

25th – 27th June 2007 in Passau, Germany

Introduction:

Highly diverse forms of violent conflict – both inter- and intrastate – between groups of every description are currently framed as religious. Twenty years ago the ultimate cause for such conflicts was looked for in ethnicity, language or, indeed, economic factors. The perception changed so decisively primarily when attention focussed on Islamic groups and their claim to fight against discrimination and suppression in the name of religion. Suddenly these claims, formerly being dismissed as pretexts, were being taken seriously. Fatally, it looks as though this attitude was conducive to the emergence of numerous increasingly violent conflicts in many regions of the world; in fact, it seems to bring forth these conflicts. Ever more groups that feel underprivileged or aggrieved try to rectify things with the religious argument. Can religion really be taken as reason for conflict and even more so for the use of violence in conflicts? Whether suppression actually happens on account of religion is one question in this connection, the other is whether the fight against this suppression indeed occurs for religious reasons. However, in nearly all cases, a contradiction, even a paradox between doctrine and practice is evident. The texts demand peacefulness in all major world religions, but nevertheless actual violence is committed in their name. Are religions inherently violent? In popular perception this is stated with regards to the Abrahamic religions. In contrast, Hinduism and even more Buddhism are considered religions of inherent peacefulness, fostered by protagonists of these religions like Mahatma Gandhi and the Dalai Lama. Yet even here, or better, precisely here, we encounter the mentioned paradox in its starkest form. The peacefulness may be a demand, in most cases, it is just a fiction. In the light of these observations the question arises why violent conflict and violent attacks are justified, even sanctioned with religious arguments. Is religion a cause of violence or is it being merely instrumentalised? If the latter, why and how is it being instrumentalised?

Structure of the Conference and leading Issues:

In the countries under study, we discern multiple layers of religious involvement and of conflict, giving rise to equally layered questions that should be addressed in the planned conference. These questions are discussed in panel sessions. The focus are general questions concerning the relations and tensions between religion, violence, development and conflict. Therefore we want to avoid country specific discourses. Nevertheless, the presentations should have a sound empirical base, which is in most cases country specific. The empirical based papers will be presented on these general panels so that the specifics of each country can be discussed in a comparative way.

Panels and questions to be discussed:

1. Political uses of religion in Theravada Buddhist countries:

Religion is simultaneously legitimizing and resisting political power and claims. It is a phenomenon observed in Sri Lanka as well as in Burma. The explanation of the monks or the Sangha of having to guide the rulers and lead them on the right path, obscures more than it clarifies. It does not really account for the wariness with which religion is treated by the political establishment in all countries. It clearly has something to do also with the perception and degree of religiosity of the population. However, whether religion is merely instrumentalised or used as a fig-leaf by the rulers to follow their own agendas, as Gombrich postulates for Sri Lanka, or whether a more basic perception of the power of religion and religiosity, maybe even fear, underlies political actions, has to be investigated.

2. Everyday Religion: Function and Meaning

The political uses of religion have to be connected to the general role religion plays in everyday life. Here it is not so much the doctrine that is to be investigated, but religious practice and interpretation for worldly life, religion as a provider of meaning. Doctrine, however, plays a role insofar as the mentioned paradox should be highlighted and discussed, since this alone will give us a hint about the political use and significance of religion as a variable. Here, the comparison with India will be helpful. Similarly, the religiosity of the people does not suffice as explanation for controversy and violent conflict. As Nanda has shown, they have to be convinced that someone or something acutely threatens the unimpeded pursuit or the security of their religious convictions. We have to see when and how these perceptions arise and what fuels them.

3. Charisma and Conflict: Religion Why and for What Ends?

Is religion really the main reason for these conflicts arising or going on? Is religion used for political, social, or economic exclusion and/or suppression, or is it possibly the other way round: e.g. the economy being used for religious exclusion? In all of these cases we have to enquire into the significance of these other factors: economic, social, political ones? Why were these conflicts, if they are ongoing for some amount of time, labeled differently in different periods? Which leads us back to the previous question: are we talking about the same conflicts all the time? Are these conflicts the same ones that were fought in the past? Only by asking this question can we address claims that these are centuries-old conflicts which are just being fought continuously. Or are they new conflicts that are just given the same name? Who would then be interested to first keep the conflict alive and second to define them as continuous and why?

4. The Parochialisation of Religion and the Sacralisation of Violence

If indeed these conflicts are religiously informed, we have to enquire what type of religion informs them. We saw that following an identical religion, even a world religion, does not prevent countries from going to war. On the other hand, conversion is sometimes propagated and even used as an ostensible means to overcome problems of secession and separation. It goes without saying that this rarely works as planned. But it points to a parochialisation and provincialisation of world religions which can become particularly dangerous. It leads to claims of uniqueness and being endangered and hampers a perception of commonality. Sri Lanka, e.g. declares its religion endangered by the Tamils and by India, but never looks beyond to all the countries of the same religion in Southeast Asia, though it has shown considerable ambition to join the economically powerful and largely ASEAN. What, then, is being endangered: the nation, the territory, or the vision of a better future? Which would then take us back to the question of meaning. This parochialisation and territorialisation of religion and its effects should be studied further. How does it occur and what purpose does it serve? And what are the consequences not only for non-Buddhist, but even for ethnic Buddhist minorities?

5. Dharma and Development: Interdependencies between religion and development policies

Where, then, does this leave us with regard to religion as the cause for violent conflict or as an agent of development and the claimed retreat into religion from an uncertain world? Does it not become doubtful in the light of this? Then what is the real role of religion? While, as outlined above, it apparently is rarely the stated or even real cause for conflict, it can serve to legitimize conflict, violence and inclusion or exclusion. The mechanisms for this process have to be unraveled.

6. Religion as a Reservoir of Public and Private Meaning

Why does religion appear so eminently suitable as a sort of repository and reservoir as well as focus of resistance and struggle, what, to repeat an earlier formulation, is the surplus of religion that makes it superior to territorial and national ideologies? Who, and that is the really decisive question, draws attention to this possible factor, who concentrates and focusses insecurities and interests and directs them towards defined targets? Normative self-images and the instrumentalisation of religion for political purposes can by no means be equated with religion as a causal factor; instead we have to ask, why the instrumentalisation of religion appears more successful than e.g. ethnicity or language and so on. Is nowadays religion more important than other markers, or are we labouring under a delusion here? The situation in Sri Lanka makes the latter assumption probable. In other words: what is it that makes religion so efficient as 'opium of the people'? It is not sufficient to consider religion as one factor determining social and political life, because then we would overlook the question, how, if at all, religion does determine these areas. The role of religion in martial conflicts has to be investigated case by case, before we can reach generalising and theoretical conclusions. The foregoing considerations starkly confront us with the question of the ranking of religion in a secular context: If it really possesses an ideological surplus lacking in other ideologies, then we can hardly consider religion as merely another form of ideology. But can we really consider it as a meta-ideology? Would that not mean that we anticipate our conclusions? What is it that makes religion powerful enough that it cannot really or at most only temporarily be substituted by nationalism or any other secular ideology? And moreover: how does it come about that conversely nationalism frequently needs if not a religious, but at least a sacred component to be efficient? If territorial borders become sacred boundaries and citizenship becomes belonging in a chosen people then we might operate with the construct of the reversal of values. Religion and/or the sacred help in the interpretation and overcoming of crises when everyday knowledge fails. Still, that does not really account for the component of violence. Some answers to these questions we hope to arrive at in the planned conference.