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Religious Actors and Conflict Transformation

Theory and Practice

The role of religious actors in conflict transformation, as an area of academic inquiry, is relatively new to the study of politics. Given the absence of religion and religious actors – broadly defined to include faith leaders and faith-based civil society organizations – in the mainstream politics of the Cold War years, it remains a challenge to find appropriate frameworks to accommodate these phenomena in the twenty-first-century peace-building and conflict resolution practices.[1] Today, it is critical to devise perspectives and tools that help us understand religious actors better. Religious political parties have become vocal in diverse settings ranging from India to Turkey. Ethnoreligious conflicts with international ramifications, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, continued to intensify while sectarian strifes in Syria and Iraq attracted attention worldwide. The rise of violent actors, such as the Islamic State, whose leaders question the legitimacy of secular arrangements and borders, concern policy makers and communities not just in the Middle East but around the world. Conflicts in places like Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Bosnia, India, and Pakistan have religious dimensions. Therefore, finding lasting solutions to some of the political challenges we currently face requires policy makers and academics to understand the peaceful and violent theologies as well as to devise methods identifying the constructive role religious actors can play in transforming conflicts into stable political settings. The aim of this book is to explore the dynamics of such constructive involvement with a focus on Northern Ireland and to develop a novel framework that takes religious leaders seriously in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

One common view in both policy and academic circles is that religious actors either incite violence or remain silent in the face of it. Compared to the number of scholarly accounts of religion and violence, the number of investigations of religion and peacebuilding still remains inadequate. Brekke, in his review of religion and the peace process in Sri Lanka, points to this gap.

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He states that despite evidence showing religious actors "have often raised their voices urging the parties to find a peaceful settlement to the war," research concerning this role remains surprisingly insufficient.[2] In this book, I adapt one of the influential frameworks of agency to the study of faith leaders today to address this gap in the studies of conflict transformation and peacebuilding. There is no systematic theory of expertise to study religious leaders in conflict settings. I offer an analytical perspective by adapting and enriching an existing framework, that of *epistemic communities*, to account for the impact religious actors have on the politics of peace and conflict. Religion constitutes a type of knowledge and an area of expertise. Religious actors, peaceful or violent, act as knowledge producers. Therefore, we cannot treat religious actors as ordinary members of civil society. They constitute a distinct category. Using such an expertise-based approach in peacebuilding opens new avenues in the study and practice of religion and conflict transformation.

COMMUNITIES OF EXPERTISE AND RELIGION

Religious actors, in the context of this study, are experts and practitioners of a religious tradition who have background in studying the principles of the religion and engage in the application of these principles to public life. A religious actor can be a religious leader or any organization that overtly operates under religious principles. Religious leaders, by forming and advancing *a specialized type of knowledge that shapes public understanding of religion*, which I call public theology, constitute a community of expertise.[3] This expert community has an influence on multiple policy fields. Before situating religious leaders as members of epistemic communities in conflict transformation, a brief look at the philosophical origins of the concept of *episteme* and *epistemic communities* is necessary.

Episteme means "knowledge" or "science" in Greek. It stands for theoretical knowledge, in the form of agreed-on rules, standards, and procedures. Practical knowledge, on the other hand, is conveyed by the word *techne*, which is used for Platonic models of knowledge.[4] A coherent body of special knowledge qualifies as *episteme*. That body of knowledge does not need to be in the realm of physical sciences as we understand it today. To illustrate, *episteme* might define the knowledge framework that the scientist or the theologian works within, whereas *techne* would be more appropriately employed for crafts and applied science. Religious leaders and theologians create and influence *episteme* by employing textual analysis to make sense of religious sources and conveying the interpretation to the public. One area of such investigation, textual analysis and interpretation (also called *hermeneutics*), has its own specific

methodology on which scholars agree and is designated as "a body of knowledge that deals with understanding what is said in a text."[5] It is a distinct area of expertise.

Foucault can be regarded as the intellectual father of politics of knowledge, and, not surprisingly, religion has its place in his frameworks. In a Foucauldian sense, religion has as much epistemic value – if not more – as science. I argue that Foucault's "Postmodern" episode would constitute a fourth *episteme*, after the three *epistemes* defined in Foucault's *The Order of Things*:[6] the "Renaissance," the "Classical," and the "Modern." Foucault's *epistemes* belong to periods that are marked by specific discourses and worldviews. These *epistemes* do not follow a linear progression, but they may have similarities and differences. The "Renaissance" period was marked by the interpretation of "signs" and the discovery of resemblances; that particular *episteme* had a very thin line between science, as we understand it today, and divination. The "Classical" *episteme* focused on identity, difference, and measurement; there was an increased value of man-made taxonomies and analyses with advancements in technology. In the "Modern" age, there was an implicit rejection of nature and divine as "the cause." Nothing but "Man" is responsible for knowledge. The "Modern" *episteme*, in terms of its premises and its confidence in scientific theories and application, coincides with the strongly secular and materialist political views of the twentieth century. The liberal internationalist approach to peacekeeping, with its focus on bringing liberal democracy and market economy to every divided society, is a reflection of this Modern *episteme*. The next step in peacebuilding is culture-sensitive strategic peacebuilding that takes religion seriously.

As Foucault notes in various instances, the questions and discourses in each *episteme* might resemble or borrow from another *episteme*, but the categories still maintain an internal coherence. With the end of the Cold War and the continuing decline in state capacities and secular ideologies to respond to society's material and psychological needs, there is arguably a decrease in the unquestioned belief in science and secular forms of governance.[7] This shift has led to the recognition of actors who could actually devise "answers" to people's needs. Recent examples include the rise of religious actors during and after the Arab Uprisings and the increasing role of religion in the relatively more secular American and European political scenes. Within the American context, Toft, Philpott, and Shah argue that the prevalence of religion forces the candidates for national office "to speak the language of religion."[8] The Postmodern *episteme* that we are currently influenced by, therefore, is the one that acknowledges scientific advances but focuses on human spirituality and how people can relate to the outside world without experiencing alienation.

Expert communities of that particular *episteme* inevitably include faith leaders and other religious actors.

How does religion take its epistemological place next to science in this new era? Obviously, textual interpretation, no matter how rigorously it is conducted, cannot be numerically precise. However, the existence of policy debates regarding the interpretation of sacred texts renders the "absoluteness" of religious precepts open to question. Religion, in terms of practice and interpretation, evolves over time. There are multiple ways and methods through which one can give meaning to the religious traditions. Scott Appleby, a professor of history and expert on religious violence and peacebuilding, argues these dynamics make the sacred "ambivalent"; there is no final say when it comes to interpreting traditions.[9] Similar to the scientific sphere, religious expertise is the product of certain systematic procedures. Religious attitudes change over time, as religious leaders reinterpret symbols, myths, and narratives in the face of contemporary challenges. Religious actors bring together multiple influences and sources to give meaning to world events, and they usually strive for a consensus to ensure consistency and clarity. De Silva, for example, notes that Buddhist political activism in Sri Lanka was defined by Burmese monks educated in India and sympathetic to Marxist ideals.[10]

Treating religious interpretation and analysis as a special form of expertise in public policy and diplomacy might raise questions. However, it is congruent with the development of the epistemic communities theory in international studies. The importance accorded to a specific area defines the classification of knowledge, as well as its permeation into practice. Emanuel Adler, a key scholar in the study of epistemic communities, asserts that depending on the historical context, "theories and policy proposals that previously did not make much sense to politicians may suddenly acquire a political meaning, thus becoming viable."[11] This is true for resurgence of religion in the public sphere. With religion's reentry into the political realm and the questioning of the secularization-modernization arguments,[12] contemporary policy makers assign more credence to faith-related issues.

In the field of political science, an epistemic community is defined as "a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area."[13] Peter Haas, a political scientist who has extensively written on communities of knowledge, states that "epistemic communities need not be made up of natural scientists; they can consist of social scientists or individuals from any discipline or profession who have a sufficiently strong claim to a body of knowledge that is valued by society."[14] However, scholarly investigations that employ the epistemic communities framework

have focused mostly on the influence of scientific elites on political decision making. Examples include Mediterranean pollution control,[15] the protection of stratospheric ozone,[16] nuclear arms control,[17] climate change,[18] and AIDS control regimes.[19] The only exception is the relatively recent treatment of diplomatic corps as epistemic communities by Davis-Cross.[20]

This technocratic bias in the literature leads many to think that knowledge communities can exist only in the realm of science and that other forms of expertise, including religion, do not qualify as "knowledge." However, those scholars who have initially theorized knowledge communities in global politics have clearly stated that an epistemic communities framework is a "vehicle for the development of insightful theoretical premises about the creation of collective interpretation and choice" and "methodologically pluralistic."[21] Given the character and the formation process of public theologies and the voluntary nature of religious affiliations and practice, faith-related debates and processes call for such a theoretical vehicle.

The success of epistemic communities is historically contingent.[22] Post–Cold War systemic structures, identity debates, and political events, as well as their resonance in domestic contexts, have rendered implementation of religious policy proposals politically more viable than they were perceived in the past. In other words, as the focus has shifted from material capabilities to identity-related issues in politics, religious actors and their influence have become more visible in politics. This influence is not confined to conflict settings. Political debates on issues such as development and human rights included strong religious voices. To illustrate, James D. Wolfensohn (former president of the World Bank Group) and Lord George Carey (Archbishop of Canterbury between 1991 and 2002) established World Faiths Development Dialogue to foster understanding between faith-based organizations and the World Bank, thus tapping into the expertise of religious actors in local settings. We continue to witness the establishment of such interfaith institutes, initiatives, and issue-based religious organizations every day.

Religious actors satisfy the criteria for the communities of knowledge and expertise. According to Haas, a network of professionals should share a minimum of four conditions to qualify as an epistemic community: a shared set of normative and principled beliefs, shared causal beliefs, shared norms of validity, and a common policy enterprise in the form of common practices associated with a set of problems to which professional competence is directed. Religious actors, albeit different in a number of ways from scientific communities, share those traits. In terms of their normative and causal beliefs, as well as norms of validity, there is a remarkable level of agreement, which is not surprising given that religious actors make reference to the same texts, usually

by employing widely accepted methods of interpretation. Respect for life, a belief in a transcendent being, and the need for a just economic system are among the values that most – if not all – religious actors hold as an integral part of their "beliefs" and for which they advocate actively on national and international levels. Evidently, stated belief and practice may differ to a significant extent. However, this does not change the fact that theological discussions usually revolve around some common principles. Articles of faith are not created randomly; a practice or proclamation of faith is systematically traced to text and tradition. Only religious leaders and experts in theology can effectively undertake this step. People turn to their religious leaders when they want to know more about what insights their religious tradition provides on specific issues such as group membership, health practices, and public service. Religious actors sometimes lead activist networks, which perpetuate the interpretation and theological insights into a policy or concern.

One can argue that religious actors merely qualify as activists or communities of discourse and that religious knowledge cannot be treated like scientific knowledge, the type of knowledge that has been at the center of the epistemic communities approach so far. What counts as *episteme* (knowledge) at a specific time would be defined by consensus and the extent to which a body of knowledge would be regarded as authoritative. In this vein, the preaching of religious leaders and the communities that form around these teachings constitute "islands of epistemic communities." The audience for these teachings takes this type of knowledge seriously, and its members regulate their public and private lives accordingly. For a significant number of people, religious knowledge has more relevance than scientific knowledge – actually, religious knowledge, at times, has the power to define the borders of science, as we have seen with the debates surrounding stem cell research in the US. This book does not claim in any way, however, that religious knowledge is or should be superior to its scientific counterpart. Yet ignoring religious actors' influence in the politics of technology, conflict, and the economy is costly, and no investigation of peacebuilding, conflict transformation, or human rights can be complete without reference to the impact of religious interpretation. Religious knowledge can lead to violence or bring peace; it can have public manifestations in any direction. In either case, policy makers should take religion seriously.

The main argument of this book is that religious interpretation translates into a form of expertise, and religious actors are knowledge producers in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and human rights, among other issue areas. What makes the stance of a religious actor different from that of a layperson is the employment of *exegesis* and *hermeneutics*, sometimes acquired through

intensive training. Exegesis is defined as the critical interpretations of an authoritative text, such as the Holy Scriptures, and as stated before, hermeneutics refers to the *science* of formulating guidelines, laws, and methods for interpreting a text's meaning.[23] This training and interest in exegesis and in the study of hermeneutics lend faith leaders relative credibility when it comes to religious approaches toward private and public spheres. While it is true that one might find "conflicting" textual evidence that advocates different positions, in many cases it has been possible to have a technical discussion of the context and the message in sacred texts. The existence of conferences, conventions, and peer-reviewed journals in the field of theology consolidates the argument that there exists a structured expert community that promotes the advancement of knowledge in textual analysis, interpretation, and application, all of which are subject to critique and refutation.[24] Epistemic communities are seeking and "marketing" not the "truth" but systematic new perspectives that have the capacity to influence the politics of the moment. In other words, the factors we should be interested in are the "values and visions that can catch the imagination of decision-makers who then, on the basis of their new understanding, may redefine strategic and economic interests so as to enhance human interests across national borders."[25] In the fields of peacebuilding and conflict transformation, these values and visions are the religious perspectives that capture the subtleties of human security, trauma healing, and reconciliation.

The epistemic perspective toward conflict transformation and peacebuilding is interdisciplinary. It combines theology, sociology, philosophy, and political science, among others. In this book, I use the so-called Troubles period of Northern Ireland as a theory-building case, but the framework is applicable to any ethnically divided society or any setting that requires countering a violent discourse or practice. Production and dissemination of religious knowledge, when investigated rigorously, can help both scholars and practitioners explain the mechanisms of violence and peace. The framework also helps clarify the duties of the practitioners in multidimensional strategic peacebuilding.

RELIGIOUS ACTORS AS EPISTEMIC COMMUNITIES IN CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Twentieth-century peace-building efforts were dominated by liberal internationalism, which offered market economy and liberal democracy as a panacea for divisions and problems of unstable societies. This approach failed in many settings and destabilized societies even further. In Rwanda, Angola, Bosnia, Mozambique, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, liberal internationalist

peace-building missions "had the 'perverse effect' of undermining the very peace they were meant to buttress."[26] Practitioners have gradually come to the conclusion that peacebuilding needs to be sensitive to the particular needs of the divided societies and that there is no magic solution that works in every conflict setting. The conflict transformation process requires the inclusion of multiple local and transnational actors in the process, which means bringing together diverse knowledge networks and relevant areas of expertise. Religion is one such critical area that peacebuilders ignored in the past but that has become increasingly recognized as relevant to peace processes.

Many contemporary conflicts and civil wars have a religious dimension.[27] This does not mean that the parties are fighting over religion or that the conflicts are religious in nature. There are diverse arguments when it comes to the effect of religion on conflicts and their resolution. Toft argues that religious civil wars are four times harder on noncombatants when compared to their nonreligious counterparts.[28] On the other hand, Svensson notes that religious difference does not make a conflict more intractable, unless parties are fighting for an overtly religious cause.[29] However, the religion dimension is too important to ignore altogether in conflict transformation and efforts for a sustainable peace, even in nonreligious conflict settings. In most societies, religion is a part of political identity and national narratives, and policy makers cannot underestimate its importance even when dealing with seemingly secular issues and tensions.

All religions have both inclusive and exclusive interpretations and practices, which I call public theologies; no faith tradition is intrinsically violent or peaceful. I define *exclusive public theologies* as perspectives and interpretations that discourage cooperation with the members of other denominations or religions and aggressively defend a particular religious view without being open to compromise or discussion. *Inclusive public theologies*, on the other hand, focus on possibilities of cooperation and agreement, recognizing that different faith groups can come together for a common purpose and that differences can be resolved or tolerated. Each of these theologies has its supporters and ways to influence politics. The settings where exclusive public theologies dominate are usually conflict prone. To bring stability to divided societies, religious communities that support inclusive public theologies must find ways to influence politicians and other parties to the conflict. These religious communities work to advance their public theology in ways that are similar to the ways scientific epistemic communities affect power politics. Accordingly, even in conflict settings such as Colombia, Uganda, and El Salvador, where religion was not the main issue of contention, religious actors played a constructive

role in conflict transformation through their knowledge of local customs and expertise in theological approaches to conflict.[30]

Especially since the end of the Cold War, religious leaders who are interested in representing their traditions in an inclusive manner have become more visible. In August 2000, more than 1000 representatives of transnational and indigenous religious traditions gathered at the United Nations for a Millennium Summit of World Religious and Spiritual Leaders, which indicated the level of international recognition of faith leaders as influential actors in global politics. What is surprising is not just how recent this focus on religious actors has been but how long it has taken to recognize that they influence politics both directly and indirectly. Former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright criticized the George W. Bush administration for its lack of recognition of religious actors' influence in an international context: "One of the many ironies of U.S. policy is that the Bush administration, for all its faith-based initiatives, is far more comfortable working with secular leaders than with those Iraqis for whom religion is central. This is true even when the religious leaders are moderate in orientation and generally accepting the U.S. goals."[31] One reason for such discomfort is that policy makers have not sufficiently recognized religious expertise in mainstream politics, including the dynamics of peacebuilding and conflict transformation.

Today's challenges show that even in places where a separation of church and state exists, such a legal divide is not necessarily equal to a diminished role of religion in the lives of individuals. Even if people do not experience and practice religion in their everyday existence, knowing that "the church" is there for them still matters, as do statements made by religious leaders.[32] This understanding of "vicarious religion," as observed by sociologist Grace Davie, can explain how religions might appear to be absent in the political and public scene yet might exert tremendous influence and meaning at the individual level. Davie draws attention to the Nordic populations, who are members of the Lutheran Church and pay "appreciable amount of tax" to their churches yet remain to be among the least practicing populations in the world on every comparable scale.[33] Vicarious religion is not the only framework that underscores the complexity of religion. Demerath developed the concept of "cultural religion," which is "identification with a religious heritage without religious participation or a sense of personal involvement per se," and among his examples are the Polish Catholics, Northern Irish Catholics, and Northern Irish Protestants.[34] Gans formulated "symbolic religiosity" that he defines as the "consumption of religious symbols, apart from regular participation in a religious culture and in religious affiliations – other than for purely secular purposes."[35] These concepts indicate that even if people do

not actively practice religion in their everyday lives, religious tradition, with its symbols and myths, still plays an important role worthy of investigation, and religious leaders and their public role remain highly relevant. In the context of Northern Ireland, for example, Bruce states, "What matters is not any individual's religiosity, but the individual's incorporation in an ethnic group defined by a particular religion."[36] In short, even if the public does not appear to be "religious" in statistical tabulations or surveys, it is still likely to heed religious leaders and their public discourse.[37] This is especially noteworthy in conflict transformation and peace-building processes within seemingly secular societies.

Religious actors play multiple roles in conflict transformation, peacebuilding, and human rights, which we can subsume under the term "religious peacebuilding." Professor of the practice of Catholic peacebuilding Gerard Powers defines religious peacebuilding as "the beliefs, norms, and rituals that pertain to peacebuilding, as well as a range of actors, from religious institutions, faith-based private voluntary organizations that are not formally part of a religious institution, and individuals and groups for whom religion is a significant motivation for their peacebuilding."[38] According to Powers, inter-religious peacebuilding has one or more of the following purposes: deepening relationships, improving understanding, finding common ground on beliefs and actions, promoting common action, and encouraging complementary action.[39] Everyone can participate in religious peacebuilding, but an epistemic community that can relate text and tradition to daily life and peace efforts usually leads this network. Sociologist John Brewer and his colleagues typify religious peacemaking as active and passive, the former living out commitments as a social practice, the latter an idealistic commitment but lacking in application. They also distinguish between social (related to societal healing) and political (related to negotiated deals) peace processes.[40] Professor of political science and peace studies Daniel Philpott argues that the central meaning of reconciliation is the restoration of right relationship, and "it is largely religious leaders and communities who have sponsored it, though not exclusively."[41] In short, scholars in multiple fields have recently pointed to the importance of religious expertise and religious leaders in conflict transformation and peacebuilding.[42]

To be recognized as an epistemic community, a group should be seen as "experts" who are uniquely qualified to inform the public and policy debates. Citizens defer to the authority of experts not only in circumstances involving technical dimensions, but also in "all sorts of common decisions."[43] Thus, religious leaders appear on the political scene as "heralds," "advocates," "observers," "educators," and "institution builders," in addition to being