Understanding Conflicts with Religious Dimensions in their Transnational Interrelations

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Abstract

Jihadist terror attacks in Europe, religious sectarianism in Syria, Iraq, regional power politics of Saudi Arabia and Iran, tensions between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, Ethiopia and Bosnia: While those phenomena emerge within their own distinct social, political, economic, and cultural context, they also interrelate with another to varying degrees. Accordingly, local socio-political issues intersect with religion and foster dynamics that transcend into the national, regional and international realm, where they intersect anew with further dynamics. With social processes increasingly transcending the geographical and political boundaries in most regions of the world, conflict dynamics do not remain unaffected. A growing transnational interplay seems to concern conflicts with religious dimensions in particular. After all, most religions claim universal truths. This paper sketches a theoretic approach to describe a conflict with religious dimensions and the transnational dynamics that underlie it. In order to do so, it introduces a concept of religious practice which allows to both grasp the subjective significance of religion for the believer and to describe transnational processes.

Keywords: religion in IR; religious violence; religious conflicts; religious peacebuilding; transnational

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Maximilian Lakitsch

The latest terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, Berlin, and London in the name of religion represent an appalling manifestation of the violent potential of religion. They were carried out by Europeans with the intention to foster insecurity among European societies, spark Christian resentments, and fuel Islamophobic narratives. However, having been coordinated and financially as well as ideologically supported by the Islamic State militia, these incidents are also emblematic of deeper and protracted regional and national conflicts within the Middle East. They concern various political, social, and religious injustices in Iraq and Syria, which foster sectarianism between Sunnites, Shiites, and Christians and attract religious-jihadist visionaries. (Stern and Berger 2015, 1-51) Lebanon is another piece of this complex puzzle since it does not only harbor hundreds of thousands of refugees from those countries, but also because its Hezbollah militia serves as crucial backbone of the Syrian Alawi-dominated regime. In addition, political affiliations and dynamics in Lebanon are tied to its relations with the Syrian Ba'ath government and supported by Iran on the one side and Saudi-Arabia on the other, both of which seek to influence regional political dynamics along religious affiliations according to their own interests. (ICG 2013; Bahout 2017)

While these dynamics mainly concern the Middle East, sectarian Salafist and jihadist narratives also became relevant in other regions like Sub-Sahara Africa and the Balkans. In these instances, national issues of discrimination, political representation, and power between ethnic groups as well as between Christian and Muslim parts of society procured fertile grounds for those discourses. The resulting societal tensions in Ghana, Mali, Ethiopia, but also Bosnia created the foundations on which the external dynamics from the Middle East could take effect and exert its influence on the local social fabric. Thus, although Salafism and jihadism are Middle Eastern phenomena with respective historical, socio-political and religious roots, they nevertheless converged and continue to do so with dynamics beyond its borders. In other words, the resulting conflicts are both of external and internal origin. (Çancı and Odukoya 2016) Accordingly, various local conflict factors from different national contexts together constitute a complex web of interrelations that often spans a whole region and also

transcends it. As a result, crucial drivers and sources of local conflicts are dispersed transnationally. Thus, for a better understanding of a distinct setting of a local conflict with religious dimensions, it is necessary to grasp the wider transnational context of involved factors.

With social processes increasingly transcending the geographical and political boundaries in most regions of the world, conflict dynamics do not remain unaffected. These changes seem to influence conflicts with religious dimensions in particular. After all, most religions claim universal truths. Additionally, the affiliation to religious identities is not bound to national borders. It is thus not surprising that religion in its dimensions such as doctrine, identity, ritual or spirituality serves as substantial a conflict factor that drives the resulting conflict dynamics beyond political and geographic borders. (Frazer and Friedli 2015)

Nevertheless, in studying conflicts with religious dimensions, analyses are often too much focused on the national contexts. Accordingly, various studies have been undertaken on religious nationalism¹ and ethno-religious conflicts². However, this emphasis on the national makes it difficult to adequately take into account crucial conflict factors beyond state borders. Accordingly, while many of those studies do consider the influence of regional powers as an external influence on national dynamics, they often do so at the expense of domestic influences or ramifications from neighboring states.³ Above all, this affects works on religious fundamentalism, in particular research on Islamic religious fundamentalism and its increasing entanglement with the ethno-religious dimension.⁴ Given the inextricable interlinkages of processes and actors across various states and regions on the state as well as sub-state level, an adequate focus to study conflict dynamics involving religion has to take into account a broad geographic spectrum stretching from the local to at least the regional and eventually the global.

The paper outlines an attempt on how to analyze local conflicts including the transnational web of interrelations that also underlies and affects their dynamics. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to a better understanding of local intersections of religion and conflict. In a first

¹ See e.g. Brubaker (2012), Juergensmeyer (2010), Hibbard (2015), or Nasr (2001).

² See e.g. Sells (1996), Marty and Appleby (1997). However, most studies on this topic are concerned with ethnic conflicts in general and treat religion as one identity among others. See e.g. John Burton (1998) and Edward Azar (1990).

³ While e.g. Phillips (2015) scrutinizes the role of Iran and the Gulf states for sectarianism in Syria, Pierret (2013) suggests that the opposite holds true. Accordingly, the Syrian war reconfigured regional alliances.

⁴ See e.g. Kepel (2006), Nasr (2001; 2007), Abdo (2013), or Rosiny and Richter (2016).

step, the paper will evaluate the literature on religion in International Relations including Transnational Relations. Based on this account, it proposes an epistemologically and ontologically comprehensive approach towards the intersection of religion and conflict, which allows to both grasp the subjective significance of religion for the believer and to describe transnational processes. Finally, the paper introduces a corresponding concept of religious practice. It facilitates the analysis of a certain conflict and the detection of its transnational interrelations.

1 Studies on Religion in International Relations

Although many religions are genuinely inclined to transcend national borders due to their universal message, International Relations has been rather reluctant to reflect religion in its international relevance since its establishment as an academic discipline in the 1920s. This reluctance might relate to the notion of the international state system as a secular realm following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Additionally, the bipolar system of balance in the Cold War might have increased the attention to material capabilities at the expense of religion and other identity factors. Thus, mainstream IR theories used to have a tendency to disregard religion as a relevant factor. (Sandal and James 2010, 3-5) However, the 9/11 terror attacks dramatically demonstrated the need to include religion with theoretical significance in International Relations studies.

Within International Relations, Transnational Studies have established themselves more and more as a distinct field of research through its emphasis on internationally relevant sub-state actors and processes at the expense of the monolithic state. They assume that social processes increasingly transcend political and geographic borders and constitute transnational social spaces. This analytical perspective allowed for the recognition of the growing international importance of religion already in the 1990s and thus a growing interest in transnational religious movements or transnational international actors. (Pries 2008; Checkel 2013)

Since the early 2000s, a considerable amount of literature on religion in IR has been published. This research can be divided into two categories regarding their understanding of religion. One category of studies seeks to take religion seriously as a genuine phenomenon with a distinct significance for the believers. The other category comprises works which consider religion an important factor of everyday-life, yet treat it as one factor among others that can be exhaustively described as a phenomenon of empirical reality. This distinction

corresponds to a great extent with the authors' epistemological choices. Accordingly, the first category is inclined towards anti-positivism, while the second category leans towards positivist approaches.

Comprehensive studies that fall into the second category are among others Fox (2001), Fox and Sandler (2004), Fox (2009), Fox and Sandal (2010), Sandal and James (2010), and Sandal and Fox (2013). They all describe how religion influences crucial elements of politics, such as decision-making, political legitimacy, border transcending issues, and religious terrorism. On this foundation, they elaborate on how religion can be integrated into the schools of IR. Similarly, Jeff Haynes (2001) emphasizes the relevance of religion in IR by describing the transnational relevance of religious organizations. A few of the most wide-ranging studies on the involvement of religion in conflict with a regional and international dimension involve Matthias Basedau. (Basedau and Schaefer-Kehnert 2019; Basedau et al. 2016) Yet, while especially Basedau emphasizes the need for a comprehensive framework which allows to take into account the many non-religious factors that a distinct dimension of religion interacts with, it remains within the realm of positivism and is not able to grasp the genuine character of religion. After all, any social dynamics involving religion derive from the individual relationship with the sacred (Riesebrodt 2010, 2-5; Appleby 2000). In the end, religion remains a factor among others. Other authors such as Monica Duffy Toft (2011) and Mona Sheikh (2010) explicitly distance themselves from authors who do not take religion seriously in its exceptionality, yet fail to do so themselves because of their positivist approach. Essentially, neglecting the relevance of the subjective dimension of the believer who as a conflict actor is driven by the dedication to the sacred will not allow to convincingly describe how religion is different from other factors and thus crucial to understanding conflict dynamics involving religion.

In contrast, literature that is inclined towards a non-positivist approach tends to emphasize the individual and irreducible significance of religion for the believer. That concerns studies that focus on religious identity and transnational communities like Peter Mandaville (2001), Fiona Adamson (2013) or Oula Kadhum (2018) to a lesser extent than research that considers individual belief an important factor. The latter category comprises literature such as Philpott (2000), Shah and Philpott (2011), Elisabeth Hurd (2011) or Scott Thomas (2003 and 2005). They describe how religion has always been a crucial driver in international affairs despite dominating narratives of secularism. As religion does not exhaustively manifest itself in

empirical reality, it can drive processes that are hidden underneath obvious dynamics – until they break through the surface of visibility and return to the stage of international affairs. Mark Juergensmeyer's (2003) study on religious violence is one of the most comprehensive attempts to describe global dynamics of religiously driven political activism as being based on individual belief. He describes religion as a symbolic need that benefits from the secular state's inability to provide symbolical means of integrating a fragmented society. Nevertheless, the more those approaches take seriously the subjective significance of religion for the believer, the more difficult it becomes for them to comprehend the underlying social processes and to transnationally and internationally relate the respective conflict dynamics.

In essence, approaches that are inclined towards a positivist conception of religion allow for the inclusion of various factors and processes and thus to grasp their complex transnational and international entanglements with social dynamics. However, they fail to properly describe religion in its substantial relevance, since they do not take into account the subjective dimension. Anti-positivism on the other hand emphasizes religion's significance for the actor, yet eclipses the complexity of respective processes that translates the sacred into complex and transnational and international conflict dynamics. Ron Hassner (2010, 37-56) presents a similar account of the existing literature about the intersection of religion, politics, and international relations. In addition, he distinguishes the existing research along a further dichotomy between locally focused works on the one side, and those that focus on the international realm. According to Hassner, a comprehensive endeavor towards religion, conflict, and IR should integrate the approaches of both spectra. His *thick religion*⁵ approach proposes the investigation of a particular political phenomenon from the micro perspective to its international dimensions and at the same time to relate it to the involved religious rituals, symbols, institutional arrangements, and theological discourses. While his ideas, beyond doubt, represent the most comprehensive approach towards understanding the dynamics of religion in International Relations, he does not adequately integrate the approaches on the epistemological spectrum towards positivism. This leaves even Hassner's approach open to a few questions regarding the dynamics and processes that underlie the complex entanglements of the intersection of religion, politics, and the transnational and international. Therefore, it remains unclear in what ways belief diffuses into international dynamics.

⁵ Analogue to Clifford Geertz's thick description. (Geertz 1973)

Consequently, in order to be able to comprehend transnational conflict dynamics involving religion properly, a respective concept of religion needs to grasp both the significance of religion for the believer and the underlying social processes. Emmanuel Adler introduces constructivism as a way to synthesize diverging theories in International Relations. Accordingly, it seizes the middle ground between realist and idealist approaches in ontological terms, and positivist and interpretivist approaches in epistemological terms. Constructivism in Adler's interpretation eventually draws together those perspectives and claims that although human reality is mediated through knowledge, it nonetheless exists beyond the subject and the discourse due to its intersubjective character. In other words, intersubjective knowledge *is* material reality. As such, it is given to the subject and can thus be reflected in its actions. While intersubjective knowledge constitutes ontological reality, it is nevertheless subject to intentional but also unintentional change through human action – the material world is permanently under construction. As a consequence, material conditions and knowledge alike constitute human reality. (Adler 1997, 319-337) Emanuel Adler introduces a corresponding approach to practice theory, which considers material, ideational, and subjective aspects and thus allows to both take into account the subjective dimension of the believer and to relate it to complex processes which allow to describe transnational and international conflict dynamics.

2 Transnational Politicized Religious Practices

The concept of practice goes back to theorists such as Karl Marx and Ludwig Wittgenstein in philosophy, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Anthony Giddens (1984), among others, in social theory. In the early 2000s, it was introduced into a broader debate in Political Studies through the publication of an edited volume by Theodore R. Schatzki et al. (2001). Finally, Emmanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (2011) facilitated its adoption into International Relations. Given its long history in various fields of study, there are many understandings of Practice Theory. Schatzki et al. seek to give an overarching definition by describing “practices as embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding.” (2001, 11)

Based on his depiction of constructivism, Emmanuel Adler together with Vincent Pouliot describe Practice Theory as an ontological synthesis of realist and idealist dichotomies on the one hand, and of rigid agent and structure oppositions on the other hand. They elevate this assumption onto the transnational dimension and describe that “world politics can be

understood as structured by practices, which give meaning to international action, make possible strategic interaction, and are reproduced, changed, and reinforced by international action and interaction.” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 3-5).

In order to shed more light on their understanding of the term practice, Adler and Pouliot differentiate between behavior, action, and practice. While behavior refers to the purely material definition of deed, the concept of action includes a meaningful layer: Actions are deeds bearing meaning. Accordingly, running after someone is behavior, chasing someone is an action. Practices finally are patterned actions that are embedded in specific contexts and translate into certain kinds of action. Thus, various cohering actions constitute a distinct class of actions which represents a certain practice. (Ibid., 6).

Adler and Pouliot describe five characteristics that further clarify their understanding of practice. First, practices are performances that represent a process of doing something. They do not exist beyond the unfolding process itself and thus instantiate beliefs, discourses or institutions. Second, practices are patterned meaningful behaviors – iteration is an important characteristic. Third, competence is a fundamental element that underlies the structured character of practices. In other words, competence elevates activities to practices and thus contributes to its persistence over time and space. Eventually, practices are recognized by a certain group of people as more or less competent, imbuing them with a certain socially normative character. Fourth, practices both rely and exemplify a certain background knowledge. Thus, practices embody intersubjective understanding. Finally, as already remarked, practices weave together the material and the discursive dimensions. Although practices are materially embodied, language provides the complementary layer in order to make sense of them. At the same time, language is itself a certain doing and can also be conceptualized as practice. (Ibid., 7-10)

In essence, practices embody the material and ideational foundations that underlie them. While the elements of iteration and competence facilitate their persistence in time and space, practices are also subject to change. This notion relates to their ontological foundation of agent and structure that constitute themselves in and through every action – material and ideational realities are constantly under construction and so are the practices that embody and reify them. (Adler 1997, 319-337)

Martin Riesebrodt describes a Practice Theory concept of religion that builds on the individual significance of religion and allows relating it to a certain socio-political context. He

defines religion as practices based on the belief in superhuman powers. Those powers refer to the ability to control what is beyond human control. (Riesebrodt 2010, 2-20) Emphasizing the fundamental character of the subjective perspective, religious practices only relate to those practices that meet the believers' self-conception of religion. Therefore, religious practices refer to a certain complex of practices which are premised on the existence of invisible superhuman powers. Those powers are believed to have influence and control over the natural and social life. Hence, religious powers are those that seek access to and control over natural and social life along culturally influenced means. In essence, religious practices provide meaning through their references to superhuman powers, as embedded in a distinct web of meaning that relates to a certain knowledge base. (Riesebrodt 2010, 71-75)

In other words, religious practices seek to control what is beyond human control. That also involves the political realm. According to Riesebrodt, experiences of crisis situations like e.g. inequality, poverty, illness, and death can foster the interpretation of political processes along religious narratives of salvation. Thus, situations of crisis mark exceptional local and temporal spaces where religion and politics intersect. Yet, while Riesebrodt claims that religion needs to undergo a process of politicization in order to become relevant as a conflict factor, he nevertheless describes it as genuinely inclined to do so in any cultural setting: religion is a "cultural system of crisis prevention and management" (Riesebrodt 2013, 14). (Riesebrodt 1996, 247-275)

Religion relates to various phenomena of social reality like identity, teachings, rituals, or spirituality. Conflict-driving and conflict-appeasing dynamics can occur in all those dimensions. (Frazer and Friedli 2015) However, while not all of those conflicts might be politically relevant, all politicized religious practices are of relevance for conflicts, in one way or another. Thus, practices of concern are religious practices which have been politicized due to situations of crisis and secondly, tied to religious leaders whose practices are deemed as competent interpretations of superhuman powers. This competence, if it is invoked in certain practices, implies the premise on the existence of superhuman powers. Thirdly, those interpretations concern the political realm through their reference to matters of the political community, whether it concerns identity groups within the community, political actors and entities, or political issues. Fourthly, the politicized religious practice may emerge as conflict-driving or appeasing depending on whether those matters foster incompatibilities within a certain political community or diminish them. Those practices are of more or less conflict relevance

depending on the degree that people with a certain religious denomination identify with a distinct practice's understanding.⁶

Understanding the relationship between conflict and religion as a result of politicized religious practices prepares the path to the transnational and international in a comprehensive way. After all, it both ties religion to the immediate significance for the individual and allows to relate it to complex social, political or economic processes which transcend the individual and local perspective.

3 Transnational Relations of Politicized Religious Practice

In essence, conceptualizing conflicts involving religion as politicized religious practices allows for describing three types of transnational relationships. First, since practices are not bound by political and geographical boundaries, they might transcend the contexts where they emerged and to diffuse into other local contexts that happen to be beyond their national origin. Accordingly, two conflicts in two countries might be transnationally related due to their belonging to the same politicized religious practice. That means that the understanding of politicized religious practice coheres in both national contexts as well as the substantial share of the practice's ideational and material foundations. Still, those foundations might slightly differ since they each relate to a distinct national setting that is more or less also influenced by a distinct local and national political, social, economic or cultural context. (Adler 2005, 3-26)

Additionally, practices that are of relevance in one particular setting might be influenced by forces from another external context. That concerns, second, the foundation of a certain practice and is thus of conditional influence. A practice's foundations might be transnationally influenced already by a small share of external contributions to their ideational and material resources. Those comprise material resources like e.g. economic or military means, or ideational resources, such as various non-religious and religious narratives like religious scriptures, teachings, beliefs, myths, stereotypes or convictions. They can all be provided externally, either intentionally, or by accident. Also events and incidents can become part of a practice's foundations, both material and ideational depending on the nature of the repercussions. (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 18-20)

⁶ Group cohesion is never complete, as Rogers Brubaker cautions. (Brubaker 2002, p. 163-166)

Finally, practices can be of causal influence for another one. Causal chains of politicized religious practices from a distinct setting to practices in a transnational context are the third type of transnational relationships under scrutiny. This causal interplay can have different outcomes: no effect, making other practices possible, reinforcing and diminishing each other. While in the case of conditional influence on practices, agency might be of less relevance, it is crucial for the interplay of practices. After all, practices are tied to agents who are regarded as competent in performing them. (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 18-20)

4 Analyzing Local Conflicts with Religious Dimensions and their Transnational Interrelations

Following practice theory, the object of analysis can be anything that exemplifies practice. However, in many cases, written or spoken statements are the main object under scrutiny. While that provides for substantial and comprehensive data, the analysis of statements requires careful interpretation. After all, the articulated meaning differs ontologically from its implicit foundation. As Christian Bueger remarks, “[a]lthough praxiography claims that explicit articulated meaning is only of secondary relevance, in doing praxiography, the researcher de facto often needs to primarily draw on this data.” (Bueger 2014, 389) Still, the exclusive reliance on nothing but primary data distinguishes the practice theorist from the discourse analyst. (Ibid.) A research process could focus on official statements by religious leaders. After all, practices are tied to agents who are regarded as competent in performing them. (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 18-20)

In order to better understand local conflicts with religious dimensions by revealing transnational factors that are driving or appeasing them, this paper suggests two steps of analysis. First, local politicized religious practices will be investigated to reveal their relevance for either fostering or appeasing a certain conflict. On the one hand, this investigation concerns the respective understanding of practice which represents a certain political idea that is believed to be accessible to the divine – in other words, the layer of immediate and irreducible subjective relevance. Whether this idea fosters or diminishes social incompatibilities determines its potential for driving or appeasing a conflict. On the other hand, this analysis concerns the material foundation of the articulated understanding of practice, such as economic or military means, or ideational resources, such as various non-religious and religious narratives like religious scriptures, teachings, beliefs, myths, stereotypes or convictions. Scrutinizing both the articulated understanding of practice as well

as its foundation will indicate traces of references beyond the local: national or transnational ones. Those traces point to translocal and transnational external foundations as well as to further practices beyond the local which indicate the web of transnational relations. Those further practices will be analyzed as described above.

Second, an in-depth study will focus on the interplay between the described and scrutinized politicized religious practices. That concerns above all the causal interplay between them. In order to do so, the study will apply process tracing which has established itself among scholars as a suitable method to describe transnational mechanisms which produce a certain effect. (Checkel 2013, 9-15) It is best suited for this inquiry, first, due its ability to incorporate all sorts of different non-comparable material and ideational evidence as factors, and second, since it allows to trace an effect through a chain of various instances. (Gerring 2007, 172-185; George and Bennett 2005, 236-263) Accordingly, the investigation will trace the effects that the described politicized religious practices have or don't have on each other. Those findings will allow to describe the local conflict with religious dimensions and its conditional and causal transnational links along the above introduced three types of transnational relationships.

Scrutinizing local conflicts with religious dimensions and their interrelations could benefit from focusing on times of crisis for two reason. First, as already introduced, crises represent exceptional moments of politicization of religion and thus serve as a viable temporal demarcation to study the intersection of religion and conflict. Second, moments of crisis are of great relevance for analyzing practices in general. After all, they represent situations in which common routines fail and call for a reflection of old practices and the implementation of new ones. Thus, they mark specific occasions in which implicit knowledge becomes explicitly articulated: Practitioners debate about old practices and their ability to adapt to the new situation, adjustments have to be made or new practices have to be introduced. Consequently, studying practices in those moments of crisis reveals old practices as well as new practices (Bueger 2014, 395-397)

Certainly, a respective research endeavor will not be able to describe a complete network of all transnational relations which underlie a certain conflict, as well as it will never be able to exhaustively describe the sources of a local conflict, whether it involves religion or not. Nevertheless, this paper seeks to contribute to widening the geographic focus of analysis and at the same time not ignore the genuine character of religion.

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