. Since there was only one place where this quality of care could be found and the rule of segregation of the sexes had to be respected, women had no access to the hospital. Together they came up with an ad hoc solution: to divide the hospital by a wall, with two separate

entrances. In this way, men and women received the same quality of care, meeting the need for gender segregation for both patients and caregivers.

3. The mediation space approach

3.1. Defining the process

When conflicts between "worlds" erupt, there is usually an escalation and a consequent "hardening" of positions. What is needed then is a safe space for the parties to become flexible and creative again in (re)interpreting their worldview. Religious narratives or worldviews can usually integrate new actors and new contexts. This (re)interpretation of the narratives or worldviews is done by the parties themselves, using their own cultural and religious resources.

The mediation space model[10] is specifically designed to address the challenge of dealing with the interplay of values and interests in a negotiation or a mediation process. The "mediation" work is not understood here as the result of the presence of a go-between conflicting parties, but rather assumes the process of "meeting or confrontation of two discourses or two narratives seeking to coordinate their actions, whether this process is supported by a third party or not"[11]. If mediation is defined as "assisted negotiation", then mediation space is a process in which the assistance in negotiation is not characterized initially by focusing on agenda setting or substantive issues (we explained above that interests are not immediately accessible), but rather by providing and maintaining, through facilitation, a strong and safe structure for an open-ended process that in itself leaves significant space for creativity to generate concrete joint actions that directly relate to solutions to the conflict issues.

Within the mediation space, the "language", culture or religious vocabulary of the persons and groups involved should be considered as resources for a co-creative process that produces shared solutions. The protagonists of the conflict are not seen as the passive recipients of a solution analyzed by others according to cognitive constructions alien to their world. Participation in the process is measured by the possibility that each party has had to use its own linguistic and narrative resources to create and thus own the proposed problem-solving mechanism. This should be thought of as a teamwork, drawing on the creativity and innovation capacity specific to each world's development and innovation rules.

Two aspects of the mediation space process:

The process is open-ended and not structured along a pre-defined agenda: this is to allow the parties, or speakers of communities/worldviews, to find practical ways to provide solutions for empirical coexistence with the other community/communities), while at the same time drawing from their cultural and linguistic religious resources the forms and figures, often retrieved from the narrative resources of the religious knowledge corpus, that allow and are compatible with the elaboration of these practical solutions. A classic and much cited example is the notion of "shura" (consultation), which has been retrieved as a Qur'anic (or Islamic) resource which is compatible with aspects of "democracy".

Another aspect of the process is diapraxis[12], which addresses the challenge of communication between worldviews where the exchange of words is not sufficient. As mentioned earlier, in the eyes of one community, the actions of the other community do not necessarily follow their words in an understandable or predictable way, so it is important to work with the device of "show me what you mean", or "what are the practical implications of what you are saying?".

One does not look first at the cognitive dimension of an agreement, but at an empirical dimension. In the empirical example referred to below as the "secularity process", diapraxis consists in looking at what the actions corresponding to a "common civic space" look like empirically. In terms of the retrieval of religious resources compatible with the tradition and corpus of the orthodox worldview of the community involved (our first aspect of mediation space here above), this "common civic space" may appear as corresponding to what is religiously permissible.

A successful outcome of a mediation space is the agreement on and subsequent testing of a set of empirical actions that are compatible within two (or more) worldviews or religions. This corresponds to John Rawls's notion of "overlapping consensus".

3.2. Structuring the process

Establishing a shared vision

Establishing a basic shared vision is one of the first steps in creating a safe mediation space. A shared vision can be as simple as "at some point we are going to have to live together". The formulation should be broad enough for all parties to agree. It does not require reaching agreement on doctrine or a worldview. It should also be formulated in practical terms, i.e. avoiding terms that may mean very different things to different parties, such as "peace" or "justice".

Agreeing on "safety lines"

In order for participants to feel that the mediation space is a safe place for discussion some "safety lines" need to be established. These are lines that everyone agrees they do not want to cross in the discussion. "Safety lines" differ from "red lines" in a negotiation process because the former correspond to items that are prohibited on the agenda, whereas "safety lines" exclude certain behaviors and language in the interactions between the parties. The logic is that it is more concrete to frame the safe space and set limits by saying what behavior or statements should be avoided rather than what kind of behavior of or statements are desirable. "Safety lines" are defined according to the context and according to the participants. They are not imposed but must be agreed upon by all participants. Agreeing on the "safety lines" is itself part of the discussion process and may take some time. For example, in the Sri Lanka dialogue process involving Buddhist monks during the war with the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) (see the second empirical case provided below), participants agreed that within the mediation space:

- Nothing would be said or done against the Dharma (Buddha's teachings),
- Nothing against the government of Sri Lanka,
- Nothing that might antagonize the communities involved in the conflict.

3.3. Experiencing the process

There is not enough space in this paper to develop on concrete experiences that have been implemented over the last twenty years. Only three of them will be mentioned, with the relevant references.

The Sri Lanka dialogue process[13]

The "Sri Lanka Dialogue Project" (SLDP) was launched in January 2006 to address the fact that key pro-war Buddhist conflict actors had been left aside from the mediation process between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, a process led by the Norwegian Government with the help of Switzerland.

Indeed, it was believed (by important and vocal members of the Buddhist community and clergy) that Buddhist religious rights were in irreconcilable competition with a (Tamil) political autonomy in the North and East of Sri Lanka, the latter autonomy being perceived as a major threat. Driven by an ideology of a unitary country and a will to preserve Buddhist interests in Sri Lanka, some ultra-nationalist monks within the Buddhist clergy (*Sangha)* were against any concessions made to the Tamil minority and any moves to modify Sri Lanka's centralized political system. Highly politicized and organized into pressure

groups and political parties, they promoted an armed solution to the conflict and pressured the Government of Sri Lanka to put an end to the cease-fire. From 2006 to 2009, the SLDP implemented a mediation space approach to engage with monks from different schools within the Sri Lankan Sangha (Buddhist clergy) to explore the compatibility of Tamil expectations with Buddhist values – with the result of uniting them in support of the peace process.

The post-conflict confidence building process in Tajikistan[14]

Following Tajikistan's independence as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a civil war ravaged the country between 1992 and 1997, leaving 50'000 dead and more than a hundred thousand disappeared. In 1997, the UN brokered a peace agreement, based on the principle of power-sharing between the warring factions: a coalition of various Islamic movements and democrats on one side, and former communists on the other. The National Reconciliation Commission (1997-2000) failed to resolve the deep mistrust and divisive issues between the conflict parties, including the role and place of religion in State and society. The risk of a relapse into violent conflict was real, if not imminent.

Between 2000 and 2004, there were several initiatives for dialogue between the conflict parties. As these exchanges were not followed up or accompanied by concrete gestures, they failed to build trust between the protagonists. The Tajikistan Dialogue Project was designed and implemented between 2004 and 2008 as a process of dialogue through practice that addressed the most divisive issues in the country: religious education, the law on religion and religious organizations, and the fight against extremism (both secular and religious).

The "secularity process" in the MENA region[15]

Several workshops took place (2016-2017) on the issue of "secularity", with activists from different worldviews from North Africa and the Middle East (including Syria) – i.e. secularists, nationalists, Muslim Brothers and Salafis. It was an opportunity to reach a consensus with them on the issue of the possibility of a "common civic space" that is "compossible" for them, i.e. possible for their different value matrices. Hence, a space of flexibility, a space where creative negotiation is possible, or, in other words, where conformity to religion is not anymore an area of "intangibility". Such intangibility, or the perception of intangibility arises in polarized situations, i.e. in situations where one's own religious approach is perceived as being fundamentally challenged.

4. Conclusion

When parties to violent political conflicts are inspired by different value systems or religions – or in other words when they inhabit different "worlds" – the classical mediation approach, which consists of identifying the interests of the parties, becomes significantly more complex. Indeed, when interests are shaped by different worldviews, negotiations become more difficult because the ability to understand the utility of the interest and its visibility is not a given. Other obstacles, such as communication difficulties, and the fear that one's "world" or religion is threatened, add to the challenges of dealing with such conflicts. The mediation space approach was developed to address these difficulties and challenges. The methodology has been tested in the aftermath of the civil war in Tajikistan, during the war in Sri Lanka, and on issues of polarization between religious and secular actors in the MENA region.

Notes and References

[1] Isak Svensson and Desirée Nilsson, Disputes over the Divine: Introducing the Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) Data, 1975 to 2015, Journal of Conflict Resolution, 2018, Vol. 62(5), pp.1136-1137.

[2] The discipline of "conflict resolution" combines practice and theory, focusing on conflict (as an interpersonal, intercommunal, intra-state or international social phenomenon) as an object of analysis and a focus for action. Practitioners and academics take an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on political science, the humanities, international relations, social psychology, psychology (individual, group, cognitive), cultural anthropology and ethnology, with the emergence and evolution of conflicts between individuals, groups or countries, and their eventual resolution or transformation, as the "object" of study.

[3] In addition, values, taken for themselves, are not negotiable: research on negotiation has shown that debates about values do not work (Druckman, Rozelle et al. 1977: 105-131).

[4] Jean-Nicolas Bitter, Les Dieux embusqués. Une approche pragmatique de la dimension religieuse des conflits, Paris/Genève, Librairie Droz, 2003.

[5] George A. Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine. Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age. Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1984, p. 33 (notre traduction). Version française : La nature des doctrines. Religion et théologie à l'âge du postlibéralisme, Paris, Van Dieren Editeur, 2002; traduit par Mireille Hébert.

[6] Quoted p.26 in Lindbeck, G. A., Spiritual Formation and Theological Education, *Theological Education*, (1988) 24 *suppl.* 1, p.10-32.

[7] P. 312 in Lindbeck, G., Theological revolutions and the present crisis, Theology Digest, (1975) 23, p.308-319. The quote has been translated back into English from a French translation, to be found in Jean-Nicolas Bitter, "Les Dieux Embusqués", *op.cit.,* p. 353.

[8] Nudler, O., On Conflicts and Metaphors, in: J. Burton (éd.), Conflict: Human Needs Theory, New York, St Martin's Press, 1990, p.177-201, p.188.

[9] The term "diapraxis" was proposed by the Danish Lutheran theologian Lissi Rasmussen to indicate a relationship in which common practice is essential - as opposed to dialogue, in which discussion is central. Rasmussen clarifies: "Thus by diapraxis I do not mean the actual application of dialogue but rather dialogue as action. We need a more anthropological

contextual approach to dialogue where we see diapraxis as a meeting between people who try to reveal and transform the reality they share." (Lutheran World Information: Diapraxis for Peace and Reconciliation, Vol. 04, 2005, p. 4.).

[10] Jean-Nicolas Bitter, Mediation Space and Diapraxis, in: Owen Frazer and Lakhdar Ghettas (eds.), *Conflict Transformation in Practice,* Cordoba Now Forum, 2013, http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/Conflict_Transformation_in_Practice_2013.pdf

[11] Ibidem. This definition in inspired by Lederach's definition of mediation as a "[…] process involving the creation of social spaces between divided groups, as opposed to a process lodged in the work of an individual or small team"). Lederach, J. P. 2002. *Building Mediative Capacity in Deep-Rooted Conflict. The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 26(1): 91-101.

[12] Jean-Nicolas Bitter, Diapraxis in Different Contexts: A brief discussion with Rasmussen, in: *Religion in Conflict Transformation, Politorbis No. 52,* Swiss FDFA, 2011, pp. 65-68, http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/Politorbis-52.pdf

[13] Jael Stettler, Swiss Peacebuilding Strategy on Religious-related Conflict. A case study of the Sri Lanka Dialogue Project from 2006-2010. Bachelor's degree in International Relations. Research project in Political Science, University of Geneva, Global Studies Institute, 2022/2023.

[14] Bitter, Jean-Nicolas, Introduction. Tajik Secular-Islamic Dialogue: Implementing Dialogue Through Practice, in: Bitter et al. (eds), Implementing Dialogue Through Practice: the Tajik experience, Geneva, Dushanbe, 2008.

[15] Alistair Davison. Towards a Common Action Space: Religion and Politics in the Public Sphere. Cordoba Workshops Reports. Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (2017). https://cpi-geneva.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CFG_ExpertSecularityDiscuss_032017.pdf