

Conflict and Religion

NWO - Conflict programme line

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Introduction

The resurgence or marked resilience of religions all over the world, including Northern Europe, is a matter of intense debate today. Far from signaling a return to outmoded religious beliefs and practices supposedly out of tune with modernity, this resurgence takes place in the context of globalisation, mass mediatization, international migration and the rise of new transnational networks. Across the globe, we witness the emergence of culturally and religiously plural societies, in which religious movements manifest themselves as major social-cultural forces and play a significant role in the public sphere. Nation-states find it increasingly difficult to handle the upsurge of religious movements. These processes towards pluralism and religious diversity are associated in many places with conflicts on micro, meso, and macro levels of society. Because of the way information is spread using modern media, 'local' conflicts are easily mobilised to incite conflicts in remote places, as has been the case with, for example, the 'Danish cartoon affair'. Religious diversity is associated with social, ethnic and political conflicts, and poses unexpected challenges to political bodies such as national governments and supranational bodies such as the United Nations.

Many North European societies, including the Netherlands, witness not only the marked articulation of Islamic identity, accompanied by heavily contested claims for Islamic modes of dress and purposely built mosques, but also a renewed public emphasis on orthodox or evangelical Christian identities, stressing Christian norms, decent modes of dress, and rejecting immoral styles of expression. In many Asian, Latin American and African countries, Pentecostal-charismatic churches set out to wage a 'spiritual war' against indigenous cultural and religious traditions, thereby challenging state politics or cultural heritage. The public presence of religion is not only a question of conflicts associated with particular religious convictions and modes of being, but also of the possible role of religious movements and organisations in the resolution of conflicts of a different nature, as was the case with the input of Anglican Archbishop Tutu in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Scholarly attention for both local and global conflicts is considerable, but both knowledge and theory about many aspects of their religious dimension are still missing. In order to grasp this dimension, a number of issues must be taken into account that are central to current debates concerning the resurgence of religion.

First, despite the actuality of the apparent resurgence of religion, it is important to adopt *a historical and comparative perspective*. While the rise of transnational religious networks, religious uses of the internet, the search for religious origins and processes of radicalisation should certainly be viewed as distinct contemporary phenomena, we still need to pay attention to the historical antecedents that shape religions' role and place in the present (compare the NWO programme *The Future of the Religious Past*). As the ways in which religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism manifest themselves are subject to change, it would be mistaken to regard these traditions as constituting timeless ideas and practices. Researchers are called to investigate how religious movements and organisations are positioned in particular social and political formations, prior to the rise of the modern nation-state, in the setting up of the nation-state and in the context of globalisation, how they are positioned in everyday life and re-invented over time. With regard to historical antecedents, we may think about, for example, the presence of Islam in medieval Europe, processes of Christian proselytization in the context of colonialism

(including the responses on the part of other religious traditions), or the longstanding appeal of Eastern spirituality for disenchanted moderns. But attention also needs to be paid to the fact that the ways in which religious groups manifest themselves vary in different national arenas, as nation-states deal with religion in a variety of ways. For example, being a Muslim in the Middle East, where Islam is part and parcel of everyday life, or in the Netherlands, where Islam is a—highly contested—religion next to Christianity and secularist positions, is not the same. Espousing a Pentecostal-charismatic conviction may yield different kinds of conflicts in, for example, Nigeria where strong tensions exist between Christians and Muslims, in the United States where the President presents himself as a Born Again Christian, or in a migrant church in Europe where Pentecostals form a small minority. Research on contemporary religious conflicts and conflicts about religion therefore calls for a historical and comparative approach that makes it possible to discern the particular context-specific place and role of religious movements and organisations.

Secondly, in current debates around the assertive role assumed by religious movements and organisations in the early 21st century, scholars have found the value of secularisation theory—assuming an intrinsic relation between modernity and the privatisation of religion—to be limited in helping understand the global resurgence of religion and the consequent conflicts. Even North European societies, long considered the stronghold of modernity and secularisation, face the rise of a new religious assertiveness in the sphere of orthodox and Pentecostal Christianity and Islam and the marked articulation of religious movements and organisations in the public sphere. Although intellectual elites in these societies self-consciously identify themselves as ‘secular’, religion has become a topic—and to some ‘a problem’—that can no longer be neglected. It seems that contemporary states find it increasingly difficult to contain religious movements and organisations, for example by confining them to the private sphere and making them submit to the premise of the public sphere and the state as secular. Indeed, the suggestion made by Jürgen Habermas that our current era could be characterized as ‘post-secular’ indicates that we face new challenges concerning our understanding of, as well as policies with regard to, religion (as also the recent WRR report on Religion in the Public Domain in the Netherlands suggests). While many scholars, following the ground-breaking work of Peter Berger, agree that secularisation is no longer suitable as a paradigm for the study of modern religion, it is nevertheless clear that, at the research level, attention needs to be paid to conflicts between groups assuming ‘secular’ or ‘religious’ positions. It is of eminent concern to *view the rise and mobilisation of ‘secularism’ in conjunction with the emergence of ‘religion’ as a modern category* (Asad, 2004). The spread and appeal of ‘secularism’, alongside with modern understandings of religion as a system of beliefs located in the inner self, is not confined to North European societies, but relevant across the globe. There is need for research on the relationship between secular and religious positions that are mobilised in current conflicts concerning the role and place of religions in the public domain of multi-cultural religiously plural societies, and that impinge on present-day politics.

Thirdly, as many authors have remarked, *globalisation raises the question of identity and community in a new manner*. Due to processes of space-time compression, the more or less assumed link between culture and place has been severed. In varying degrees, all over the world, people have a host of cultural materials at their disposal—ranging from the sphere of popular film to transnational religion—that offer new resources for the construction of identity but, at the same time, also underpin the erosion of hitherto assumed certainties. Global migration entails the rise of new multi-cultural, religiously plural societies, transnational religious networks and new dynamics between diasporic communities and the

country of origin. The unprecedented rise of new opportunities and mobility goes hand in hand with experiences of fragmentation and distraction. These experiences yield a search for security and certainty, and the formation of new, bounded identities with their own dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. It is exactly in this field that religious movements and organisations assume a central role. Many of them eagerly and skillfully capitalise upon the new possibilities offered by the easy accessibility of modern media to spread information across the world, making it increasingly difficult to maintain a distinction between religion and market forces. At the same time, they also promise to offer many desired certainties and a new language to deploy the self and assert one's position in public arenas. They have a special appeal to young people. In many respects the resurgence of religions may well be regarded as part and parcel of youth cultures, which develop new notions of self, gender, relationships between generations and attitudes with regard to significant others. Not unlike earlier youth movements in the wake of the 1960s, current religious movements offer languages of resistance that are at the heart of new counter cultures and are eagerly mobilised against mainstream languages of power. In this sense, these movements have a strongly personal and, by the same token, political dimension.

If many religious movements spread by virtue of the flows that characterise globalisation, they paradoxically also offer new forms of closure. Examples concern not only young, second generation Muslims who mobilise Internet resources in their search of a pure Islam, but also the popularity of movements such as Falun Gong, Pentecostalism or the Catholic Charismatic Revival. Many of these new religious movements assert a quite uncompromising stance towards other religious traditions and secularist positions, thus polarising contemporary identity politics. Conducting research on the relationship between religion and conflict, it is important to take as a point of departure the tension between experiences of fragmentation and diversity on the one hand and the certainty proclaimed by many religions on the other. It is important here not to take the certainty proclaimed by religions at face value, but to situate it in the broader multi-cultural, religiously plural setting, to which contemporary religious groups owe much of their appeal. However central religion may be to people's lives, it should not be forgotten that a person's religious identity relates to his/her other identities (gender, social, professional, political, national, etcetera), as well as to the identities of Others. The appeal of religious identity therefore needs to be investigated against the background of co-existing, and at times conflicting identities that exist within and between people in the context of religiously plural, multi-cultural societies. Instead of essentialising a religious identity as a given, close attention needs to be paid to the processes through which it is constructed and to the potential conflicts and modes of conflict resolution, to which it may give rise in practice.

This programme thus wishes to stimulate research into religious conflicts that is undertaken in a multi-disciplinary and multi-level manner, synthesising local and global interconnections in a historical and comparative perspective. Also, the programme particularly aims to elucidate the dynamic aspects of these conflicts. As promising fields we distinguish:

- Religious Plurality: Minorities and Majorities
- Religion in the Public Sphere: Clashes between Religious and Secular Positions
- Radicalism and Extremism: Manifestations, Causes, Consequences
- Interventions: Preventing and Tackling Religious Conflicts

Let us now discuss these fields in detail.

Religious Plurality: Minorities and Majorities

Individual and collective religious identities are formed in interaction processes with other individuals and groups. Differences are often overstated and similarities understated. Others may be persons who belong to another religious tradition, but this does not need to be the case as different identities are also shaped within a single tradition. This holds especially true for gender identities and relations. Should conflicts arise, they may therefore have intra-religious and inter-religious dimensions.

Present day conflicts with religious dimensions have a history and memories that may reach back for centuries. The role of Islam in European history is a case in point. In medieval times, Europe was officially barely plural (in religious terms) and state organs were dominated by Christianity. Islam was an established religion in Southern Europe only. Judaism was tolerated at times, but its adherents were expelled at other times. In some early-modern states religious plurality was rejected on religious grounds, and where plurality of religions existed, it was often associated with latent or open conflicts. Many Europeans have associated Islam with intolerance and violence, and this has fueled strong emotions of fear, which in turn have served to argue that Muslims should be denied certain rights. The framing of Islam as an intolerant and violent religion—a process that sometimes has been informed by ancient stereotypes—has interfered in the relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims, as historical and anthropological studies have shown.

Modern societies have managed religious differences in different ways, something that is contingent on political and bureaucratic structures. Old rivalries over claims of truth and religious convictions are canalised in regular meetings with representing bodies, as the case of pillarization in the Netherlands demonstrates. Such structures may induce changes in representations, ritual acts and attitudes that the religious groups involved hold. The transformation of conflicts between religions—especially religious minorities—and the state (promoting or protecting for instance the freedom of religion) and between religious traditions (promoting special claims regarding for instance rights of women or proselytisation) is often mediated by human rights movements. In several cases, these movements have become powerful players.

Here we call for studies that focus on conflicts between religious groups and the role of the (nation) state in relation to majority-minority questions. With a few exceptions, most religious groups live in state-ruled areas. Globalisation—and certainly international migration—have reshaped conflicts that used to be confined to particular local spaces. Religious movements have spread across the world, giving rise to new sorts of religious pluralisms. In this conjuncture, new transnational religious movements come to the fore—think of the struggles around scientology in France and Germany or the legal dispute about ritual ‘drug’ use of Santo Daime. W. Fallers Sullivan, mulling over the proliferation of (often conflicting) claims of religious movements and individuals in states that define themselves as religiously neutral, argues that religious freedom is impossible.

These new and perhaps not so new developments have also drawn attention to political and legal aspects. In many situations, conflicts with a religious dimension take the shape of conflicts between religious groups and states—and thus various political and legal systems. A comparative research design is needed to fully assess and appreciate the significance of the interaction patterns between religious minorities and local or national political and legal majority systems. And since these systems are highly dynamic and multi-layered,

longitudinal and multi-scalar research projects on religious plurality in nation-state formations and in a transnational perspective are recommended.

Religion in the Public Sphere: Clashes between Religious and Secular Positions

Conflicts about the public presence of religion are not confined to Western societies, but occur in many settings across the world in which the modern secular state has been taken as the norm, as for instance in Turkey or India. At stake here is the set up of the modern public sphere as a secular environment, in which religion is subordinate to the state and regarded as a private matter. Around the globe, this modern idea about the public sphere is contested by the articulate manifestation of religious groups and individuals, many of which, paradoxically, are able to voice their concerns due to processes of democratisation, media liberalisation and religious freedom. Far from featuring as the norm, in the context of religious pluralism, secular positions are up against religious ones. This often means that conflicts about public religion are framed in terms of opposition between ‘freedom of expression’ and ‘freedom of religion’. This part of the research programme invites comparative research that investigates struggles resulting from the public presence of religion by combining detailed empirical studies of all parties involved, the genesis and antecedents of such conflicts in a historical perspective as well as reflecting on the ways in which these conflicts are being framed.

The following issues may be of particular interest in research on conflicts evolving around the public presence of religion. One concerns the articulation of religious identities via dress styles and body techniques. In many settings, the wearing of a headscarf, niqab, or burka in public spaces is subject to heated debate, as are issues such as the question of (female) circumcision. By contrast, religiously grounded resistance to immunisation against particular diseases (as is the case in some areas in the so-called Dutch Bible belt), albeit less contested today, may also be subject to misgivings from a secular perspective. Often, critiques of the practices mentioned are articulated via discourses that mobilise modern norms and values, such as female emancipation, education, hygiene or health. Discarding such practices as outmoded places them in a temporary scheme that opposes religion and modernity in terms of backwardness and enlightenment. And yet, for the people concerned, wearing a particular kind of religious dress or engaging in certain bodily techniques usually forms the bedrock of a—often newly found—religious identity.

A second issue concerns the presence of religious buildings in public space. With the rise of religiously and culturally plural populations, many societies witness severe conflicts about the construction and location of mosques and other purposely built religious constructions and the soundscapes associated with them. Examples concern not only struggles about mosques in Western societies, but also conflicts about the establishment of churches near traditional holy spaces, as is the case in many parts of, for instance, Africa, where Pentecostal-charismatic churches engage in a ‘spiritual war’ against indigenous religious traditions. Religious structures, it appears, seem to evoke a strong sense of presence by their sheer materiality that, in turn, accentuates their symbolic value. For this reason, such structures may be hailed by religious practitioners for asserting their identity and, for the same reasons, being fiercely contested by opponents.

A third issue concerns contests leveled from a religious position against mainstream secular practices and opinions. Examples are the rejection of homosexual marriage on the ground of a religious (Christian, Muslim or Jewish) conviction, campaigns against cursing and against

allegedly indecent advertisements on TV or in public spaces (such as the recent protest on the part of the Dutch political party, the Christian Union, against a billboard showing a sparsely dressed woman advertising lingerie) and blasphemy. Concerning the issue of blasphemy, we should not only think about the worldwide protests against the publication of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and the recent upheaval around the so-called Muhammad cartoons published in *Jylland's Posten*, but also about campaigns, made in the name of Christianity, against allegedly offensive popular art, such as Madonna's crucifixion tour.

This part of the programme invites research that investigates the different positions that are being mobilised in conflicts about the public presence of religion from insiders' perspectives, as well as the representation of religion in public outlets (including newspapers, songs, adverts and films). A comparative perspective that is able to unravel similarities between different manifestations of religious assertiveness launched from the standpoint of different religious traditions is pertinent. How do personal affairs, grounded as they are on a religious or secular conviction, become heavily debated, public issues? What is so vexing about certain religious practices regarding modes of dress and bodily techniques, and the presence of religious buildings from a secular perspective, whereas they appear as inalienable elements of religious and personal identity from the perspective of believers? Conversely, why are certain instances of secular modernity so much critiqued from religious standpoints? How are both religious and secular positions framed in relation to each other? How to balance 'freedom of religion' and 'freedom of expression' in religiously plural, multicultural societies? And, most importantly, what can a detailed investigation of the positions of all sides involved contribute to a better understanding of underlying causes and conflict resolution?

Radicalism and Extremism: Manifestations, Causes, Consequences

Religious beliefs and practices assume many different forms and the same holds for the relationships between religious minorities and the mainstream. In some cases, religious minorities are alienated from wider society and a process of radicalisation may unfold. Radicalisation entails estrangement, polarisation and separation and may—under particular conditions—lead to extremism. Extremism refers to both ideology and action. An extremist ideology articulates an intense fear of the imminent doom of one's own community in a world perceived as 'evil'. It calls on an uncompromising struggle against all threats to that community and promotes a utopian state characterised by uniformity and harmony. Some (but certainly not all) extremists are prepared to use violence to that end and, in so doing, clash with democratic values. There is revolutionary left-wing radicalism, racist right-wing radicalism, multi issue radicalism, single issue radicalism (for instance the Animal Liberation Front) and so forth, but here we confine ourselves to religious varieties. Extreme and violent examples are fundamentalist Christians attacking abortion clinics in the United States, Hindustani activists destroying mosques and killed thousands of peoples in India and Muslim fighters getting involved in suicide missions in various places in the world. But, as has been indicated, radicalism does not need to culminate in extremism, and extremism does not necessarily have to be engaged with violent action.

In the minds of many people however, radicalism and extremism are violent by default, and this draws our attention to the role of framing. This is especially the case with those forms of radicalism and extremism associated with Islam. We noted earlier that many people associate Islam with intolerance and violence and with pre-industrial, undemocratic opinions and practices. This framing of the Muslim Other has been reproduced time and time again and

this has fueled the withholding of certain citizen rights of Muslims. Here we call for studies that describe and analyse this process of framing and compare it with the framing of other religious categories. The response of the mainstream may further social disruption and conflicts. This, however, should not be taken for granted, but also be subject to empirical research.

Radicalism and extremism are of course not always the product of processes of framing and social exclusion. They can also be the result of a quest for purity. Such processes are however embedded in wider social structures. Research has demonstrated that people are more open to radicalism if they i) find themselves in an inferior social position and a victim of discrimination, ii) feel that this situation is not a failure of an otherwise adequate social system, but the expression of a thoroughly bad social system, iii) believe that their inferior social position is the result of cultural, religious and political power play, iv) nourish the idea that their identity should prosper in a kind of enclave that exists in opposition to mainstream society and v) have no faith in the political system and democracy.

It would be interesting to further explore this and to assess, in a comparative setting, when such processes take off, who is involved and how these processes develop. Is there any relationship between religious radicalisation and more general tendencies towards hardening and coarsening of social relations? Do psychopathological factors interfere in processes of radicalisation? In the same vein, it would be interesting to learn more about the reverse process, namely that of deradicalisation.

Furthermore, this research programme calls for studies of the consequences of religious radicalism. What is seen as religious radicalism is currently in the centre of public attention and debate, but what impact does this have on the development of religious identities and the relations between people from different religious or non-religious groups? What are the relations between radical and moderate believers, what are the characteristics of the key players, which discourses do they use?

Interventions: Preventing and Tackling Religious Conflicts

Interventions in conflicts with religious dimensions are shaped by the character of the conflicts, the intervening actors and the religious groups involved. The intervening actors may be both the state and institutions of the civil society. The role of the state is however not uncontested. Many nation-states acknowledge the separation of state and church (i.e. organised religion) but expect orthodox believers to exercise restraint. In practice, nation-states outside but also within Europe have different interpretations of the separation of state and church and allocate different rights to religious denominations. The space for religious groups to exercise religious practices therefore varies from country to country and within one particular country sometimes from place to place and from denomination to denomination. Even in a democratic society such as Germany, which has accepted the principle of religious freedom, debates are being held about the legitimacy of the Scientology Church. Elsewhere, conflicts have been fought out by interdicting particular religious tendencies and persecuting its believers.

Nation-states have developed a plethora of intervention schemes to deal with social, political, economic and religious conflicts. They may aim at the containment and neutralisation of the conflict by fostering the transformation of religious activity as a stepping stone towards radicalisation, extremism and violent action to religious activity as a threshold. Nation-states

and/or civil society actors may also offer an informed alternative to those who have embarked on a trajectory towards radicalisation etcetera, for example by ensuring equal treatment for all religious groups.

These kinds of intervention may be informed by all kind of ideologies or social and political practices. Some believe that these interventions manifest the antagonism of Enlightened modernity versus religion. These kinds of discourses and their relation with intervention practices, however, should be objects of research.

Various questions arise. What are the social and political responses to radical and extreme tendencies? What kind of ideological and pragmatic arguments have been formulated to prevent the development of extremist ideologies and practices? What are the effects of any intervention on anti-democratic religious movements? Do religious groups—or particular individuals, subgroups or institutions within them—engage in any form of intervention, and why and with what effects? What role do professionals such as teachers, community workers, and so forth play?

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