

No. 159

February 2019

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The KOFF
Peacebuilding
Magazine



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and Peacebuilding

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While some argue that any religion has the potential to cause violence, others point out that religion is never the sole cause of conflict and that it can have a peacebuilding effect.

Numerous contributions to this issue maintain that the attribution of a conflict to purely religious factors is often a gross over-simplification, if not an actual falsification of the true causes of a conflict. Such a simplified view can hinder peacebuilding.

This magazine contains many good examples of how religious and spiritual sides can help NGOs and also state institutions to contribute to peacebuilding in a constructive way.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue.

Amélie Lustenberger, editor of KOFF Magazine

focus

Religion – curse or blessing in peace promotion?



A Nuer and a Dinka working together for peace, South Sudan. Photo by Mission 21

Are religions a curse in the peacebuilding process as they can fuel conflicts, or a blessing in that they give rise to peacemakers thanks to ethics which promote living and peace? Organizations with a religious background working in international cooperation are given a hard time by a considerable proportion of Swiss society. This can be put down to images in the media, among other things. We hear more about extremist Muslims and the cases of abuse in the Catholic Church than the potential of religions as forces to bring about change in society, for example. What's more, there is a growth paradigm in development policy, which has long been dominated by economic and technical factors and has ignored religious and cultural ones.

In fact, religious factors can exacerbate conflicts, support oppressive structures or exclude people of other faiths, thus impeding the promotion of peace. Having said that, ethical values and visions of a “good, peaceful life” play a crucial role in all religions. They therefore present a strong counter accent to prevailing values such as consumption, egoism, and growth at any cost, place peaceful coexistence at the center, and are a creative social force. Religious actors often stand up for excluded individuals, the environment, and a transformation in politics and the economy. In many countries, religious representatives enjoy a high level of trust among the population and take on the role of mediators in conflict situations. They denounce injustices, call for the renunciation of violence, and unite people

across different religious, ethnic groups and social classes.

Ambivalence in dealing with religion

More than 80 percent of the world's population identifies with a religion. In many societies, this has a major impact on how people co-exist. And this role is ambivalent, as religions offer both potentials and risks. It is specifically because it is not easy to deal with these ambivalences that there is a risk that the religious factor will be ignored or not analyzed in enough detail. From 2002 to 2009, under the leadership of Anne-Marie Holenstein, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) initiated a first process of reflection and research on religion and spirituality in development cooperation, which led to several case studies and publications, but then went no further. However, the question of the role of religion in peacebuilding and peace politics is being raised more and more in recent times, such as by the Human Security Division HSD, combined with further training provided in collaboration with the Center for Security Studies at ETHZ, or more recent training courses at swisspeace. In Germany, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) addressed the issues of religion and development, also with regard to cooperation with religions, in the Agenda 2030.

Potentials and risks

It makes sense to see religion as a force with peacebuilding potential, especially when it comes to peace work. Religious communities can motivate their members to live together peacefully and reconcile their differences. Religious leaders have a key role to play in this. They can promote peace strategies that are inherent in religions and convey religiously-motivated values that reinforce the renunciation of violence. Religious societies are also well networked and present for people in remote areas throughout the world and bring people from different cultures and social milieus together under one roof.

The often significant role of religious communities also gives them power and influence. The exercise of power is ambivalent because it can be used for both good and bad. Peace can be threatened if religious groups claim their convictions as the only absolute truth. This can result in intolerance, stigmatization, discrimination against "others" and even violence. The exploitation of religion by external parties also poses a risk, for example when ethnic and religious differences are deliberately misused for political power interests and played off against each other. Religions are therefore often involved in conflicts and can become part of the problem or intensify it. However, contrary to widespread opinion, peace and conflict research has shown that religions are almost never the actual, sole cause of conflicts. It is well known that conflicts are extremely complex and multifaceted. Conflicts often arise out of political and economic power interests, which result in discrimination against certain population groups and, if the opportunity presents itself, exploit religious affiliation.

Lessons learned in practice

Due to the ambivalence inherent in religion, it is important to tread carefully with this subject. Careful conflict and actor analyses that consider religious and cultural factors must be taken into account. That is why, together with the Bread for All cooperation

community, Mission 21 has further developed the *3 Steps Manual for Working in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations*, originally developed by KOFF/swisspeace and Helvetas. If we are aware of the potentials and risks of religious factors and organizations, we can further improve the effectiveness of our programs.

The peacebuilding potential of churches is often clearly evident, as is the case with the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) and the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan (PCOSS). In a civil war charged with power politics in which ethnic groups are exploited and incited against each other, the Church is one of the few institutions that still enjoys the trust of the population, since it unites different ethnic groups and provides day-to-day support for those who are suffering. However, there is often a lack of qualified personnel, which is why long-term capacity development measures are very important also, for successful peace work. It therefore demands a great deal of patience on the part of the foreign partners too. Longstanding relationships form an important, trustful basis for cooperation.

Reflection is also important: In order not to jeopardize peace processes, nobody should be offended or even excluded from the process by different religious traditions and views. Having said that, it is vital that one's own religious identity is reflected: I can only enter into a dialog with people of other faiths on equal footing if I know what I (don't) believe and why.

We live in a pluralistic world, but religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity is not only perceived as an enrichment, but partly as a threat. Interreligious and interethnic understanding and alliances for peace and the improvement of living conditions can defuse conflicts. By particularly promoting young people and women, we can promote confidence building and interethnic and interreligious initiatives in grassroots communities whilst also stimulating dialog and mediation processes at national or international level through key religious figures, as the experience of Mission 21 in Indonesia or South Sudan shows.

The deeply rooted religious (not just Christian) concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation also pave the way for peace. The first interreligious refugee and peace village, Gurku in Nigeria, initiated by Mission 21 partners, is a hopeful example of this.

Mission 21

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links

- [Peacebuilding of Mission 21](#)
- [HSD: Peace politics](#)
- [BMZ: Religion and development \(in German\)](#)
- [GIZ – Status Quo Report: Religion and development \(in German\)](#)
- [Holenstein, Anne-Marie \(2010\): Religions – Potential or Danger? \(in German\)](#)

reports

The Central African Republic – not a religious conflict



Rebel in the Northern Central African Republic. Picture: Creative Commons

The popular story goes that the conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR) is as simple as Muslim versus Christian; Séléka versus anti-balaka. This dominant narrative often leads to equally simplistic peacebuilding responses. By presenting this as a religious war and ignoring the complexities, the real drivers of conflict will never be tackled.

As violence is persistent across the country, it is essential for those working for peace to understand how all parties to a conflict define the causes and drivers of that conflict.

In CAR, along with our partners, we spoke with commanders and rank-and-file members of various non-state armed groups, to ascertain their reasons for remaining in the groups and what would motivate them to leave. The majority of people we spoke to didn't remain in armed groups because of ideological beliefs or political ambition, but because they had no viable alternatives.

Whilst former members of the Séléka militia may be predominantly Muslim, they are not all Muslim, and certainly not all Muslims support them. Likewise, the anti-balaka groups are diverse, including Christians, animists, Muslim groups and some ex- Séléka.

The religious narrative ignores the complexities of the conflict. It obscures the extent to which the majority of Muslims and Christians share the same aspirations for their country and have done so for decades. Instead of creating further divides in reporting this crisis, these aspirations need to be emphasised.

Community-led reconciliation processes have an important role to play in creating space to change the narrative. In CAR, Conciliation Resources has been supporting 12 Local Peace Committees (LPCs) since 2014 – volunteer-led groups that identify and resolve conflicts in their communities. They lead community-level reconciliation and support the return of former fighters. Through this work they have built trust and have become vital links for discussion between communities and armed groups. The CAR government has now established a nationwide structure known as the Peace and Reconciliation Committees and a pilot scheme to rollout the structure is ongoing, working hand in hand with the LPCs.

Whatever mechanisms chosen to promote reconciliation, those responding should avoid perpetuating narrow rhetoric, and should instead seek to include a variety of perspectives and experiences. Above all, the focus should be on the sources of resilience and the abilities within societies to achieve sustainable peace.

[Conciliation Resources](#)

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[links](#)

- [Report: Perspectives of non-state armed groups in the Central African Republic](#)
- [Report: Disarmament of the heart: reconciliation in the Central African Republic](#)

reports

When religion forms the basis for the commitment to fight poverty and injustice



Animist temple built by the Adivasi in honor of their god of nature in Andhra Pradesh. Picture: Fastenopfer

As a Catholic organization, the Swiss Catholic Lenten Fund (Fastenopfer) is aware of the importance of religion and spirituality in the specific context of each country, each culture, each universe of belief.

Faced with the extreme poverty of the majority of their faithful, many nuns and priests in southern countries interpret their ministry as a preferential option for the poor – a concept developed in the 1960s in Latin America to demonstrate the Church's commitment to the poor – and they work actively to promote the rights of the most disadvantaged in a context of sometimes violent conflict. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, where the Catholic Church is a respected institution (though it's also the target of violence when it defends human rights), the serious consequences of mining have prompted the Church to set up the Episcopal Commission for Natural Resources (CERN) consisting of 22 regional observatories. This Commission lobbies to improve the law on mining resources and encourages dialog with the populations affected. More recently, the Catholic Church deployed the only observers of the presidential and legislative elections on 30 December

2018, providing 41,000 people. By filling in the gaps left by a State with poor governance, the Church works to promote democratic expression and peace.

On a different note, India's animist ancestral religion is a powerful lever of the Fastenopfer program to fight debt bondage. By reconnecting with their rejected identity, scorned both by the authorities and by the dominant culture, the untouchables, the native Adivasi people, can rebuild an individual and collective sense of self esteem which acts as the cement for defending their rights. Here spirituality aids the affirmation of their identity, helping to give strength and meaning to their struggle against the authorities and the multinationals taking over the space that constitutes their livelihood, the forest.

[Fastenopfer](#)

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[links](#)

- [Fastenopfer brochure on Stories, religion and culture \(in German\)](#)
- [Role and significance of religion and spirituality in development co-operation: Holenstein, Anne Marie](#)
- [Religionen – Potential oder Gefahr. LIT Verlag \(in German\)](#)

reports

Overview of religion & development aspects in SDC activities

SDC – the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation – has been active in the field of religion and development for a number of years with the understanding that religious practices, faith communities and leaders, may influence its interventions. Freedom of religion and belief for human rights engagement, faith leaders in relation to peace building, the role of faith-based organizations in the delivery of aid or of humanitarian assistance are among the challenges faced by SDC in its operations. Faith has a role to play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the Agenda for Humanity.

Faith can be both instrumental and detrimental to SDC operations, inasmuch as religion is a dominant socio-cultural determinant. For this reason, SDC continues supporting the emergence of a balanced discourse on religion, whereby faith should help addressing grievances and strengthening capacities of communities to resist and react to catastrophes, crisis and conflicts. In these contexts, faith should be construed as a driver of change and/or of resilience. In practice, faith and religion are increasingly becoming a part of the conflict-sensitive analysis and programming applied in fragile and conflict-affected countries. Whenever necessary, its role in situations where State authorities and public services are often floundering should also be reflected in the theories of change guiding our actions.

At the global level, SDC is an observer to the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD). The PaRD aims at fostering greater cooperation between secular and religious actors, while focusing on the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies. Thanks to its mixed membership and broad constituency, the PaRD facilitates knowledge exchange, learning and partnerships among a diverse community of action in favour of engaging faith for development. In 2018, SDC co-hosted its 3rd Annual Meeting in Bossey and supported the translation of the Fez Plan of Action for Religious Leaders in the prevention of mass atrocities and genocide in Arabic, French and Spanish.

[SDC – the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation](#)

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links

- [International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development](#)
- [Fez Plan of Action](#)

reports

Dialog in the education space in Sidi Hassine, Tunisia



Discussion group in Sidi Hassine. Photo by OTCS.

Tunisia has a large number of young people and teens. Their prospects in the wake of the revolution have not improved. Far from it: the vast majority of people we speak to in Tunisia consider the economic, and often political, situation to be worse than before 2011. Young people are at risk and can easily give in to the temptations offered by extremist recruiters, who promise them not only a better future but also, and possibly most of all, the chance to take part in achieving a grand and noble cause and the opportunity to realize themselves through a truly cosmic project.

Young Tunisians are therefore at high risk of radicalization. The lack of opportunities for parents and teachers to talk about this openly in a safe environment and the refusal of some families to recognize that their children have problems often prevent early intervention. And that's where our project comes in. Using a systemic approach, we offer parents and teachers at four junior and senior high schools themed discussion groups with experts so that they can gain confidence and a better understanding of the origins, signs and consequences of radicalization by extremists. How do I spot that my child is in trouble, how do I talk to them and where can I go for help? These are the types of questions that the discussion groups aim to answer, using a participative approach. These discussions will

help us to identify the problem more clearly and to find out more about the needs of and the challenges facing parents and teachers. We then convert our findings into training, also aimed at parents and teachers, so that it can be made available on a larger scale.

Last but by no means least, we are also involving young people by financing four multiplier projects to prevent extremism among young people, for example, works of art, videos, personal stories, etc.

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links

- [ae-centre \(in French\)](#)
- [Partner ae-Centre: Organisation Tunisienne pour la Cohésion Sociale \(OTCS\) \(in French\)](#)

reports

Interview: Speaking the language of religious actors



Nuno Gonçalves Macedo

Nuno Gonçalves Macedo is an independent consultant with a background in development cooperation and theology, and has extensive experience in collaborating with faith-based actors. Recently, he has worked with Christian Aid's Angola programme for about three and a half years, – first as a senior programme officer and then as a consultant-, and in this capacity was responsible for managing partnerships with Angolan faith-based organisations. He is also currently a board member of FEC, an NGO of the Catholic Church in Portugal. In this interview, he will give us an assessment of how religion and religious actors can contribute to peace, and reflect on his participation in the swisspeace postgraduate course "Conflict Transformation and the Role of Religion".

Besides Angola, you have also worked in Guinea-Bissau. Does religion play any role in the conflicts these countries face?

In the past civil wars in both countries, people were not fighting for religious reasons. However, previous to that, during the colonial period, particularly in Angola, it has been established that different Christian denominations have had a role in the emancipation, ideologically and organisationally, of different communities and ethnic groups, and the

training of their leaders. This was important to influence the dynamics of the war of independence, also the civil war that followed, and the development of the independent Angolan state and society.

Also, different Christian denominations in the case of Angola, and Christian and Muslim actors in the case of Guinea-Bissau, have had an important role in mediating dialogue between parties at several points of the respective civil conflicts. To this day, different religious actors play a significant role in the forming of public opinion, particularly through public and less public interventions on a variety of social and political issues, although generally they will distance themselves from political parties. Governments recognise the ethical authority and power of religious actors and seek to engage with them as social partners. Religion is still fundamental in the provision of an ethical framework and constitutes a major source of values and principles that strongly influence the way people go about their lives as individuals and communities. Religious actors are also important providers of social services to the population, in particular education and health.

Based on your experience, how can religion and religious actors contribute to peace?

I believe that religion and religious actors contribute to peace wherever and whenever they make the case for justice and dignity for all, a well-being based on a common good that also protects the weakest, and when they distance themselves from violent ways of resolving conflicts.

Many religions share the “golden rule”, the principle of treating others as one would wish to be treated. At their best, religions seek to instil within individuals and communities a sense of good and right, and a dynamic of continuous self-improvement; they also provide for non-violent mechanisms to deal with failures and conflicts.

Another important dimension in the tradition of religion and religious actors is something known as the exercise of a prophetic voice, preventing or denouncing abuses from power holders. Furthermore, the ability to promote collective action for peaceful purposes is an important capacity of religious actors. Also, the ability to engage constructively with other civil society organisations, particularly human rights organisations and defenders, is an increasingly important factor of success, or, otherwise, a limitation.

Needless to say, these are principles that need to be acted upon by religious leaders and religious groups, if indeed a meaningful contribution to peace is to be made.

Do you think that faith-based organizations do have any particular advantages or disadvantages when working in peacebuilding?

From my experience, I would say that faith-based organizations have several advantages. They are embedded in communities, culturally adapted and moreover have regional and even global links that facilitate cross-cultural and international relations. Apart from that, such organizations have organised spaces for reflection and well-trained and respected leaders. In addition, they have peace and non-violence at the core of their vision and mission. These characteristics make faith-based organisations potentially legitimate and effective actors. Naturally, there is the other side of the coin, some religious groups may be or become fundamentalist, sectarian or submissive to power holders.

Religion can also divide people. Do you think it might be problematic for a faith-based organization to be involved in a context where religion is a driver of conflict?

Aggressive, voluntary infliction of pain and suffering to someone is condemned by most world religions. Thus, if religion becomes a source or a driver of violent conflict, it means that something went wrong along the way. Of course, looking around us, present and past, in all sorts of places, many things did go wrong. Division seems only an obvious consequence of that. In such contexts, and particularly where a certain faith-based organisation is not perceived as neutral or thought to be associated with a driver of conflict, then its involvement in peacebuilding might become compromised. However, if the organisation manages to influence perceptions and affirm itself as being interested in and capable of transforming conflict, of building bridges for dialogue or diminishing suffering derived from conflict, its intervention might still be accepted. A thorough conflict-sensitivity analysis is critical in such cases.

Additionally to International Development you studied Theology. How do you think does your religious education influence your work in the field of peacebuilding?

My theology studies definitely helped me build up a better understanding of the ways religion and religious actors may contribute to peace or violent conflict, as well as of the ideas but also the history and context behind those. Beyond that, it allowed me to become better acquainted with the language and culture of religious actors. This knowledge is utterly beneficial to me when engaging with faith leaders and groups in my daily work, in helping to identify the potential of faith and religion as a force for peace, but also the risks that may compromise this potential.

Even more than my theology training, what inspires and informs me the most, are the experiences that I have had with people living in situations of civil conflict or post-conflict, in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and elsewhere: how faith and religion were and still are fundamental for their daily life and for hope in a better, more peaceful future.

Last year you participated in the postgraduate course “Conflict Transformation and the Role of Religion” offered by swisspeace. What motivated you to invest in an education on the nexus of conflict transformation and religion?

Yes, I participated in that course as part of my ongoing CAS in Civilian Peacebuilding. One of my main motivations has been to develop my knowledge and understanding about the theory and practice of religion, conflict and peacebuilding, particularly in contexts that are not so familiar to me. My aim was to improve the usage of peacebuilding strategies and

tools that I can use in my consultancy work. What's more, the course provides an opportunity for sharing, learning and networking with academics and practitioners working in this area of expertise, which is increasingly relevant in so many social conflicts.

What were things you did not yet know? What did build on your previous knowhow and experiences?

Although I had some previous knowledge about the conflict in Northern Ireland, one of the case studies used in the course, it was very interesting to study in more detail the historic role of religion in constructing ideologies, the relationship between theology and politics, and religion as an ethnic marker. Another significant point was to reflect on the difficulty that religious actors have in working for a solution for peace in cases where they are an important part of the problem in the first place, and on the role that religious leaders at the margins may play in such contexts. There were also some useful insights from the analysis of the intervention of churches in processes of dealing with the past: for instance, the need to recognise the complexity in the meanings and mechanisms of forgiveness and reconciliation for different people involved.

In what ways do you think will your participation in the course be beneficial to your work?

For me, it was helpful to reassess reflections on ongoing work I am currently part of in other places, in my consultancy work. Also, from a more methodological point of view, the use of the ACCP methodology in the design of mediation processes applied to this kind of conflict, is something I will remember.

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links

- [swisspeace postgraduate course on "Conflict and Religion"](#)
- [Christian Aid](#)
- [The Faith and Cooperation Foundation \(FEC, in Portuguese\)](#)

reports

The power of religion and spirituality for transforming conflicts



Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa (left) lead a Peace Declaration and inter-faith prayers at the scene of a fatal bomb blast in the Nairobi suburb of Eastleigh. Credit: Alan Channer

Last December, Initiatives of Change Switzerland facilitated the venue of Imam Ashafa and Pastor James from northern Nigeria to the Center of Competence for Humanitarian Negotiation’s annual meeting in Geneva.

Imam Ashafa and Pastor James’ inspiring history of reconciliation after having been part of opposing armed militias has given birth to the Interfaith Mediation Centre and has been portrayed in the film: “The Imam and the Pastor”. Their personal journey and their ability to start with themselves to generate change around them has been inspiring important humanitarian negotiation and conflict transformation work in northern Nigeria and internationally. Their successful mediation of ethnic conflict in Kenya is depicted in the film “An African Answer”. Although they come from theologically conservative backgrounds, they visibly have profound respect for each other’s’ differences.

In Geneva, they explained how walking up the scale of identities of conflicting parties can help transform conflicts by allowing them to gain perspective and to feel connected. When asked the question “how do you resolve a conflict between neighbors”, Imam Ashafa and

Pastor James responded that they ask them to explore their identities as a member of family, village, county, country, human being and spiritual being. At the highest level, we are related and the same.

At Initiatives of Change, we find that giving a respectful space to the spiritual level can support processes of conflict transformation. At the Caux Forum which we organize each summer at Caux above Montreux, we offer a safe space which is politically and religiously neutral, and in which participants can share and listen to each other's personal experiences and points of view in the language that they are coming from, without imposing them on others. Participants are also encouraged to take moments in silence to access the deeper wisdom within them, whatever their religion or faith, if they have any.

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links

- [Initiatives of Change Switzerland](#)
- [Center of Competence for Humanitarian Negotiation](#)
- [Interfaith Mediation Centre](#)
- [Film: The Imam and the Pastor](#)
- [Film: An African Answer](#)
- [Caux Forum](#)

reports

Identity markers & human creativity

Making Peace with Faith



Book-Cover: Making Peace with Faith: The Challenges of Religion and Peacebuilding

Context analyses and peacebuilding evaluations provide me with opportunities to observe the interplay of religion and conflict around the world. I also experience those dynamics as a faith-motivated practitioner based in the troubled United States. Religion is almost never a primary driver of conflict, but often an important secondary factor as a source of identity, a shaper of mindsets or an influential institution. The issue of religion as an identity marker is worth exploring, because it often confuses peace practitioners.

Identity markers matter when groups in tension – for nonreligious reasons – have obviously different religious affiliations. For example, in Mindanao, Philippines, the land-driven conflict between residents and settlers was interpreted – and eventually experienced – as a conflict between Muslims and Christians. Sometimes religious affiliation reflects deeply-held beliefs, and other times it is nominal. In either case, such affiliations appear divisive when used to define boundaries that separate ‘us’ from ‘them.’ Conflict analysts see the problem clearly. However, they do not always see the responses of the local people involved.

Peace-minded religious people creatively resist the identity marker problem in at least four different ways.

First, there is **intentional symbolic mixing**. The Interreligious Council in Bosnia &

Herzegovina has made a high-profile commitment to modeling cooperation between Orthodox Christian (ethnically Serb), Catholic Christian (Croat), Muslim (Bosniak) and Jewish leaders. When used alone, this approach does not necessarily undo the divisive aspects of religion as an identity marker – but it does provide a compelling symbolic counterpoint. In Bosnia and elsewhere, this is often done in combination with other approaches.

Second, people are seeking to **redefine religious labels**. In the ethnically polarized US, there is growing resistance among evangelical Christians against the perceptions that their tradition is predominantly white (untrue), and that white evangelicals occupy a political right wing tinged with racism (partially true). For the significant minority of white evangelicals who hold progressive views, this is an unacceptable misuse of their faith. Many seek to reform and reframe how the word ‘evangelical’ is understood – to re-work theology and practice – so that people inside and outside the church understand it as compatible with social justice.

On the other hand, some feel that ‘evangelical’ has become toxic beyond repair, so they are decisively abandoning the term. Hence the third observation: people **leaving religious labels behind**. This approach manifests differently in certain parts of Iraq. As the public gets increasingly tired of politically-driven religious sectarianism, peace-minded people may de-emphasize religious affiliation in everyday conversation. When asked about their religion, they respond ‘Just Muslim’ to avoid commenting on the divisive Sunni/Shia split, or ‘I’d rather not say.’ This does not mean that their faith has changed, but rather that they decline to label themselves in politically provocative ways.

Finally, people are **creating new identities** that cross boundaries. This is seen in community service groups involving Muslims, Catholics and Protestants in Mindanao. It may start with a modest first contact, a single joint activity. When people discover that they have much in common, new aspects of identity emerge. If a person embraces it, they see themselves less as ‘a Catholic’ (for example) and more as ‘a Catholic in a cross-faith network.’ Over time, some even feel more at ease within the cross-faith network. This is an additional layer of identity, not a replacement for the original. It is typical to hear that “cross-faith cooperation makes me a better Catholic.” People caught up in the religious identity marker problem are not passive, and many are working creatively for transformation.

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links

- [Website – Interreligious Council in Bosnia-Herzegovina](#)
- [Manual – Religion in Conflict Analysis and Peacebuilding: Analysis Guide](#)
- [Practitioners in Mindanao – Transformed Together: A Journey with Local Capacities for Peace](#)
- [Book – Making Peace with Faith: The Challenges of Religion and Peacebuilding](#)
- [Book – The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation](#)

reports

Switzerland's commitment in the area of religion and conflict



Dharmachakra flag on the Wa Saket Temple in Bangkok. ©FDFA

“Religion, Politics, Conflicts” is a department of the FDFA’s Human Security Division. Its aim is to support Switzerland’s action to promote peace in the interplay between religions, politics, and conflicts.

Over 80% of people worldwide identify with a religion that influences many aspects of their personal, social and political lives. It is thus not surprising that religions also play a role in conflicts, with the proportion of religious conflicts on the rise (source: Baumann, Finbogason, Svensson, 2018). In 1975, the proportion of armed conflicts with a religious aspect for at least one of the parties was 1/3. In 2015, this was the case for 2/3 of all armed conflicts around the world.

Neutral approach in terms of values and inclusion of religious-political stakeholders

Switzerland is a secular state which holds a neutral stance on religion. It does not trace the causes of conflict back to religion, per se, but rather to the clash of different worldviews, which are fed and justified by religions in a certain context.

Switzerland is especially keen to involve all stakeholders in political processes, even those who do not share our values. It is convinced that excluding people from political processes makes them more likely to resort to undemocratic means, which can thus lead to violence. This is why religious political groups should be able to help shape their society by democratic means.

Supporting the process

In its peace policy projects in the Religion, Politics, Conflicts departments, Switzerland works closely with university institutions, foundations, religious communities, and civil society. Geographically, its work is concentrated on the Sahel region, the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. Here are a few examples:

- In Chad, Switzerland is helping to establish an early warning center in the capital, N'Djamena, which would allow tensions between and within religious communities to be identified at an early stage and for local actors to respond.
- In Morocco, Switzerland moderated a dialog between women's rights activists and supporters of various Islamic groups on the role of women in society.
- In Thailand, Switzerland launched an intra-Buddhist dialog in the south of the country to constructively incorporate influential representatives of the Buddhist community into the peacebuilding process in the restless south.

Training and development

As well as supporting the peacebuilding process, the Religion, Politics, Conflicts department has joined forces with the Center for Security Studies (CSS) of ETH Zurich and Finland to offer an annual Religion and Mediation Course. The five-day course is aimed at people looking to acquire specific knowledge on peacebuilding in religious conflicts. The next course will be held from 1 to 6 September 2019 in Murten and the application deadline is mid-March.

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[links](#)

- [FDFA: Religion, politics and conflicts division on the FDFA website](#)
- [FDFA blog on peace policy work in the area of religion in southern Thailand \(in German\)](#)
- [Partner: Culture and Religion in Mediation \(CARIM\) program offered by ETH Zurich's Center for Security Studies \(CSS\)](#)
- [Partner: Cordoba Foundation Geneva](#)
- [Partner: Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers](#)
- [Religion and Mediation Course](#)
- [FDFA project in Chad](#)

- [FDA project in Morocco](#)
- [FDA project in Thailand](#)

in depth

Swiss mediation in conflicts with religious dimensions: in conversation with Angela Ullmann



Angela Ullmann

Recent studies at the University of Uppsala in Sweden have shown that armed conflicts where religion is a factor in the mindsets and the demands of conflicting parties have been on the rise since 1975. Angela Ullmann is a senior program office at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zürich. She asks whether traditional means of conflict transformation and peacebuilding in those conflicts with a religious dimension are less effective than in other forms of armed conflict. The trained mediator is working on various projects within the “Culture and Religion in Mediation” (CARIM) program, a joint initiative of FDFA and CSS, and has many years of experience in training diplomats and mediators in the area of conflict with religious dimensions. She is a co-organizer of the annual “Religion and Mediation” course at ETH and is involved in the swisspeace continuing education “Religion & Conflict”.

According to Ullmann, when handling conflicts based on religion, certain factors need to be

taken into account. “It’s seldom possible to negotiate on deeply-held religious or secular convictions in conflicts, as a compromise can involve sacrificing values. On the practical level of living with these values, however, common solutions can be found to enable peaceful co-existence”, according to Ullmann. In this regard, Switzerland takes a pioneering role: as long ago as 2004, Switzerland had been focusing on religion and conflict within the framework of its peacebuilding commitments. For Angela Ullmann, the basis of the Swiss commitment is the Swiss political culture, which is characterized by its own experience in dealing with religious conflict: “Instead of ideological differences and debates on values between Catholics and Protestants after the Sonderbund War, Switzerland focused on the development of practical aspects of co-existence on a local level.” The federal structure of the country and the principle of subsidiarity have also contributed to the fact that there has been an institutionalized search for local and individual solutions. “A feature of the Swiss political culture is to strive for a pragmatic consensus on all sides. Historically, Switzerland developed the understanding that there can be no over-arching solutions to differing conflicts of religious coexistence.”

The result of this political culture is an approach which does not seek to evaluate religious worldviews but includes all the relevant actors. Furthermore, it recognizes that the role of religion should neither be under- nor over-estimated. The Swiss approach tries to build a dialog between both parties on a practical co-existence level. Case studies from Thailand, North Africa and the Middle East show that the Swiss approach can bear fruit. The challenges of conflicts with a religious dimension should not be under-estimated, however: “A religion-neutral approach does not require indifference to values on the part of the peace practitioner, but rather that the various religious or secular worldviews of the conflict parties are not judged, but respected as part of each party’s everyday real world. This requires a certain amount of self-reflection.”

In order to meet this challenge, relevant training and further training is important for practitioners. “Religion is a daily reality for the majority of the world population, and if diplomats want to move in this world, they need a basic understanding of religious affairs,” says Ullmann. Although there is much more to be done in this area, Angela Ullmann is confident. She is convinced that Switzerland is on the right path when it comes to the (continuous) education of practitioners. Basically, the expert encourages people to be open: “You don’t have to be religious yourself to be able to deal with religion. We all have our world view, whether it is religious, secular, humanist or something else. You can achieve a lot with a sense of curiosity and an inner acceptance that people see and understand the world differently, regardless of whether you can relate to these values or not.”

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Communications at swisspeace

[links](#)

- [Center for Security Studies \(CSS\) at ETH Zurich](#)
- [Culture and Religion in Mediation Program \(CARIM\)](#)
- [swisspeace continuing education: "Religion and Conflict"](#)
- [ETH Course: "Religion and Mediation"](#)
- [Switzerland's handling of religious conflicts: A publication by Jean-Nicolas Bitter and Angela Ullmann \(in German\)](#)
- [Religion and Conflict in Swiss Peace Policy: Publication by Angela Ullmann \(in German\)](#)
- [Mediation Perspectives: Training Secular Diplomats on the Religion-Peacebuilding Nexus by Angela Ullmann](#)
- [Mediation Perspectives: What Monsters Can Teach us about Religion and Conflict by Angela Ullmann](#)

news

Hardware vs software: When the process determines the result



Session on change processes during the 2018 regional edition of the course in Naivasha, Kenya. ©IPAT-Interpeace

National and international experts/advisers are often mandated to provide assistance on policy formulation and implementation in countries emerging from dynamics of violence. However, reviews of decades of technical assistance make evident that the expertise provided is not always producing the desired results, nor contributing to sustaining peace. This is partly due to a focus on the production of tangible deliverables – such as laws, infrastructures, policies or plans – with little attention to longer-term governance processes and the development of local capacities.

This article explores this tension between short-term, tangible results and long-term processes, comparing them to a computer's *hardware* and *software* systems. Inspired by Interpeace's annual course on "*Effective Advising in Peacebuilding Contexts*", the article presents the methods and tools available to advisors to better integrate *soft* elements in their practice at the strategic, operational, and personal levels, to anchor their interventions in time.

To illustrate this, a case study from Interpeace's programme in Somaliland portrays how

the integration of relational elements into a highly technical issue – the development of an electoral law – has enabled the team and their local partner to enhance their efficiency and impact in the region. In conclusion, the article advocates for the adoption of a peacebuilding lens, characterized by attention to long-term processes and local ownership, into all humanitarian and development interventions.

Interpeace’s course on “*Effective Advising in Peacebuilding Contexts*” was developed in 2013, with the support of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). It gathers every year technical experts who work with governments or organisations in fragile and conflict-prone countries. Delivered by Interpeace’s International Peacebuilding Advisory Team (IPAT) service, the course aims to strengthen advisors’ ability to understand the complex change processes they find themselves in, enhance their impact, and overcome their institutional, cultural and interpersonal challenges.

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- [Read the full article](#)
- [Interpeace Website](#)

news

ETH conference on security policy: religion in Swiss peace promotion



ETH Conference on Security Policy on January 25, 2019 in Zurich. Picture: swisspeace

On January 25, the 31st ETH Conference on Security Policy addressed the following questions: How do Swiss actors handle the issue of religion in conflicts? What challenges does this issue pose, both now and in the future? The participants included representatives from the public and humanitarian sectors, politics, the military, and civil society. The topics discussed at the conference ranged from the Swiss Wars of Kappel of the 16th century, mediation projects in southern Thailand and Kyrgyzstan and global trends in conflict and peace issues through to Islam in Swiss society. The following main findings emerged:

After the Second World War, new conflict prevention tools were introduced across the globe, which in many cases worked well in the course of the 20th century. Over the past two decades, however, conflicts have flared up in many places where traditional peacebuilding has failed. There is still a lot of catching up to be done, particularly when it comes to religious dimensions in armed conflicts.

Wanting to hold a debate at an ideological level in the midst of a conflict with religious

dimensions does not help. The aim should not be to convince another party of the conflict to share your view on the world. Past examples and experiences from case studies currently being carried out show that finding solutions to practical problems facing both parties in a conflict in everyday life is a more effective approach, and can lead to cooperation and rapprochement.

Switzerland recognized the importance of religious dimensions in armed conflicts at an early stage and played a pioneering role in the approach to conflicts of this kind. A key aspect of the Swiss approach is to involve all important local actors in the peace process, without passing judgment on the different religious world views. This allows you to build on local structures and simplify the dialog. The “do no harm” principle, which is used to determine if peacebuilding efforts should be halted if there is a risk of causing more harm than good, is crucial here.

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Communications

[links](#)

- [ETH Conference \(in German\)](#)

news

The Basel Peace Forum 2019: Rethinking peace



Welcome address to the Basel Peace Forum by swisspeace Director Laurent Goetschel. Picture: TwoShotSpot Photography

Developing new and innovative approaches to peacebuilding is the stated aim of the Basel Peace Forum 2019. With this goal in mind, approximately 200 leading experts and decision-makers in the fields of politics, economics, civil society, and science got together in the Congress Center Basel and the Basel Art Museum on January 13 and 14. The forum, taking place for the third time, was organized by the Swiss peace foundation swisspeace, and supported by the Canton of Basel-City, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA and private individuals.

Five topics, all relating to peacebuilding, were chosen for participants to address in workshops. This year's topics were "Artificial Intelligence and Digitalization," "Architecture and Urban Planning," "Health and Migration," "Risks and the Raw Materials Industry," and "Impact Investing."

The meeting of the carefully selected participants presented a unique wealth of experience and enabled new ideas to be developed to promote international peacebuilding. But what does innovative peacebuilding look like in reality? An example was given by Sharar Raz from "Games for Peace," who explained the peace-making potential of computer games at the Basel Peace Forum by means of the organization's project in Israel. Participants were able to discover creative ideas for peacebuilding such as this one and discuss them with each

other in the various pavilions.

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links

- [Basel Peace Forum Website](#)
- [SRF radio show, Echo der Zeit "The value of a human life" \(in German\)](#)
- [SRF news show "Video games for peace: empathy instead of murder" \(in German\)](#)
- [Telebasel item "World peace is discussed in Basel" \(in German\)](#)
- [SRF news show item "Peacebuilding with computer games" \(in German\)](#)
- [Basler Zeitung article "Architects for world peace" \(in German\)](#)

calendar

Upcoming events

KOFF MEMBER NEWS SITE

Upcoming events organised by KOFF member organisations can be found on our [KOFF MEMBER NEWS SITE](#).

SWISSPEACE COURSES

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- [PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICTS](#)
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- [RELIGION & CONFLICT](#)

Information on the entire swisspeace course offering on peacebuilding and conflicts can be found on [OUR WEBSITE](#).

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Publisher	KOFF of swisspeace
Contact	Sonnenbergstrasse 17, P.O. Box, CH-3001 Bern, Phone: +41 (0)31 330 12 12
Editing	Amélie Lustenberger, Michael Zysset and Dayana Hug
Translation	Furrer Übersetzungen, Übersetzergruppe Zürich
Cover	Palestine, 2016. Rachel Gasser, swisspeace.

KOFF

Die Schweizer Plattform für Friedensförderung
La plateforme suisse de promotion de la paix
La piattaforma svizzera per la promozione della pace
The Swiss platform for peacebuilding

KOFF is a dialogue and exchange platform facilitated by swisspeace. It is jointly supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and the following Swiss NGOs which are members of the platform:

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Caux – Initiatives of Change	MIR Switzerland	Friedensförderung
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