

INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF THE RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

Pavleski Aleksandar, PhD¹

Abstract: *The New World Order cannot be understood without accounting for the role and the impact of religion and religious organizations. Actually, compared to the period until the end of the Cold War, much more attention is paid to the religion and nationalism issues today. From security point of view one of the reasons for such a situation is based on the growing number and internationalisation of the religious issues and conflicts around the world. This paper analyses why and how local religious conflicts are becoming an international issue. It is clear that internationalization of domestic conflicts is not unique to religious conflicts. However, religious conflicts are among those that have been internationalized in past 30-years. In security aspect, the internationalization process of these conflicts is very important because of its serious impact on the conflict resolution or escalation dynamics as well.*

Keywords: *religion, conflict, security, international relations*

¹ Institute for Security, Defence and Peace, Faculty of Philosophy, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia, e-mail: pavleski@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

Introduction

From historical point of view, it is no doubt that since time immemorial political and religious leaders have exploited the unique power of religion to justify violence and war. Moreover, even though the main reasons and issues may not be of religious nature, religion could have a significant role at different levels and phases of conflict, especially when different religious systems encounter each other, regardless of the real cause of the conflict. Actually, in such situations religion can be used as a mobilizing factor as well as a significant generator for worsening the conflict situation. In this regard, Kadayifci-Orellana, points out that religion, as a system of beliefs and practices relating to the sacred, and uniting its adherents in a community, has a powerful hold on people's way of thinking, acting and perceptions of interests (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009 p.264).

From the point of view of the international relations theory, it is characteristic that religion did not initiate more serious attention among theorists of this discipline until the beginning of the 20th century. A reason about such a lack of attention to the religious element could be attributed to the events that followed the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. In fact, this date serves as a frontier in international relations because it confirms the secularization of the modern international system in which the separation between the state and the Church takes place. As a result, a new model appears in which the state is the only legitimate actor in international relations and where religion is reduced to a marginal position. In addition, the 20th century was dominated by the perception that the inevitable process of modernization would reduce the importance of religious and ethnic issues in international politics.

However, such a perception has significantly changed in the past three decades. Actually, we have witnessed a gradual awakening of interest about the religious factor in international relations in recent decades. Contrary to the previous understandings and beliefs in this regard, modernization and phenomena due to the progressive process of globalization have contributed in a direct and indirect way to the return of religion, in some parts of the world and to the "big door". Above all in a world that is increasingly interconnected and interdependent, local issues even of a religious nature, can have an impact internationally. The religious conflicts are the best confirmation in this sense.

In this sense, by referring to the nature of religious conflicts, the paper analyses why and how they become a significant issue on the international and security agenda.

1. Theoretical aspects of the religious conflicts

According to the theory of conflicts, a part of the reasons for the occurrence of conflicts are located in the existence of different values (including religious ones) among people. These different values arise as a result of differences in belief about

which activities, which things and which ideas are right, meaningful, useful and good, and which are not. In this sense, from the aspect of the religious extremism and interpretation of the Holy Books, religious extremists believe that there is only one right reading and interpretation of their Holy Books, which leads to God's truth (Matevski, 2021).

The system of values is formed throughout life, through wider cultural influences, family upbringing and own experience, and it represents a standard that guides people's actions. From this aspect, when the conflict is expressed through the words: honest, fair, right or equal, then it is a conflict caused by different values (Gocevski et al., 1999).

In a situation where values are conflicting, the parties to the conflict are focused on whether the demands are right or wrong, whether they are good or bad, etc. Therefore, conflicts over different values are the most difficult to resolve because they involve issues to which people are particularly sensitive. Actually, when values are in conflict, the participants perceive the conflict as an attack on the person, due to which the individual (group) reacts with a strongly expressed manifestation.

There are different values, cultures, societies and religions around the world today. Most of these cultures and religions originated or evolved from the very beginning of ancient societies. Religions and cultures have spread in different ways by each country or religious grouping - from education process to using violence and forced practice of religion. However, a key insight from history is that there is no inevitable relationship between religious difference, conflict and insecurity. There are numerous historical examples, starting from locations and periods as diverse as the ancient Middle East, early modern Europe and today's contemporary world, of people of varied religious commitments living peaceful, although sometimes segregated lives. The essential problem is therefore one of seeking to understand why and how such situations of stable coexistence break down, or how and why a more specifically religious difference, becomes a security threat.

In their essence, religious conflicts are mainly initiated by religious intolerance of the religious values, beliefs and practices of others. It should be noted that sometimes such an intolerance is characteristic even among adherents from one religion (Sunnis-Shiites, Catholics-Protestants etc.). In this regard, strong religious commitments and identifications are a potent source of security for their adherents, but can seem threatening to opponents at same time. Actually, religious conflicts refer to those conflicts which involve parties that are defined along religious lines, societies where religion is an integral aspect of social and cultural life and where religious institutions represent a significant portion of the community and possesses moral legitimacy as well as the capacity to reach and mobilize adherents throughout the community. There are several characteristics in theory that distinguishes these from other kind of conflicts. Among others, the most significant are related to the: centrality of identity issues, intractability, centrality of religion and religion institutions, using of religion language and crisis of legitimacy.

Regarding to the first aspect or centrality of identity issues, conflicts where the parties define themselves along ethno-religious lines are recognized as identity conflicts. Identity is related to a description of who one is and how one fits into social groups and society overall and is closely tied with the culture and religion. One crucial aspect of identity conflict is that it incorporates psychological, physical, and social dimensions, since identity is an intrinsic element of the “self”, and a perceived threat to “self” or to a sense of security based on a distinctive identity that usually overrides rational thoughts and reason. Oppression and discrimination of one or more religious groups cause frustration of identity needs, which leads to ethno-religious conflict and religion as a core component of identity, serves to separate sharp distinctions between parties during this kind of conflict.

Regarding to the intractability, conflict theory agrees that conflicts which are based on ethno-religious identity are usually much more complicated and harder to resolve than those conflicts over resources. These conflicts tend to resist conflict resolution attempts and endure for long periods of time. In this order new concepts such as “enduring”, “intractable” and “protracted” conflicts have been introduced. Therefore, they require special efforts if they are to be accurately defined, adequately analyzed and effectively resolved.

Centrality of religion and religion institutions, refers to the fact that religion is one of the central identifying characteristics of communities, and religious institutions represent a significant portion of the population possessing moral legitimacy as well as the capacity to reach and to mobilize adherents throughout the community. In this regard, very often religious feelings can mobilize people faster than other elements of their identity because religion touches upon deep level of identity. As a result, religion and religious institutions can play a central and significant role in religious conflicts.

Using of religion language, texts, images, refers to the fact that these conflicts are connected to more abstract and interpretive dynamics of history, culture, values and beliefs of identity groups. Therefore, during these conflicts, religious beliefs, sacred texts, and images are often used and abused to incite hatred and depict enemy images. These beliefs, texts and images serve as lenses through which history and events are interpreted from. In this regard, conflict situation can escalate even more if various verses of stories would be interpreted to depict the enemy as evil, satanic or demonic, making reconciliation extremely difficult. Additionally, the abuse of religious symbols in certain conflict situations, is also significant aspect in order to provide legitimacy for the activities of one of the conflicting parties, despite the fact that it is not a pure religious conflict. In this regard, history shows examples where religious symbols have been used as national symbols as well as that they have been used for political manipulation. However, in such situations religious communities and religious leaders should mainly have a significant responsibility through their request for the removal of religious symbols from the uniforms of soldiers. If they do not act in this way, they face the challenge of their role being taken over by politi-

cians, and religious truth becoming some kind of political truth. Namely, it opens up the possibility of establishing the thesis and approach that it is no longer important what God thinks is holy, but the politician's attitude about what God thinks is decisive. Such an approach can only further aggravate the conflict situation, whether it is a religious or other kind of conflict.

Another significant aspect is related to the crisis of legitimacy. Many of societies are faced with a crisis of legitimacy which facilitates attacks on the socio-political legitimacy and economic performance of incumbent governments, especially with religious ideologies. In this context, it becomes easier for religious leaders to use their moral legitimacy to incite violence and hatred and both political and religious leaders to not hesitate to employ religious objects such as sacred texts, symbols, imagery, myths, and so on to invoke various emotions such as heroism, bravery, vengeance, among others.

The indicated characteristics and aspects, confirm the understanding that conflicts due to different values, such as religious conflicts, have a complex nature that seriously complicates efforts for their resolving. It is no doubt that religions have clashed and caused controversy in disputes over beliefs, norms, and taboos throughout history. These conflicts caused intolerance towards other religions and cultures, and that animosity spread to people and resulted in persecution of each other, in the belief that their religion is one and true religion while the rest were believed to be pagans, unbelievers, atheists. Some of these beliefs still have a lasting effect on our modern lives. Still present divisions among the many Catholics and Protestants, especially in Ireland, as well as the continuing conflict between Muslims and Jews in the Middle East, are among others the best indicator about such a perception.

Still, on other hand it should be also noted that religious traditions that are used to legitimize violence and war, has also been sources of inspiration for establishing peace and resolving conflicts over the centuries. Actually, religious actors and faith-based organizations (e.g. Quakers, Mennonites, Interfaith Mediation Center in Nigeria among others) are becoming more involved in conflict resolution, mediation and interfaith dialogues to transform the conflictual relations between parties.

2. Bringing religious conflicts into international agenda

In general, there are two main recognized ways in which conflicts become an international issue according to conflict theory. First one, refers to the situations when local or internal (religious) conflict extends beyond the borders of the state in which it takes place, while the second one is related to the situations in which different international actors get involved themselves in a concrete internal (religious) conflict, regardless of their motive for doing so (whether in support of one of parties, or as

mediators between conflicting parties). In the context of the indicated ways, a multitude of different approaches and aspects for the internationalization of internal (religious) conflicts have been developed.

Gurr, describes two ways in which conflicts can cross border, both of which also apply to religious conflicts (Gurr, 1993). The first one is related to the situation when groups with specific ethnic affinities reside in states bordering the one in which a conflict is taking place. These groups, whether they are minorities or majorities within the state in which they live are often influenced by the conflict by supporting the rebelling minority or can themselves be inspired to rebel. Such situations were particularly characteristic of the period after the Cold War and the escalation of ethno-nationalist conflicts. The second way in which conflicts cross borders is diffusion. This is the process where a rebellion in one place can inspire similar groups living elsewhere to do the same. Perhaps the most concrete example of such situation are the events of the so-called Arab Spring.

Historically, one of the most obvious approach in internationalization of the religious conflicts arises from the desire about establishing control over holy sites. Examples of such conflicts throughout history (especially over the control of Jerusalem), show us that such conflicts are by definition an international issue. This is because the religions that consider a site holy almost always have members who live outside of the state in which the holy site is located. Thus, disputes over ownership and control of holy sites can easily become international ones. As mentioned above, the most classic example of this phenomenon is the city of Jerusalem which contains sites holy to three major religions which combined have billions of members. At different points in history Jews, Muslims, and Christians have conquered the city in what they considered to be a holy war and the dispute between these three religions, and often denominations within these religions, over control of holy sites there continues until today. Jews claim Jerusalem as their eternal capital and especially the Temple Mount that is currently occupied by the Al-Aqsa Mosque and it is believed that it is the location from which Mohamed rose to heaven and received instructions regarding the Muslim prayers. Finally, many of the events in the Christian Bible occurred in Jerusalem (Fox & Sandler, 2004). In the case of Jerusalem, the religious significance of the city has also considerable political significance in that it has become tied up in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Both Israeli and Palestinian leaders have claimed Jerusalem as their eternal capital, a phrasing that intentionally invokes the religious significance of the city. Given all of this it is not surprising that the status of the city of Jerusalem has received considerable international attention by the media, governments, international organizations, advocacy groups, and religious groups

Another significant aspect for the internationalization of religious conflicts (equally applicable to conflicts over the control of holy places, but also to religious conflicts for other reasons) is related to the relationship of the kinship groups. Actually, in this regard, the main religious influence, arises as a result of religion understanding as a

source of identity and in this sense theory and practice show that members of the same identity group (regardless of their place of residence) often manifest a strong motivating potential for action, whenever the conflict is due to identity issues. This is because such situations may cause them to feel responsible for their co-religionists, wherever they may live. Actually, on one side, this explains why the kin groups, especially those who living across the border and control their states government, influence the internationalization of domestic (religious) conflicts. For example, the rebellion by Muslims in the Kashmiri province of India has contributed to sporadic military conflict between neighboring Pakistan, which is religiously and ethnically similar to the population in the province (Fox & Sandler, 2004). On other side, this also explains why states tend to intervene most often on behalf of groups religiously similar to them, or moreover, why states of similar religions are less likely to go to war with each other (Henderson, 1998).

Refugee issue is also significant aspect through which it can be analyzed the internationalization of the religious conflicts. Namely, it is no doubt that the violent (religious) conflicts tend to create refugees. Dealing with these refugees is by definition an international problem. While this most affects states bordering the state in which the conflict takes place, refugees from conflicts often migrate thousands of miles looking for safe harbor. Syria remains the world's largest refugee crisis today. More than 6.8 million Syrians have been forced to flee their country since 2011 and another 6.9 million people remain internally displaced (UNHCR, 2022). On other side, more than 6 million Afghans have been driven out of their homes or their country by conflict and violence (UNHCR, 2022). Such an examples have initiated increased interest and attention of the International community about creating a common response to the refugee issue from the Middle East in the last 10 years. On the one hand, the problem of the refugee issue arises from the possibility that refugees (from the different religions that are in conflict) will carry the conflict with them to the new countries to which they migrate, while on other hand, additional problem stems from the challenges regarding their integration and inclusion in new countries. In this sense, tensions and violence involving people from minority groups of Muslim culture are perhaps the greatest source of societal tensions and violent conflicts in contemporary Europe today.

Religious fundamentalism is perhaps the most current aspect of bringing religion into international relations in the past three decades. Actually, religious fundamentalism is becoming an increasingly important factor in both domestic and international politics in most parts of the world (Fox & Sandler, 2004). In this regard it is no doubt that religiously motivated terrorism has an increasingly global agenda. In fact, precisely as a response to the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty was activated for the first time and the Coalition to Fight Terrorism was established. The indicated attacks confirmed the seriousness of the religious fundamentalism as a security threat and have initi-

ated greater attention to the states (primarily from the so-called Western world) to deal with it, as religious human rights, has become a global issue.

Conclusion

With all this in mind, there is no doubt that throughout history and even today, religion has a significant impact on the security and international agenda. The main reason for that, as the analysis in the paper shows, primarily stems from the power of its identity aspects to encourage and mobilize believers whenever necessary, i.e. whenever the issue of its endangerment is raised. In this regard, it can be noted that religious conflicts are mainly caused by intolerance against another's religious beliefs or practices, although the possibility of disagreement and conflict is also open between parties of the same religion.

However, when such conflicts do arise, they are usually followed by the use of the religious beliefs, symbols and myths, to justify violence and dehumanization of the opponents. A particularly serious challenge in this context are situations in which religious beliefs, symbols and myths are misused by political elites and leaders of the conflicting parties. Actually, if the religious leaders and institutions do not react to such abuse, then the possibility opens for the religious truth to become political, thus losing the legitimacy of the religious subjects on the one hand, and on the other hand, the possibilities for resolving the conflict become directly determined by the political leaders. Therefore, conflict resolution efforts in this regard, should identify negative myths that have provided the basis for violence as well as the way in which these myths have been manipulated.

As mentioned above, religious conflicts are in general intrastate conflicts involving people from different religious and/or cultural traditions that live close to each other, or have been put together within artificial state boundaries. Actually, most of the wars and conflicts today are intra-state affairs, and they are deep rooted. As such they have a long history of mistrust and conflict, which feeds negative enemy images and stereotypes. This is also one of the most significant aspect of the religious conflict, which among other things, is confirmed by the long-decades conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Moreover, this means that in the aftermath of conflict, parties will continue to live close to each other either as neighbors, or as fellow citizens. Therefore, merely resolving the conflict, that is identifying and addressing the underlying reason of the conflict such as needs deprivation, is not enough. There is also a need to reconcile parties by transforming negative images into positive ones and establishing structures to address conflict before it escalates into violence.

As presented in paper, there are various ways and reasons why local or internal religious conflicts becomes an international issue. From a historical point of view,

the most common reason for such conflicts is the tendency for having control over the holy places, above all especially having control over the city of Jerusalem. Even today, the religious significance of the city does not decrease, which is especially visible from the aspect of Palestinian-Israeli conflict. As mentioned above, both Israeli and Palestinian leaders have claimed Jerusalem as their eternal capital, a phrasing that intentionally invokes the religious significance of the city.

The kinship groups relationship is also significant aspect in internationalization of internal religious conflict. Actually, the groups involved in the conflict often have national, religious, or ethnic ties with groups living in other states. According to the paper analysis, kin groups, especially those who live across the border of the state in which conflict takes place and moreover if control their states government, can have significant influence on the internationalization of domestic (religious) conflicts. In this regard, it can be also concluded that the successes of groups on one side of the world can often inspire similar groups on the other to rebel.

Having in mind that conflicts often results in international refugee flows, it can be also concluded that the refugee issue becomes a significant aspect of the internationalization of local or internal religious conflicts. In fact, such issue has a two-dimensional meaning in this aspect. On the one hand, there is the possibility that refugees (from different religions) bring with them the religious conflict in the countries they migrate to, while on the other hand there are challenges related to their non-integration and non-inclusiveness in the new countries.

Despite the mentioned aspects, religious fundamentalism is perhaps the most current and challenging aspect of bringing religion into international relations today. It is because transnational religious phenomena tend to have origins outside of traditional state policy-making circles. Therefore, fundamentalism and terrorism are among the greatest challenges to a number of individual states and the international system that is largely based on the relations between sovereign states (Fox & Sandler, 2004).

By the end, it must be noted that such an internationalization of local or internal conflicts is not unique to religious conflicts. Still, the experience so far shows that religion has had a significant impact on the dynamics of domestic conflicts and on their internationalization as well.

References

- Brekke, T. (2012). *Fundamentalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Гоцевски, Т., Ортаковски, В., Георгиева, Л. (1999) Разрешување и трансформација на конфликтите (Conflict resolution and transformation). Куманово: Македонска ризница.
- Gurr, T.R. (1993). *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.

- Henderson, E. A. (1998). The Democratic Peace through the Lens of Culture, 1820-1989. *International Studies Quarterly*, 42 (3), 461-484.
- Kadayfci-Orellana, S. (2009). *Ethno-Religious Conflicts: Exploring the Role of Religion in Conflict Resolution*. The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Matevski, Z. (2021). Religious Extremism as One of the Roles of Religion in Europe. In: Matevski, Z. (Eds.), *The role of Religion in Peace and Conflict* (pp. 1-11). Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Fox, J. & Sandler, S. (2004). *Bringing Religion into International Relations*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.