Mapping religious conflicts in contemporary world: causes, trends and solutions

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Abstract:

With regret, we note that in the 21st century the culture of peace is a desirable reality. Desirable because today's global engagements, which have accumulated energies of common intent, show us that they fail to stabilize certain poles of conflict in the harmony of peace. Quite simply, religious conflict, whatever the reasons or motives behind it, is present in the world. This study provides an overview of the current situation of religious conflicts and terrorist attacks in the world based on data from Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) *and the* European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT)*, with an indication of the particular elements involved in the process of generating, carrying out and possibly resolving them. Tangentially, although necessary for such a study, we will attempt an answer to the question: is interreligious dialogue a concrete solution to minimize the religious conflicts?*

Keywords:

religious conflict, interreligious dialogue, identity, terrorism

Introduction

The world of the 21st century is not what we thought, in anticipation, of it 20 years ago: a world in which people are happy, a world in which relations between States are based on a construction of common

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interest and prosperity. Utopian perspectives have proved to be some of the most illusory ideas. In the first decades of the present century the world has felt the dramatic impact of armed conflicts in the Middle East (Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria), Africa, Asia, as well as terrorist attacks in the United States and Europe. All the more we feel today, in 2022, the tension of the conflict from Ukraine, which, paradoxically, involves two states with a declared Orthodox Christian majority. In addition to this cruel reality, the social drama has also been amplified by the Covid19 pandemic, which has substantially tested human solidarity.

That the world of 2022 is not one of stability, but one of challenges to human security, is confirmed by the data of *Alert 2022! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*, which analyses the conflict situation in 2021: 32 armed conflicts are reported (Africa - 15, representing 47%, Asia - 9, Middle East - 5, Europe - 2, Americas - 1); for the first time in a decade, high intensity armed conflicts accounted for more than half (53%) of all cases worldwide; the number of casualties in armed conflicts has increased; according to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data, there were 82.4 million forcibly displaced people worldwide at the end of 2020, more than double than 10 years ago; 98 socio-political crises were identified worldwide in 2021 (Alert 2022! 2022, 7). It can be seen that the reality is not what we want.

In order to solve a problem we need to identify its cause and its vectors of unfolding, as well as the elements that catalyze its materialization. But what we are particularly interested in this study is the religious conflict, not how many there are in the world today, but what is the trend in their unfolding. It is impossible to encompass the dimensions of conflict in these pages, and therefore we will limit our analysis to the religious conflict.

1. Religious conflict - conceptualization and particularities

At a general level, a conflict is "the result of opposing interests involving scarce resources, goal divergence and frustration" (Swanström & Weissmann 2005, 7). Conflict should not only be defined in terms of violence (behaviour) or hostility (attitudes), but also includes

incompatibility or "differences in position on the issue" (Swanström & Weissmann 2005, 7). According to Peter Wallensteen, a conflict consists of three components: *action*, *incompatibility* and *actors*, which makes conflict a social situation in which at least two actors (parties) strive to acquire at the same time an available set of rare resources (Wallensteen 2002, 17) or objectives. Consequently, the conflict defines a confrontation between one or more parties, who aspire to incompatible or competing goals.

If we apply these definitional equations to religious conflicts, we understand much better what their particularities are. Take, for example, Peter Wallensteen's definition. In a religious conflict, the *actors* are believers who have a strong religious affiliation, an affiliation that specifies their identity in all its complexity. The elements that enter into the structure of religious identity are creed, cult, group affiliation. These three factors shape and define the religious identity of the actor involved in the religious conflict. *Incompatibility* in a religious conflict comes down to differences, some radical, in doctrine between the actors involved in the conflict. For example, let us hypothetically consider a religious conflict between Christians and Muslims. Incompatibility between them essentially boils down to the different ways of understanding their own teaching, worship and identification with members of the same community. A Muslim will never accept that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Logos, because he has a radical theological understanding of Allah, just as no Christian will accept that Jesus is a prophet and the supreme prophet is Mohammed. *Action*, which is the result of contradiction or incompatibility, can be manifest, i.e. visibly articulated in armed conflict, or non-manifest, i.e. situated at the discursive level of differences of opinions.

F.V. Anthony, C. Hermans, and C.J.A. Sterkens note four types of causes of religious conflict: (a) socio-economic, (b) political, (c) ethno-cultural and (d) religious. In their view, "violent actions are the means of (re)defining religious identity and (re)claiming the authority of one's own religion" (Anthony, Hermans and Sterkens 2014, 170). Socio-economic causes can arise when a majority group has social economic development

and a good standard of living, which would lead to an attitude of intolerance on the part of a minority group that is outclassed in terms of economic development. And not infrequently, discrepancies in economic level between different groups create social frustration, which would lead those in the group with a poor standard of living to act for changing socio-economic conditions. The political causes of conflict between religious groups are varied: discrimination against minorities through the denial of legal rights by the State, the junction of political and religious influences in profiling ideologies with rights-claiming, radical nationalist claims. The ethno-cultural causes of interreligious conflicts are in direct congruence with the political ones, since in many situations religion functions as "a vehicle for building ethnic identity or as a support for nationalism", leading to attitudes of superiority. It can be also mention the oppositional attitude of a religious group towards globalization, secular and liberal Western politics, that would infringe on the basic moral principles of the religious community concerned. Religious causes of conflicts between religions include differences between teachings, ideologized and exclusivist interpretation of certain norms in sacred texts.

In our opinion, the basic problem of a religious conflict is the *difference* of theologies, of perspectives on the truth, as a point that can generate the concrete action of a manifested conflict, but not necessarily involve it. So this difference does not define the conflict itself. Undoubtedly, the difference exists. You cannot exclude it. Christian theology is irreconcilable on certain doctrinal points with Islamic theology. And the difference is marked by identity, by my specific way of believing, why I believe, what I believe, how I believe, what I believe for. But the difference between particular ways of understanding truth can be a source of rethinking religious particularities in a constructive perspective. Diversity of religious, theological opinions can be accepted as such and can be valued in a human heritage as a challenge to expand the cultural and religious horizon from a linear to a layered perspective. After all, Christian theology can add to the understanding of this diversity by elaborating the idea of *unity in diversity*: each human being, as a person, has a uniqueness that makes him or her particular. The universe of my

uniqueness meets, in communion, another universe of uniqueness belonging to the *other*, which is also unique. My relationship with his otherness does not mean exclusion, but inclusion through respect, admiration, complementarity, congruence and tolerance, within the same framework of community as unity.

We can now better nuance the fact that religious conflict, when it exists, does not necessarily imply an available set of resources as a stake or as an aim, but the reality of differences between religious identities that opts for two possibilities in social expression: either they close themselves in an ideological/theological exclusivism, or they open themselves to the constructive relationship of accepting the *other* with the sum of his differences. *Exclusivism is a radicalization of difference*, a selfish appropriation of the claim to hold absolute truth. At the same time, we should point out that a religious conflict can also take place between two different identities, but within the same religious culture where there are variations of opinion and lack of congruence with the general policy of the group or community.

It should be noted that *identity* is a social construct, fluid in the global rhythm of the world, whose genuine structure is shaped by conditional factors, especially those of the group or community to which it belongs. These factors (social, religious, economic, cultural) impacts an individual's social behavior. In this regard, K.B. Harpviken and H.E. Røislien note that religion has a particular tendency to form strong exclusive identities that divide people into *us* and *them*, making religious identities prone to conflict:

> Religious belief systems have a particular identity-forming potential. Religion is not just individual; it is also social, offering each believer a sense of belonging to a community of fellow believers. With its reference to a transcendent source of truth and codification of shared norms, religion serves as a compass for the individual and the religious community alike, locating all believers within an extended ontological setting. An identity with a religious source may, therefore, be exceptionally robust: religion tells you where you belong and where to proceed (Harpviken and Røislien 2008, 354).

This statement, of course, does not confirm the reality of the myth that religion is a source of conflict and violence. In this regard, it is

interesting to follow William T. Cavanaugh who refutes the so-called *myth of religious violence* that religion causes violence because it is (1) absolutist, (2) divisive, and (3) insufficiently rational (See: Cavanaugh 2009). Conflict is created on religious premises. And these premises are interpreted exclusively by religious leaders, who through their discourse and on the basis of religious affiliation to group values, can manipulate believers by radicalizing them to the extent of the most aggressive combatants and "vigilantes".

In conclusion, we believe that the stereotypical view that religious conflict is a conflict between religions must be corrected. Religious conflict is a conflict, generated by differences in radicalized theological perspectives, between identities (believers) belonging to different religious communities or groups; a conflict translated into the equation *us versus them*. It is not the religions themselves that generate conflict, some with dramatic effects of loss of life, but the radicalized and obtuse perspectives taken by some individuals, usually leaders, who give an exclusivist interpretation to their own truth, demonizing the outsiders.

2. Statistics on global religious conflicts and terrorist attacks in Europe

We believe it is necessary to present statistics on the current situation of religious conflicts in the world in general and terrorist acts in particular. For this reason we use two sources of information: *Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC)* (See: Svensson and Nilsson 2018, 1127-1148) and the *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT)* (See: Europol, 2011-2022). The data we present in this section provide us with sufficiently up-to-date informations on the barometer of the evolution of religious conflicts and terrorist acts in the world.

Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) stands out in that it includes relevant informations about religious conflict conducted on a religious cause (within the same religious tradition) and on religious conflict involving two different religious identities. The data cover the period from 1975-2015. According to *RELAC*, we can see the map of the number of conflicts on religious causes recorded by areas of the world (*figure* 1). It disproves that the Middle East would rank first in the extent of religious

conflicts, which in fact is the third most frequent region in terms of the distribution of conflicts conducted on a religious issue - 18%. What makes religious conflicts in the Middle East more prominent in our attention is due to the fact that they have been highly publicized. Returning to the chart of the distribution of religious conflicts, Africa ranks first with 40-41%, followed by Asia with 38%. In Europe the percentage is 3% and in the Americas 1% (Svensson and Nilsson 2018, 1136).
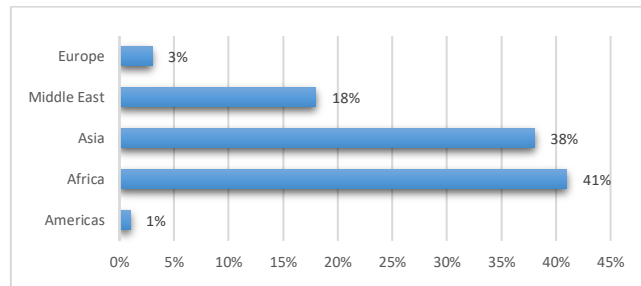

***Fig. 1* - Religious Issue conflicts by region, 1975-2015**

Figure 2 shows a dramatic increase in religiously motivated armed conflicts, from 3% in 1975 to 55% in 2015, most of them caused by the politico-religious initiatives of terrorist groups.
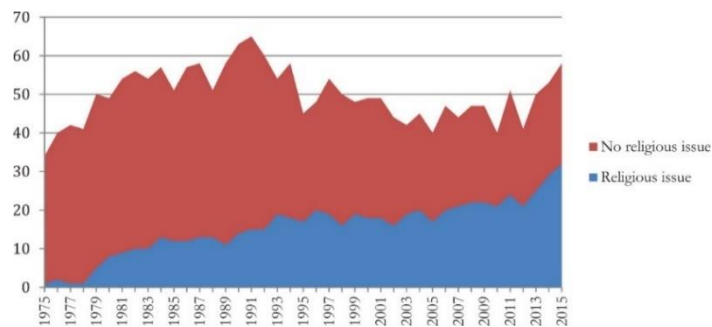
***Fig. 2* - Religious issue conflicts 1975–2015**
(Svensson and Nilsson 2018, 1136)

Figure 3 shows a slight upward trend in religious conflicts involving actors (identities) from different religions compared to religious conflicts within the same religion. The data presented invalidate the alarmist views of some scholars that the Western world is or will be in open conflict with the Eastern world, or in other words, Christianity with Islam. Personally, we believe that the thesis put forward by S. P. Huntington - the "clash of civilizations" (See: Huntington 2011) - is not feasible. If, perhaps, 30 to 40 years ago we were thinking along the opinions of S.P. Huntington regarding the cultural, social, economic and religious differences between East and West, we have a completely different perspective today. This is so if we consider, first and foremost, how the dynamics of globalization have reconfigured the structure of religious differences in their interaction. It can be felt in our society a certain familiarity with the *other* who belongs to another religious culture. Meeting a Muslim on the streets of London, for example, dressed in traditional clothes or putting his prayer mat on the pavement, is no longer striking. Interaction with religious diversity is an everyday routine, at least in the Western part of the world. Secondly, the effect of secularization and secularist policies in some Western states, coupled with the alleged contradiction between techno-scientific development and religious truth, is felt at the individual level. The consequence is that religious issues are no longer of interest, at least in their traditional form. Religious issues remain valid, but religion itself undergoes changes in form and substance, changes which de-absolutize the exclusive claims to hold the truth.
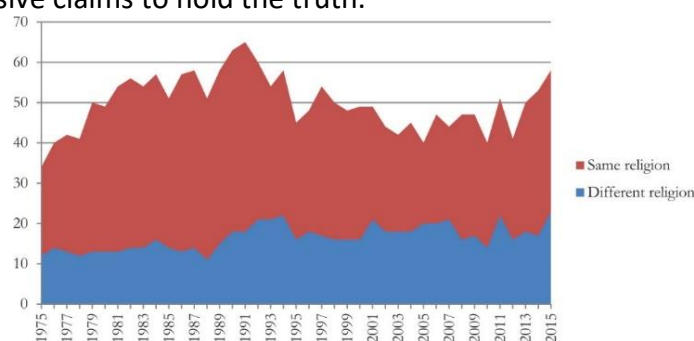

***Fig. 3* - Religious identity conflicts 1975–2015**
(Svensson and Nilsson 2018, 1138)

Regarding terrorist attacks, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT)* updates the graph of the number of conflicts in the European area between 2010-2021. Of the total number of terrorist attacks (including jihadist/religiously inspired, right-wing, left-wing and anarchist, ethno-nationalist and separatist, other and non-specified), it can be observed a fluctuation in the number of terrorist attacks with religious motives, most of which are jihadist. The highest share is between 2015-2011, as shown in the graph below (*figure* 4) (Data collected from *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT)*, 2011-2022; https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/terrorism-eu-facts-figures/ (accesed 12.09.2022)). The numbers point to the reality that religious violence, generated by paramilitary groups with exclusive religious claims, still occurs. All the more so as we see a number of people arrested for involvement in terrorist attacks (*figure* 5) (Data collected from *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT)*, 2011-2022; https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/terrorism-eu-facts-figures/ (accesed 12.09.2022). Each of these could cause a number of deaths, and all in the name of a radical interpretation of religious teachings.
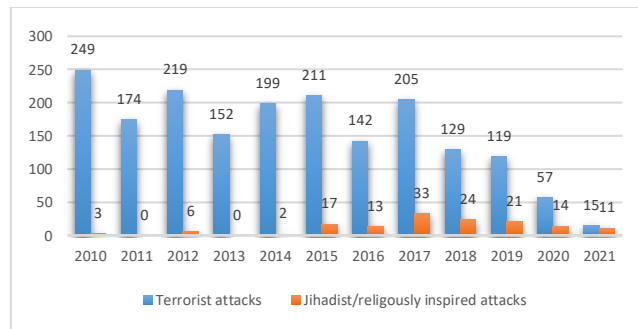
Fig. 4 - Number of religious terrorist attacks in Europe, 2011-2021
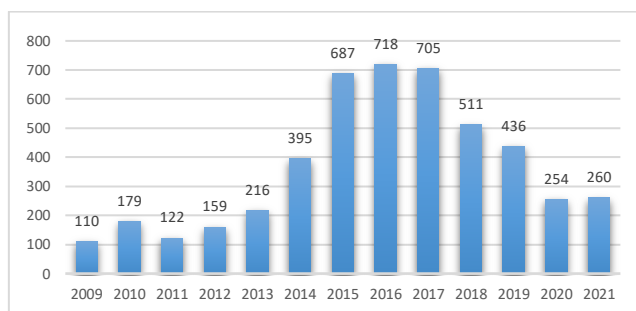
Fig. 5 - **Number of arrests for involvement in religious terrorist attacks in Europe, 2009-2021**

It remains to ask whether religious violence can really be stopped? And if so, how and by whom? It is generally considered that interreligious dialogue is an effective tool for reducing religious conflicts. In the next section we will critically argue this idea.

3. Interreligious dialogue: an effective tool to reduce religious conflicts?

Hundreds, thousands of pages have been written about the definition, dimensions and effectiveness of interreligious dialogue in contemporary society. At the theoretical level, if we stay at this level, things are in an ideal reality. But on a practical level, with application in today's society, the reality of the persistence of religious violence tends to invalidate the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue in the operationalization of conflicts.

Ever since the first official institutionalization of interreligious dialogue in 1893, when the World Parliament of Religions was established in Chicago, one of the cardinal coordinates of interreligious dialogue has been "ensuring permanent international peace" (Barrows 1893, 18). Throughout the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century were established centers, associations, state institutions and foundations, whose program is the promotion of interreligious dialogue. States and their liberal and democratic policies also joined in this engagement for

promoting peace through dialogue, establishing constitutional norms for the rights to religious freedom. Also, different programs have been established in universities around the world in order to raise awareness and implement, through education, religious tolerance. However... religious conflicts persist in forms of dramatic violence. For these reasons, a critical re-evaluation of the approach of the current interreligious dialogue is absolutely necessary.

First of all, at the level of representativeness, it must be established who can speak credibly and knowledgeably on behalf of a particular religious tradition, given the fact that certain religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism) are not centered on a single pole of authority, such as Christianity (ecclesiastical hierarchy). Most religions are polycentric rather than centralized. In another way, the interreligious dialogue addresses and involves in its process the elites (teachers, researchers, political representatives, religious leaders), excluding the ordinary people, who, paradoxically, experience religious diversity daily. This situation induces a formalism in interreligious debates. Meetings, debates, conferences that have interreligious dialogue as their theme are reduced to presentations without any real impact. The theorizing of interreligious dialogue is consumed in that framework, without any echo in the field of society.

Secondly, at the level of applicability, it must be realized that the exclusivist attitude of holding the absolute truth is not constructive for interreligious dialogue. The major challenge that interreligious dialogue addresses is whether you accept an absolute truth of the partner in dialogue, another truth different from your own truth. This interplay of absolute truths did not involve syncretism, so acidly fined by the fundamentalist factions in every religion. Also, the antagonism of opposing attitudes towards interreligious dialogue within the same religious group or community must be overcome.

Thirdly, interreligious dialogue does not presuppose a harmonization of differences in religious perspectives. Capitalizing on differences is an essential stake in the construction of an effective interreligious dialogue. Compromise and relativization have no place in

dialogue. Not infrequently, the de-substantialization of truth has been resorted to in order to make way for peace, on the idea that the principle of an absolute truth risks developing exclusivist attitudes. But the dialogue is not aimed only the peace in the sphere of religious diversity, but it can and must represent an international voice for global ethics and the solution for social difficulties (poverty, human trafficking, medical assistance, counseling and material aid in refugee camps, etc.).

Fourthly, interreligious dialogue implies assuming a nexus of co-participation in the complex horizon of the reality of religious diversity, entering into the religious universe of the other, of course without diminishing our own religious identity.

Finally, regardless of how much energy is put into the interreligious dialogue by those involved in it, without the support and involvement of the political and economic authority factors, the interreligious dialogue is consumed without any minimal social impact.

Conclusions

The complexity, dynamism and polymorphous nature of contemporary multi-religious reality impose a number of challenges in redefining religious identity and its engagement with other identities. Effective engagement with religious otherness is unavoidable today. Unfortunately, on the premise of ideologized stereotypes and subjective interpretations of faith teachings, religious differences are evaluated in a paradigm of exclusivism, leading to conflict. Religious conflict is a persistent reality in the world of the 21st century, whether it results in actual violence or war or is limited to ideological-religious contradictions in exchanges of opinions. Dealing with religious conflict lies primarily in changing people's attitudes, an inner change through awareness of the reality of diversity. *To be in dialogue* with the *other* in the daily and natural course of life, to be in tolerant relationship with him, to look at and think of the *other* in the logic of brotherhood is the concrete solution to transform conflict into coexistence and peace.

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