

Article

# Religion and Peace—Anatomy of a Love–Hate Relationship

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**Abstract:** Human history is filled with numerous examples—both past and present—that make religion and violence appear to be best friends. Ever since the events surrounding 9/11, religiously inspired violence has been considered one of the most pressing issues of our times (cf. Juergensmeyer 2017; Kimball 2008). While the conflictive dimensions of religion are still indisputably at the forefront of public and political attention, religion’s significant resources for peace and reconciliation gain increasing attention as well. This contribution will provide an analysis of the love–hate relationship between religion and peace in three consecutive steps. The first part focuses on the role(s) of religion in conflict. Frazer and Owen’s six different ways of thinking about religion provide a model for better understanding religion’s conflictive sides (Frazer and Owen 2018; cf. Frazer and Friedli 2015). In a second step, this article discusses religion’s potent, yet often neglected constructive resources for sustainable peace. While taking into account the vast diversity of religious actors, certain content-based and formal characteristics emerge that help to shed light on the otherwise vague “religious factor” in peacebuilding. Finally, an example taken from post-genocide Rwanda will serve to illustrate the preceding discussion.

**Keywords:** religion; peace; conflict; peacebuilding; FBO; conflict resolution; conflict analysis; development; post-genocide Rwanda; CARSA

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## 1. Introduction

Human history is filled with numerous examples—both past and present—that make religion and violence appear to be best friends. The events surrounding 9/11 brought religiously inspired violence to the vanguard as one of the most pressing issues of our times (cf. Juergensmeyer 2017; Kimball 2008). While the conflictive dimensions of religion are still indisputably at the forefront of public and political attention, religion’s significant resources for peace and reconciliation gain attention as well. The increasing interest in the constructive role of religion in processes of social change is embedded in a larger-scale development regarding the recognition of religion in public issues. For decades, Max Weber’s pronouncement of a “disenchantment of the world”, coupled with the post-Enlightenment relegation of religion to the private realm, had dominated the perception of religion in Western societies. Recent years, however, have seen the beginnings of a paradigm change. Religion sociologist Peter L. Berger even speaks of a “desecularization of the world” (Berger 1999). This assessment is supported by recent findings of the Pew Research Center, predicting that the 21st century will be a religious one

with almost all major religions gaining new members.<sup>1</sup> While Nicos Mouzelis points to “choice” as a “key element for understanding the present and future religious landscape” (Mouzelis 2012, p. 220) that is apparent in all three main features of modernity, namely the massive inclusion into the center, top-down differentiation and overall individualization, this sociological perspective neglects religion-immanent features from within their respective theologies as significant factors shaping both religions’ self-understanding and their perception from the outside.<sup>2</sup> Policy makers, academics and practitioners have therefore started to pay closer attention to the significance of religion and the roles of religious actors in public issues and processes of social change.

Indicative of this increasing interest is the Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors, launched by UN Secretary-General Guterres in July 2017. It includes the following proposal: the United Nations should “establish a world forum of religions and beliefs that would bring together an equal representation of religious leaders and actors, policy makers, educators, and media personnel from all world regions. The forum would deliberate on the role of religions in enhancing peaceful, inclusive, and just societies. The forum would have regional hubs” (Plan of Action 2017). The plan not only points to the significance of religion in constructively addressing global challenges such as peace and justice, but also to the necessity of both a global perspective and local roots or “hubs”.

While the acknowledgement and appreciation of the roles of religion in global issues are long overdue, religion is no panacea. Religion is innately ambiguous and can be employed to draw out both the best and the worst in humankind. This holds especially true with regards to peace and conflict. This contribution provides an analysis of the love–hate relationship between religion and peace in three consecutive steps. A first part focuses on the roles of religion in conflict. Owen Frazer and Mark Owen’s six different ways of thinking about religion provide a model for better understanding religion’s conflictive sides (Frazer and Owen 2018; cf. Frazer and Friedli 2015). In a second step, this article discusses religion’s potent, yet often neglected constructive resources for sustainable peace. While taking into account the vast diversity of religious actors, certain content-based and formal characteristics emerge that help to shed light on the otherwise vague “religious factor” in peacebuilding (cf. Schliesser et al. forthcoming). In a third and final part, an example taken from post-genocide Rwanda will illustrate the preceding discussion.

## 2. Religion and Conflict—Six Ways to Better Understand Their Relationship

In the past decade, the number of conflicts with a religious dimension have increased substantially. While in 2007 about 20% of countries world-wide experienced conflicts in which religion played a role, only ten years later the number had increased to 25% (Pew Research Center 2018). At the same time, there is wide-spread unclarity as to what in fact constitutes “religious violence”. One problem connected with this term is that it might lead to the misunderstanding as if religion were the main or even sole driving force behind a certain conflict. Rather, conflicts always have multiple dimensions, including economic, political and social factors. Second, as of now, “no universally accepted definition of religion or faith exists” (Ware et al. 2016, p. 324). Yet, if it is not clear what exactly constitutes “religion”, “religious violence” remains equally opaque. For the purpose of this contribution, I will employ a constructive-pragmatic concept of religion. This means understanding as “religion” what is described as “religion” by interlocutors and communities in a given context (Waardenburg 1986). A third problematic factor connected to the term “religious violence” is a potentially one-sided

<sup>1</sup> The Pew Research Report 2015 indicates that all major religions, with the exception of Buddhism, will increase in membership. By 2050, the number of Muslims worldwide will match the number of Christians. In Europe, 10% of the population will be Muslims (Pew Research Center 2015).

<sup>2</sup> In Christian theology, for example, the paradigm of “Public Theology” has been gaining increasing attention as it emphasizes the relevance of both theology for public issues and public issues for theology (cf. Storrar and Morton 2004). For a more sceptical view on the question of a “return of religion” (cf. Wilson 1982 and Martin 2005).

legitimation of violence by insinuating that “religious” violence is always irrational and fanatical and must be contained by “secular” violence which is always rational and controlled (cf. [Cavanaugh 2004](#)).

Conflict analysis tends to shy away from the consideration of religion. The “religious factor” is either deemed irrelevant and therefore neglectable or too complex to be of any real use. The first perspective ignores a sometimes fundamental aspect in the analysis of a conflict, while the second perspective neglects the fact that religion is often tied to different dimensions that each impact a conflict in a certain way and that can be clearly differentiated. In the following, I will outline six different ways of how religion might function within a given conflict.<sup>3</sup> These six dimensions are not mutually exclusive, but rather any conflict is likely to display several of them. At the same time, these different ways of thinking about the role of religion do not have clear-cut boundaries, but can overlap at times. Like religion, each aspect is ambiguous in and of itself; it can serve to create division and strife, while it also contains potent resources for overcoming hatred and for building peace.

### *2.1. Religion as Community: Authorities, Relationships and Identities*

Thinking about religion as community is central to the approach of French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). Religion, according to Durkheim, is “a unified system of beliefs and practices ... which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” ([Durkheim 1915](#), p. 47). Next to other aspects, it is the integrative function of religion that is emphasized here and its ability to build relationships and communities. Durkheim and his followers in the structural functionalist approach are interested in the way religion establishes and supports structures and institutions in society, including the family and the state. This includes the establishment of authorities both in the temporal and spiritual arena. As such, religion serves the stabilization or attestation of a given community.

Connected to religion’s role in establishing communities is its significance in creating identities, both in a personal and a collective sense. By belonging (or not belonging) to a certain community, by adhering (or not adhering) to the required social and moral codes, senses of the self are being constructed and affirmed. In conflict, the community and identity forming aspects of religion are highly relevant. In times of upheaval, belonging to a community can provide reassurance and stability. At the same time, the self-identification with a community and the obedience to its authorities tend to foster an in-group/out-group mentality. Religion as community thus becomes a boundary marker of who belongs and who does not. This becomes especially problematic when this boundary marker is connected with other concepts such as nationhood. India’s current Hindu-nationalist agenda, for instance, illustrates how the religious boundary marker “Hindu” becomes synonymous with that of “being Indian”. While political strategies like these usually serve to strengthen national coherence, they often result in conflicts with religious minority groups who feel discriminated by religiously defined concepts of the nation.

### *2.2. Religion as a Set of Teachings: Concepts, Norms and Values*

Religion can also be viewed as a set of teachings. These inherited teachings often contain dogmatic aspects, i.e., what to believe, from which ethical dimensions follows, i.e., how to act. The contents of a set of teachings are the focus of a “substantial” understanding of religion, rather than a “functional” perspective displayed by Durkheim and others (cf. [Werkner 2016](#)). In the Abrahamic religions, these teachings are collected in their respective Holy Scriptures, Torah, Bible and Quran (as well as traditions of law deriving from various sources such as the Jewish Halacha and Islamic Sharia), while other religious traditions rest primarily on oral rather than on written narratives. Religious sets of teachings are regarded as divine inspiration and serve not only to make sense of life, but they

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<sup>3</sup> For this, I will combine the approaches of [Frazer and Friedli \(2015\)](#) and [Frazer and Owen \(2018\)](#), who each point to different dimensions of religion in conflicts (cf. [Schliesser et al. forthcoming](#)).

also offer clear guidance and instructions on how to behave. This shared understanding can help to increase social cohesion, yet it can also lead to othering by creating insiders and outsiders.

Understanding religion as a set of teachings that includes fundamental concepts and normative implications also means taking the inherent ambiguity of religion into consideration. Religious teachings can be used for peace and for war. While religiously motivated peace-makers often refer to Scripture as their orientation and motivation (cf. Little 2007), the same holds true for Islamist suicide bombers (cf. Kruglanski et al. 2009). A common ideal such as peace and justice can become a powerful driving force for interreligious dialogue and cooperation, working together for the same goals from different religious foundations. At the same time, religious concepts and values can be used to confront the powers-that-be. Much of the social and political criticism of, for instance, South American Liberation Theology stems from a specifically Christian understanding of justification and justice (Boff and Boff 1987).

### 2.3. Religion as Spirituality: Personal Experience, Motivation and Meaning

Religion has a spiritual dimension that has bearings on peace and conflict situations. The spiritual dimension refers to the personal experience of faith as it plays out in certain life styles and behavioral choices. These can be set in both an individual or a collective context, such as in a monastery, an ashram or a Sufi circle. The World Conference of Religions for Peace defines spirituality broadly as “an awareness of responsibility rooted in an ultimate concern” (Jack 1980). This “awareness of responsibility” can be a powerful motivator. It inspired, for instance, Gautama Buddha’s engagement to challenge the Brahmin-priests’ authority and the caste system in general. While being rooted in the inner self, religious spirituality can become the catalyst for far-reaching external action that can be both promoting and diffusing conflict. At the same time, shared spiritual experiences (meditations, worship, Scriptural readings) can serve to create strong bonds between the participants. While this can lead to othering and exclusion (“them” vs. “us”), it can also help to connect across religions or communities.

Next to its motivating function, religion as spirituality also serves to bestow ultimate meaning. Here, the eschatological framework that many religions provide, i.e., the conviction that there is a horizon of meaning that transcends the individual’s life span, becomes of importance. Connecting one’s own life with its limitations to this larger purpose, coupled with the conviction of “doing God’s will”, can help to find meaning beyond the individual’s experience. Again, the conviction of “doing God’s will” can be found in both peacemakers’ and in terrorists’ rationales.

### 2.4. Religion as Practice: Symbols and Rituals

Religion as practice is the most easily visible aspect of religion. Jewish kippa, Christian church bells or Sufi dancing are all examples of lived religion. Religion as practice refers to how religion is acted out in everyday life, in dress, in food and in different coded forms such as symbols or rituals. All these lend structure and form not only to the cycle of the year (for instance, through Christian markers like Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Thanksgiving), but also to the individual’s life cycle. Religious rites of passages support the individual in times of transition such as birth, coming of age, marriage and death. Especially in perilous times such as sickness and death, *rites de passage* provide much needed structure and support.

During highly unsettling times of conflict, adherence to familiar rituals can help in coping with extreme situations. Through joint participation, bonds are created and strengthened, and identities are confirmed. At the same time, symbols and rituals can serve as boundary markers between “us” and “them”, highlighting differences and cementing social rifts. While religious rituals are powerful resources for peace, they can also be used for the opposite purpose. One example is the long-standing tradition of

blessing arms, including weapons of mass destruction, as is being practiced by the Russian-Orthodox Church. Only recently, criticism of this ritual has been voiced from within the Church.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.5. Religion as Discourse: Language, Power and Weltanschauung

The term discourse is used in a wider sense here. Not only does it encompass semantics and communication, but religion as discourse refers to a specific interpretation of reality. As George Lindbeck puts it, religion in this sense is “a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought” (Lindbeck 1984, p. 33). It is this *Weltanschauung*, in which a certain use of language makes sense. In situations of conflict, it may be the case that actors use religious language that depends on the interpretative context of their own system. For instance, the term “gender equality” could mean something entirely different in different thought systems. In order for genuine communication to take place, the dependency of language on a particular interpretative framework must be recognized and special effort must be undertaken to provide translations that help to convey the intended meaning.

Understanding religion as discourse also draws attention to power structures. The interpretative authority often rests with religious authorities. Alternative readings may or may not be allowed. A recent study points to the correlation between the legitimacy of different meanings of a given term and conflictive situations (Ochs et al. 2018). Those perceived to have authority within a given framework can use their influence for purposes of peace, such as Pope John XXIII in his influential encyclical *Pacem in terris* (1963), or to incite violence and conflict, such as some Catholic priests during the Rwandan genocide (cf. Rittner et al. 2004).

### 2.6. Religion as an Institution: Leadership, Networks and Service Delivery

Similar to religion as practice, religion also becomes visible in their institutionalized forms. Religious institutions are at home on different levels, reaching from local congregations to regional and national organizations and even international networks. Religious institutions are often engaged in a variety of service deliveries, including education, health services and provision of food and emergency aid when needed. This becomes especially pertinent in times of conflict, when the extended networks of religious institutions prove a reliable support for people in need. As Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Denis Mukwege puts it in view of his native DR Congo, a failed state haunted by corruption and violent conflict since decades: “My hope lies with the churches. When the state fails, the churches still care for the people.”<sup>5</sup> With their detailed knowledge of the local context and culture and their ability to reach even remote areas, religious institutions can become valuable partners on the ground for NGOs such as the UN Blue Helmets. Represented by their leaders, religious institutions can thus contribute to peacebuilding, for instance, by providing services across religious boundaries, yet they can also serve to fuel conflict, not least through sermons inciting hatred and violence towards the religious other.

These six different ways of thinking about religion—as community, as a set of teachings, as spirituality, as practice, as discourse and as institutions—can provide a deeper analysis and clearer understanding of religion’s roles in conflict. Throughout, it became apparent that each dimension can play a conflictive and a constructive part, furthering conflict and peace, thereby mirroring the inherently ambiguous nature of religion itself. With the destructive sides of religion usually receiving the bulk of attention, the focus now is on the resources that religion can offer for peace and reconciliation.

<sup>4</sup> Russia’s Orthodox Church wants priests to stop blessing nuclear weapons, in: New York Post, 5 February 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/02/05/russias-orthodox-church-wants-priests-to-stop-blessing-nuclear-weapons/>. Last accessed 30 March 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Interview by the author with Denis Mukwege, Bukavu, DR Congo, 6 February 2018.

### 3. Religion and Peace: An Underestimated Partnership

The relationship between religion and peace is *de facto* much better than its reputation. Nevertheless, religious peacemaking still operates on the fringes of public acknowledgement, despite the fact that—as Jeffrey Haynes rightly points out—“religious groups . . . have recently and collectively increased their peacemaking efforts” (Haynes 2007, p. 69). As the focus is shifting, however, on the side of academics, policy makers and practitioner towards an increased recognition and acknowledgement of religion’s contributions to peace (cf. McDonagh and Network 2019), the need for more systematic analysis becomes more urgent. What exactly are religion’s contributions to peace? Any attempts at a systematic examination of the “religious factor” in peace, including peacemaking and peacekeeping, need to take into consideration not only the inherent ambiguity of religion itself, but also the vast plurality of religious actors and Faith-Based Organization (FBOs).<sup>6</sup> Ron Sider and Heidi Unruh distinguish between six different types of FBOs working in development, ranging from faith-permeated to quasi-secular organizations (Sider and Unruh 2004). Yet, despite this pluralism, it is possible to point to certain characteristics of religious actors (cf. Schliesser 2020). In the following, I present a model for systematization that rests on the differentiation between “formal” and “material” characteristics, while acknowledging that certain overlap is possible (cf. Schliesser et al. forthcoming). The characteristics presented are meant to be representative rather than exhaustive. As with the six dimensions, to which they are being related, each one of the following characteristic is ambiguous in the sense that it can be used for both peaceful and for conflictive purposes.

#### 3.1. Formal Contributions of Religious Actors to Peace

##### 3.1.1. Trust (Religion as Community, Religion as Practice)

Religious leaders are often perceived as credible and moral authorities, thus generating trust, an essential component for building peace in a volatile environment. The Trust in Institutions Index of 2019 found that in Africa, for example, it is religious leaders who enjoy the highest trust (72%) (Trust in Institutions Index 2019). Trust within a religious community is further deepened as activities such as bible or Quran studies, youth groups or women’s meetings serve to strengthen community cohesion. Next to the community dimension, it is religion as practice that plays a role. Service deliveries within a certain community such as the provision of food, health care or education, have established long-term bonds of trust that can be relied on in times of crisis.

##### 3.1.2. Relationships and Identity (Religion as Community)

Their ability to inspire trust is linked to an oftentimes remarkable talent of religious peacebuilders to build relationships and to connect with people, even across religious or other boundaries. “Religious leaders are uniquely positioned to foster nonviolent conflict transformation through the building of constructive, collaborative relationships within and across ethnic and religious groups for the common good of the entire population of a region” (Appleby 2008, p. 127). Due to the trust they enjoy, religious peacebuilders often function as “connectors” between different groups, a crucial ability in peace building processes that rely on the dissemination and acceptance of new ways of thinking, for instance, in terms of reconciliation and forgiveness rather than hatred and revenge.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, relationships are innately connected to the way we understand ourselves and to the construction of our identity. In peace-making, this becomes of significance as a person’s identity can be defined by

<sup>6</sup> With Berger (2003, p. 1), I understand FBOs as “formal organizations whose identity and mission are self-consciously derived from the teachings of one or more religious or spiritual traditions and which operate on a non-profit, independent, voluntary basis to promote and realize collectively articulated ideas about the public good at the national or international level”.

<sup>7</sup> In this regard, social network analysis has been found helpful in better understanding how religious peacebuilders function as “connectors” between so-called “strong-ties groups” (close-knit communities such as religious communities) and “weak-ties groups” (loosely connected groups such as a social media group) (cf. Gopin 2009).

means of othering, i.e., in opposition to the other, or in terms of a sense of shared identity, for instance, through shared communal activities (Kadayifci-Orellana 2017).

### 3.1.3. Moral Influence and Leadership (Religion as a Set of Teachings, Religion as an Institution)

The trust and credibility religious leaders enjoy also relates to their alleged status as moral authorities. This is not least due to the perception that religious actors are neutral in the sense that they do not seek their own personal advantage, but are committed to the cause only (Bouta et al. 2005). In their position as moral authorities, religious leaders act as influencers. By shaping social values, for instance, compassion or responsibility, they impact thoughts and behavior. Their accepted guidance provides a sense of stability and reliability especially in times of upheaval. Through formal statements such as sermons, but also through their everyday behavior, trusted religious leaders serve as important role models for their communities and can lead the pathway to peace and reconciliation.

### 3.1.4. Networks (Religion as an Institution)

“Why work with religious communities?” asks UNICEF (UNICEF 2017). As one reason, UNICEF points to their extensive networks. “With religious communities counting almost 5 billion members, their potential for action is great. From the smallest village to the largest city, and from districts and provinces to national and international levels, they offer a variety of networks for the care and protection of children” (UNICEF 2017). While focused on children, UNICEF’s statement can be easily applied to other realms of development, including peace and conflict transformation. Religious actors can rely on extensive regional and transregional networks that enable them to quickly mobilize additional financial and human resources. With their grassroots foundation, religious networks are furthermore able to access even remote areas, all significant requirements for successful and sustainable conflict prevention and conflict transformation.

### 3.1.5. Provision of Service Delivery (Religion as a Set of Teachings, Religion as Practice, Religion as Spirituality)

For many religions, caring for the poor and marginalized is an integral part of their belief system. Well-known religious narratives like the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) encourage a spirit of empathy and willingness to help others, even strangers and at costs to oneself. Service delivery thus becomes part of one’s spirituality that is acted out in specific practices. These include food provision, clean water, refugee services, microfinance, education or medical services, which become especially urgent in times of crisis. In their service delivery, FBOs do not necessarily differ from secular NGOs, with whom they often cooperate, yet for religious actors, the mode of interpretation and motivation stems from within a specifically religious framework. For many religious traditions, giving alms to the needy and/or tithing are central aspects of their own religious self-understanding and spirituality.

## 3.2. Material Contributions of Religious Actors to Peace

### 3.2.1. Values and Normative Concepts (Religion as a Set of Teachings, Religion as Practice)

Religious traditions contain not only dogmatic truth claims, but also ethical imperatives regarding what is viewed as right and wrong. These are based on values and certain normative concepts regulating everyday action and behavior. Many religions regard life itself as a gift by God which means that efforts must be taken to protect one’s own and other people’s lives from harm. As the German pastor and Nazi resistance fighter Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) puts it: “Since by God’s will human life on earth exists only as bodily life, the body has a right to be preserved for the sake of the whole person” (Bonhoeffer 2005, p. 185). Based on this premise, Bonhoeffer deduces the necessity of basic human rights as normative concepts. From life itself as a fundamental value, other values follow, such as compassion, justice, peace and reconciliation. Multiple narratives and teachings in different religions serve the dissemination and strengthening of these values. “Religious communities have developed structures and defined relationships shaped by these values, and their belief systems

encourage efforts to speak out on behalf of and assist the disadvantaged, marginalized and vulnerable” (UNICEF 2017).

### 3.2.2. Holistic Anthropology (Religion as Discourse, Religion as Spirituality)

With secular NGOs often focusing on the material improvement of individuals and communities, FBOs bring in a holistic perspective. Based on their distinct anthropology, they seek to provide support not only to the body, but also to the soul. Connecting the material and spiritual, the physical and the emotional, religious actors embrace a holistic understanding of human flourishing. The significance of assisting not only the body, but also the heart and soul of people becomes apparent, for instance, in post-conflict situations such as in post-genocide Rwanda. Here, religious actors such as Christian churches or FBOs often combine reconciliation with development initiatives. In the small town of Remera, the Presbyterian Church, for example, supports the “Lights”. This group helps perpetrators and survivors through building long-term relationships with one another. These processes are supported by regular bible studies and meetings where issues of healing, forgiveness and dealing with the past are addressed. At the same time, pairs of survivor and perpetrator receive practical support, for instance, through apple saplings. By caring jointly for the saplings and splitting any income they generate, they are not only able to improve the material situations of themselves and their families, but in their daily interactions, empathy, trust and reconciliation can start to grow. Welcome synergetic effects thus help to improve the sustainability of both religious peace and development work.

### 3.2.3. Dealing with Trauma and Meaning (Religion as a Set of Teachings, Religion as Spirituality)

Experiences of violent conflict are traumatic. While physical scars are clearly visible signs of the violence and injustice suffered, emotional wounds often remain hidden. Yet, if they are not attended to, they tend to fester, cementing feelings of powerlessness and insignificance and/or hatred and desire for revenge, thereby perpetuating the spiral of violence. Survivors of gross human rights violations often struggle with integrating these experiences into their life story, in other words, with finding meaning. Here, religious frameworks can provide valuable assistance. The conviction of ultimate justice and redemption helps individuals to connect their own personal life story to the larger eschatological framework, which can impart hope and meaning to traumatized victims. At the same time, religious concepts such as forgiveness and grace help in dealing with feelings of shame, guilt and failure, emotions inevitably occurring in contexts of violent conflict and affecting both victims and perpetrators. In Islam, for instance, concepts such as predestination and the total sovereignty of God together with the values of respecting others and reestablishing order and harmony can help to facilitate processes of healing and reconciliation (Abu-Nimer and Kadayifci-Orellana 2008).

### 3.2.4. Rituals (Religion as Practice, Religion as Spirituality)

It is only recently that the significance of rituals for peace has been explored in more detail (cf. Schirch 2015). On the one hand, rituals help to structure daily life. They provide routine and stability, which in times of unrest, become of high importance. On the other hand, rituals are rich in symbolism and rely primarily on nonverbal methods of communication. As such, they are able to access parts of the person that mere rational approaches cannot reach. Rituals, symbols and other coded non-verbal expressions can thus be helpful in dealing with post-traumatic experiences by creating openings for dealing with the past and for reconciliation. Religious actors have employed, adapted and newly created rituals to structure the path to healing. Catholic communities in Rwanda have, for instance, creatively utilized the Christian sacrament of penance. By means of the ritualized process of the *gacaca nkirisitu* (Christian gacaca), perpetrators and survivors are led and accompanied on the road to reconciliation (Carney 2015).

#### 4. Religion and Peace in Post-Genocide Rwanda: The Example of CARSA's Cows for Peace Project

In order to illustrate the above discussion, I will utilize the example of the Christian FBO CARSA (Christian Action for Reconciliation and Social Assistance) and their innovative Cows for Peace project ([www.carsaministry.org](http://www.carsaministry.org)). Faced with the aftermath of the 1994 genocide and struggling to deal with his own losses, Christophe Mbonyingabo founded CARSA in 2004, a local FBO "which aims to support communities in Rwanda in their journey towards healing, forgiveness, reconciliation and holistic development" (CARSA Christian Action for Reconciliation and Social Assistance). Mbonyingabo developed the idea to present pairs of survivor and perpetrator with a cow. This valuable gift not only improves the material situation of survivors, perpetrators and their families, but through the joint care of the animal, pathways for healing and reconciliation are opened up. Regular meetings and bible studies accompany the process. Meanwhile, this project has found numerous emulators throughout the country and it serves well to illustrate the different dimensions of religious peace work.

*Religion as Community.* Though retaining its independence from established churches, CARSA's Cows for Peace project is firmly situated within a Christian context. Perpetrators and survivors, who have been presented with a cow, come together for regular meetings. CARSA staff lead the group in prayer, bible readings and discussions, yet there is room for informal exchange as well. The structured setting of the meetings helps to create bonds between former enemies. Over time, a group feeling and group solidarity develops that supports positive changes in interpersonal relationships. Trust and even friendship grow as shattered identities are being rebuilt.

*Religion as a Set of Teachings.* During their regular meetings, CARSA staff emphasize Christian concepts, norms and values such as forgiveness, grace and personal transformation. Corresponding quotes from the Bible, such as Matt 6:12 ("And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us") or Matt 18:21–35 (Parable of the Unforgiving Servant) help to reiterate the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation. The ethical dimensions of religious teachings are thus encountered as pertaining to one's own individual life.

*Religion as Spirituality.* The spiritual dimension of religion connects to the participants' personal life and experiences. Spiritual activities such as prayer, worship and Bible meditation have a firm place in CARSA's approach. Both survivors and perpetrators can find here an outlet for destructive emotions such as shame, guilt or hatred. In a culture that frowns upon the public display of sorrow—as expressed by the saying "The tears of a man go to his belly"—spiritual activities as the ones accompanying the Cows for Peace project can offer a way to deal with individual trauma and loss of meaning.

*Religion as Practice.* In a country in which more than 90% of the population adhere to the Christian faith, CARSA can link its activities to a general Christian setting as expressed, for instance, in weekly church services and regular church activities. Yet, by means of creatively using Christian symbols and by creating new rituals, CARSA connects the Christian faith more immediately to the experiences and needs of a post-genocide society. The cross as the central Christian symbol, for instance, is employed in a powerful *rite de passage*, when participants actually nail their personal letters to a wooden artifact, thereby symbolically handing over their grief and longings to Christ.

*Religion as Discourse.* Due to their often Christian socialization, most participants are familiar with the Christian language and imagery employed by CARSA. This helps to set an atmosphere of familiarity and welcome, serving subtly to create bonds between the participants. As for power structures, CARSA staff are clearly perceived to be in authority, if only derived from their reliance on Biblical authority. At the same time, a self-critical perspective on the part of CARSA is called for, combined with an awareness of the asymmetrical relationships between leader and participants.

*Religion as an Institution.* While CARSA started out as a small FBO driven by the effort of one individual, it has meanwhile grown to support more than 80 regional groups throughout the country. CARSA earned the trust of its participants through its reliability and service delivery. As apparent in its name, its trademark is the combination of "reconciliation" and "social assistance", of peace work and

development work. Through its holistic approach, CARSA cares for the body and the soul, offering practical help and spiritual support.

## 5. Conclusions

To sum up, with the role of religion in peacemaking and peacebuilding attracting increasing attention in academia, policy making and practicing, the above discussion analyzed different dimensions of the often nebulous “religious factor” in both conflict and peace. Structured along formal and material aspects, the contributions of religion to peace processes came into clearer focus. Awareness of the anatomy of the love–hate relationship between religion and peace and of the different dimensions of religion in conflict and in peace facilitates conflict analysis and can help to find openings for the constructive engagement of religious actors on the pathway to sustainable peace and reconciliation. It became clear, however, that just as religion itself, each of its dimensions are ambiguous and can serve either conflictive or peaceful means. Nevertheless, it also became clear that religion matters in both conflict and peace. Rather than ignoring its impact, the different roles of religion need to be clearly analyzed and, where possible, religion’s help enlisted in the joint engagement for a more peaceful world. In this vein, CARSA’s Cows for Peace Project in post-genocide Rwanda provided a constructive example of religious peacebuilding.

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