

## **Muslims and Christians: Global Confrontation or local problems?**

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**Increasingly, many secular people, Christians and Muslims depict a number of conflicts in our world as religious wars and manifestations of ancestral hatred. Religious intolerance, more particularly associated with Islam and indiscriminately attributed to Muslims, is likely invoked as a determinant in such conflicts. With more or less religious and historical overtones, reference is frequently made to *Jihad* and Crusade. Expressions of what is said to be an Islamic “threat” continue to capture, with more intensity, the instantaneity of media’s attention. Perceptions of Muslims, and conflicts they are a party to, are marked increasingly by sensationalism, essentialism and culturalism.**

In privileging what is sensational, certain images and stories do not only over-simplify complex realities, but tend to blur the picture they claim to make clear.

Historically specific or culturally, politically and religiously diverse, the situations of Muslims in relations to non-Muslims are, in the eyes of many, essentially the same. Many do not seem to be willing or able to recognize plurality, avoid precipitated comparisons and refrain from amalgamation. To do so would be, in their eyes, a failure or unwillingness to acknowledge major trends in today’s world.

At best, the search for intellectual rectitude and subtlety is dismissed as luxury. For their part, a mix of advocates of secular or Christian cultural supremacy and liberal proponents of the respect for other cultures exoticized, emphasize the distinctiveness of what is labeled as Islamic culture. However, their exaggeration of the status of culture and its role in explaining personal and collective behavior is less perceptible when they reflect on their own situations.

People, religious or secular, who are directly involved in, or affected by, conflicts can overstate their religious dimension. In the early phase of the second Palestinian uprising, the religious dispute over Holy Places in Jerusalem overshadowed, in the eyes of many, the dispossession and humiliation of Palestinians. The various calls to *Jihad* in Indonesia blurred the perception of many other causes of inter-communal tensions. The recent killings of Christian worshippers in Bahawalpur (Pakistan), abominable as it, may have prevented some people from considering the dangers of the legitimacy crisis of Pakistan’s and admitting that that while Christians are killed, the main addressee of the violent act is Musharraf.

Thus, the more a religious factor, one among many, is singled out as decisive in provoking and sustaining conflicts, the stronger becomes its impact on the course of these conflicts.

Interpreting local tensions and disputes as manifestations of a global confrontation, feeds into a “trans-national discourse” on “bloody borders” between Christianity and Islam, or between the Muslim World and the Western World. It is vehicled sometimes by the “diaspora” of communities and nations concerned, espoused by a number religious organizations and, in certain cases, policy-makers in a number of countries.

In its turn, this discourse is often a factor of aggravation in local conflicts, for it is known that myths once propounded gain a force of their own. The vulnerability of those who are seen to be on the wrong side of such presumed borders, namely religious minorities, is accentuated.

In short, misinterpreting or exaggerating the role of religions in international and even intra-national relations marks perceptions of local conflicts, leading to their aggravation and the subsequent failures in addressing them. Conflicts are also affected by the propagation of a globalist discourse and its corollaries. Both factors are closely associated with the rift in many nations, the legitimacy crisis of a significant number of national projects and the inadequacies of systems or practices of political participation in most religiously and ethnically plural societies.

### **The Banner of Religion**

Until the late seventies, secularization was seen, almost universally, to be irreversible. For many years, there was a tendency to propose a chronological scheme for the erosion of religion. Secularisation was supposed to be its ultimate phase. Conceived as a social-historical process of achieving an ever-greater autonomy of society and human thought in relation to religious institutions, symbols and approaches of reality, secularisation was equated with modernisation and progress. It was considered inevitable. While it was recognised that many societies did not seem to follow the universal path, their specificity was perceived as an expression of delay, reflecting inadequate modernisation, or as a form of provisional retrogression illustrating a last attempt of cultural resistance before the inescapable surrender.

In communist countries, eradication of religion was thought to be under way, despite some hurdles that caused delay. Problems of nationalities where religious identity could not be ignored were presumably solved by deportations and population transfers in a few cases and the granting of a limited cultural and political autonomy in others.

Throughout the world, most conflicts were perceived to be determined largely by economic interests, social contradictions and political rivalries. Religion had little or no visible role in international relations. Its role in national politics was seen to be declining. Theological and political polarizations within one religious community, Christian or Muslim, overshadowed the historical divisions among religions. Majorities and minorities, whenever mentioned, were perceived in terms of power relations and not numerical importance or cultural specificities. National integration was a prevailing model. Privatization of religion, through the combined effects of modernization and urbanization on one hand and the state-led nation building on non-religious or secular basis on the other hand, seemed to limit the impact of religious plurality on political structures. With a few exceptions, power sharing was hardly an inter-communal and inter-religious issue.

Traditional religious identities were said to be waning. A significant faction of religious people and organizations made great efforts to conform to modernity tied with an irreversible secularization. Religious institutions seemed to have lost much of their influence. In this context, a radical change in the way of transmitting a religious message, and a transformation of its content and emphasis, occurred within Christianity but also within Islam. When sociologists extrapolated the waning of religion, a number of western Christian theologians pronounced the death of the traditional discourse about God. This was their way of drawing the theological consequence of the process of secularisation. One of the aspects of a certain "liberation theology", presented itself, and was

understood, to be an attempt to rescue the revolutionary core values of faith against the eroding credibility of traditional religion . 1)

A number of authors, mostly agnostic, are repeatedly predicting a "religious" century- to come. Some are puzzled at the prevailing expectation of a world of more mysticism and others are preoccupied with the "the return of history", fearing wars under the banner of religion. Be that as it may, it had now become clear that the prognosticators of technological and modernizing pace would expel religion out to the margins, were wrong. They allowed that faith might well survive as a valued heritage in some ethnic enclaves or family customs but insisted that religion's days as a shaper of culture and history were over. This did not happen. Instead, religions that some theologians and other intellectuals thought had been stunted by consumerist materialism or suppressed by despotic regimes, have regained a whole new vigour.

It is true that religious beliefs and practises were, wherever they noticeably survived, visibly privatised in many societies. Collective identities associated with faith traditions seemed to find their expressions in the national-cultural self-understanding that, at best, integrated elements of religious memory. But the "return of religion" or "the return to religion" showed that the driving force of things metaphysical has not been consummated nor extinguished was the power of sentiments that bind people together in one faith. This movement took many people by surprise. It was not characterised in a clear manner nor even given a precise and widely accepted name. The re-emergence of fundamentalism, the resurgence of religion, its awakening or its revival were indiscriminately and interchangeably used. Manifestations of religious self-assertion, in the particularity of their context or the distinctiveness of their faith tradition, are increasingly seen as variations of a universal phenomenon.

It is needless to say that the regained interest in religion reflects two opposing, and in many instances ambivalent, attitudes. The first one reveals a satisfaction to see religion refilling a spiritual vacuum and offering meaning and hope to a world threatened by meaninglessness, nihilism and despair. But the second mirrors a fear from the eruption of dreams and other things irrational, and an anxiety facing the dangers of bigotry and fanaticism.

Today the assumption that we live in a secularised, and secularising, world does not meet a universal approval. A leading sociologist of religion does not hesitate to affirm that in present times the world, with some exceptions, is as furiously religious as it ever was and in some places more so than ever. 2) To be sure, modernization has had some secularising effects, more in some places than others. But it has also provoked powerful movements of counter-secularisation. Certain religious institutions have lost power in many societies but old and new religious beliefs and practices find their expressions, sometimes in an explosive manner. Conversely, religiously identified institutions play social and political roles even when fewer numbers of people believe or practice the religion that such institutions represent. In some extreme cases, people fight in the name of religions in which they ceased to believe. There are conflicts between communities that have a religious past but their religious content is of no relevance. Religions that in which people have little faith continue to define communities in which they have much faith.

It is therefore essential, when assessing the role of religion in politics, international or national, to distinguish between political movements that may be genuinely inspired by religion and those that use religion as a convenient legitimation for political agendas based on quite non-religious interests.

Be that as it may, the distinction between religious motivation and political interests does not imply their radical separation. In many situations, they cannot be disentangled. Somehow, singularly, the *Taliban* rule in Afghanistan, perpetrating an intra-Muslim conflict, obeys to two divergent logics. On the one hand, they claim an Islamic universalism, emphasize the *Umma* dimension and do not hesitate, in the name of *Shari' a*, to oppose traditional tribal structures and culture. While they fiercely subordinate women, they condemn customary law that deprives women from inheritance and insist on their rights enshrined in the Quranic text. On the other hand, they have an ethnic base, the *Pashtuns*, and their conquest of power is, in a way, a return of their ethnic group to its two centuries old dominance. The consolidation of their rule in the areas they control lead them, in an inexorable logic, to a form of “ethnic cleansing”.

It is frequent, when referring to tensions and conflicts involving Christians and Muslims, to assume that religious revival, Islamic or otherwise, is a universal phenomenon which, to the extent it is politicised, puts at peril coexistence between communities. While it is true that some religious movements can foster war, some other see themselves as agents of peace in societies where the main actors in conflicts are motivated by ethnic and ethno-nationalist interests. Many of those who manifest a stronger religious commitment seem to position themselves on the moderate range of the political spectrum.

### **Globalizing views**

It is has become difficult to discard the resonating effects in many parts of the world of a discourse on the global confrontation between Christianity or the West and Islam. Although the contemporary western world has been largely self-defined as secular and Muslims gradually perceived it as such, there is a mounting tendency to emphasize its historical and cultural identity and portray it, as Christian or Judeo-Christian does not go unnoticed. Non-Western Christians can often be identified culturally with the West and, in the case of their affirmed cultural and religious difference, suspected of political allegiance to North American and European powers, even if they do not enjoy nor expect any support from them. It matters significantly less than a few decades ago, that many Christians were a major actor in anti-colonial independence movements and continue to be strong critics of western dominance.

In the Muslim world, ideological thought patterns represent the West as selfish, materialistic and dominating. In the West, the equivalent thought patterns perceive Islam as irrational, fanatical and expansionist. In the age of global communication and migration, these thought patterns, in the variety of their subtle and not-so-subtle expressions, foster antagonism.

It is true that the issue of Islam and the West is more complex and more contingent upon contemporary concerns than either proponents and opponents of culturalist politics would imply. Many of the problems, such as foreign hegemony and intervention, terrorism and international threats, are confused and exaggerated. But they have become real issues although they are, in the main, relating to power of states, the treatment of migrant and minority groups and the balance of forces within many developing societies. 3)

But it is not less true that the end of worldwide ideological confrontations, and the globalization of Islam, 4) has favored the re-emergence of perceptions where Islam and the West exist as subjective, imaginary constructs, which influence the way each, sees the other.

It is increasingly suggested that in the post-cold war world, flags do tremendously count and so do other symbols of cultural and religious identity. It is predicted that marching under flags leads to war. For “people seeking identity and reinventing ethnicity, enemies are essential, and the potentially most dangerous enmities occur across the fault lines between the world’s major civilizations”. 5)

The world has entered an era of cultural struggle where wars and confrontations are no longer the result of clashes between individual nations or states. The clash between the “West and the rest”, we are told, is religious to the extent that religions shapes civilizations and they do so significantly. It is political as long as politics is determined by civilizational affinities instead of ideological options. The explosive force of such ideas lays in the depiction of old hostilities between East and West on modern-day collective consciousness and the potential consequence in relation to world politics.

A significant number of Muslims see the wars in Palestine, Bosnia, Chechnya and Afghanistan as a continuation of the Crusades. What was called, widely and until the nineteenth century, the Frankish invasions has gained the connotation of a global and trans-historical religious and political conquest. Western soldiers engaged in military operations against Iraq are Crusaders and so are Christian missionaries. This de-historicization and amalgamation enforces the religious overtones of what had been, for a long time, but a major political and military confrontation in the history of Western expansion. The 1991 Gulf war was seen by many as a revival of the Crusades, despite the fact that many Islamic states joined the US-led western military alliance. Western predominance in the Arab world, colonial and post-colonial, nurtured a historicist view of the Crusades, whereby Muslims see themselves retrospectively as victims despite their position of strength at the time. The serenity and fortitude, which characterized Muslims reactions to the Medieval Crusaders or Franks, is reinterpreted in terms of the military, political and economic subordination of the Islamic world today.

The imaginary has been an important factor in conflicts since 1991. Soon after the Gulf war, the majority in the West was fearful of the growth of Islamism on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. Thus many decision-takers and opinion-makers were prepared to turn a blind eye to the severe blow to democracy by the Algerian military, which lead to a cruel civil war. Public images of Muslims as fanatical and violent revealed a dangerous congruence between many in the secular and mainstream, left or right, ideas and the ultra-nationalist and xenophobic slogans warning against Islamic threats.

For their part, a number of western historians have been trying to re-historicize, more intensively in the last few years and around the nine hundredth anniversary of the first Crusade, a designation that has almost become a generic expression conveying the sense of a zealous campaign. This crucial work, which undoubtedly contributes to the healing of memories, is hardly paralleled when it comes to reading the history of Muslim peoples. Worse, reductionist approaches proposing the notion of *Jihad* as the key, and the only key, to interpret Muslim attitudes towards non-Muslims past and present, seem to receive a wide audience.

Thus, many Muslims overstate the religious character of political and military confrontations while many Christians, in the West but not in the West only, fail to historicize *Jihad* and recognize its religious significance, not only as a legitimation of defense war but as the spiritual struggle in the way of God.

In addition to war-prone attitudes and fears that are fostered by the tendency to globalize Christian-Muslim relations, one could refer to the way in which are often advocated, in the West, the rights of Christian minorities in predominantly Islamic countries and the call for reciprocity in the treatment of minorities, frequently heard in religious, and sometimes secular, circles. **6)** The logic of reciprocity, borrowed by religious communities from states, favors a world view opposing an Islamic Umma with Christendom, no matter if both are not historical realities in the present time, each having a ramification in the “abode” of the other. Asymmetrically diverse, minorities can be, and are, perceived as victims and not actors. Their ability to act as bridge-builders is severely jeopardized when they are forced into a condition of hostages.

Such a role of mediation, that many of them continue nevertheless to play, is put at risk by when human rights violations are addressed selectively. Many of the interests of Christian minorities cannot be safeguarded and promoted except in conjunction with those of the Muslim majorities among whom they live. Upholding the rights of Christians in the Muslim world, in a way that suggests, or is looked upon, a form of foreign intervention for the sake of protection, reinforces, the perception that they are alien in their own countries or disloyal to them. **7)** Defending the rights of Christians in opposition to their Muslims co-citizens and neighbors, with whom they share culture and national identity, aggravates the suspicion of majorities towards minorities seen as an instrument of a real or potential threat instigated by foreign and powerful forces.

Moreover, there are cases where the amplification of a number of real problems faced by Christians may hide, in actual fact, an unwillingness to contribute effectively towards their solution. It may provide a justification for a policy of resignation announcing, at times, the imminent eradication of the concerned minorities. **8)** What is seen as an irreversible process renders the Muslim world homogeneous, a radical other, which can be thrown into “outside darkness”.

### **The rift in many nations**

In some parts of the world, the traditional nation state model is subject to growing questioning. Some countries, like in the Balkans, have fallen apart, others, such as in Western Europe, are constructing larger entities. States have become too small for some purposes and too large for others. It is often claimed that future belongs to the infra-national and supra-national formations. In many post-colonial independent countries of Africa the Arab world and Asia, nation-building projects remain incomplete, become fragile or are failing. This is also the case in post-soviet countries. The conflict in Chechnya, for instance, represents a potential shattering of the ever-fragile post-soviet federalism as much as it reflects the possible advance of politicized Islam in Eurasia.

The borders set by the old and new imperial powers, while mostly unchanged, could not gain universal acceptance. In some cases, they are disputed. Claims to common nationhood have been countered by the fact that ethnic, cultural and linguistic communities straddle sometimes several state boundaries, while contributing to divisions within them. The examples are many in the Caucasian and trans-Caucasian regions and in the Balkans.

National governments are often far from having succeeded in delivering on promises of genuine national independence and social and economic advancement. Indeed, in many instances, early progress has gone into reverse and large sections of the national population have sunk deeper into poverty. This has provoked, or fuelled, many violent upheavals in Algeria and quite a few sub-Saharan African countries. Official rhetoric of development, national unity, democracy and human

rights often contrasted with realities and contributed to the erosion of the credibility of political institutions and their legitimacy.

The state is further weakened by a continuing globalisation of economic processes, and of information, which is associated with greater human mobility through migration, refugee movements and the growth of transnational networks. The threat posed by a global culture to national and local identities adds to the pressures on national and regional loyalties. New relations between people across traditional ties and webs of interests have created new loyalties and identities in which local community has little meaning.

As many states are becoming weak, people are thrown back to identify with, and rely on, traditional community structures and identities for meaning and security. Conversely, when a state becomes oppressive, people find protection in traditional community structures and identities. In both cases, the effects of globalisation leading to greater cultural uniformity invite, in many cases, a search for specificity and favour a re-affirmation of traditional identities. We are before a paradox where the unprecedented homogenisation exacerbates the quest for distinction and recognition.

When various human needs, personal or collective and material or symbolic, are being met or expressed in one identity, instead of many, the borders between communal loyalties are mutually reinforced. Boundaries between oneself and the other are thus strengthened. They create closed communities within which common and exclusive memories can be developed and activated, the self and stranger are stereotyped and the latter is easily demonised.

In such cases, differences in community size become an issue of minority threatened by majority. Insecure communities in one place seek alliances with others elsewhere, perceived to share a common identity, in order to achieve political empowerment. National governments and political movements that are part of "majority" communities see their suspicion towards "minorities" justified and deepened. At the same time, some governments strengthen their power by managing communities and relations between them, exploiting mutual fears, mobilizing one against the other and recruiting some in support and thus further undermining the security of others.

In many countries the logic of politics and culture seem to go the course of national fragmentation. The dynamics of globalisation limit substantially the exercise of power within the limits of a national territory. But this does not announce the universal demise of politics driven by national aspirations and considerations of national sovereignty. In fact, there are, in some countries, manifestations of an awakened nationalism. But a widespread interpretation, in the West, based on a culturalist or primordialist understanding of the nation, considers nationalism to be an archaism, something like a return of history. At best, it is a late and disordered construction that is still thought to be the way of access, in many societies, to modernity. 9) Politicians evoke a world to be ruled by the universal principles of market economy, democracy and human rights but which is threatened by "ancestral hatred". The problems of nationalism are seen as belonging to the realm of affectivity rather than that of politics. It is true that most of the protagonists in conflicts invoke history. Collective memories, once reactivated in political mobilization, may aggravate the temptation of "thinking with the blood". But the success of such mobilization is not determined by ancestral atavisms but by political strategies of power conquest or preservation. It is not ancestral hatred that is the cause of wars, and the examples are many, but war causes hatred. Ancestral hatred is, more often than not, fabricated rather than inherited. It is in many ways a creation of modernity and much less than an expression of a continued history

## **De-globalizing tensions and conflicts?**

It is undeniable that relations between Muslims and Christians are strongly influenced by local and regional histories and events. But, as suggested in this article, broader developments also have a significant impact, especially when they contribute to destabilising societies previously characterised by peaceful relations and shared life. It is mostly in situations where uncertainties of change begin to be felt, that mistrust and mutual apprehension can build up between communities creating tensions leading possibly to conflicts.

When communities identify themselves or are identified exclusively or even exaggeratedly by their religion, situations become more explosive. Christianity and Islam carry, though in different ways that are region-specific, deep historical memories. They appeal, although variably, to universal loyalties. They come to be seen as a cause of conflict while often they are not more than an intensifying feature of disputes whose main causes are outside religion.

There are cases where a conflict in one place, with its local causes and character, is perceived and instrumentalized as part of a conflict in another, with its separate and specific causes and character. So enmities in one part of the world spill over into situations of tension in other regions. An act of violence in one place is used to confirm stereotypes of the “enemy” in another place or even provoke revenge attacks elsewhere in the world. What is otherwise a remote conflict becomes a local problem. Neighbours hold each other accountable for the wrongs attributed to their co-religionists elsewhere. Unless they are prepared to dissociate themselves publicly from those with whom they share a common faith, they are accused of complicity with them.

It is therefore crucial to offer a prospect counteracting processes, which tend to globalize conflicts that involve Muslims and Christians. In other words, it is necessary to “de-globalize Christian-Muslim tensions” as a vital step towards resolving them. Attention to the specific local causes of conflicts helps identifying solutions to be found, first and foremost, in addressing those local causes. This is not possible unless the leaders of both communities refuse to be drawn into others’ conflicts on the basis of uncritical response to calls for solidarity among adherents to one faith. It is only in applying common principles of peace, justice and reconciliation that parties to local conflicts are helped to release Islam and Christianity from the burden of sectional interests and self-serving interpretations of beliefs and convictions. Christian and Islamic beliefs and convictions can then constitute a basis for critical engagement with human weakness and defective social and economic orders, in a common search for human well being, dignity, social justice and civil peace.

In responding to these necessities, Muslims and Christians learn that Christianity and Islam are not two monolithic blocks confronting each other. In dialogue with each other “they understand justice to be a universal value grounded in their faith and are called to take sides with the oppressed and marginalized, irrespective of their religious identity. Justice is an expression of a religious commitment that extends beyond the boundaries of one’s own religious community. Muslims and Christians uphold their own religious values and ideals when they take a common stand in solidarity with, or in defence of, the victims of oppression and exclusion”. **10)**

### **Footnotes:**

1) Quite elaborate and vocal among Christians, and less so among Muslims, liberation theology was meant to draw nearer to each other the progressive forces within all religions and among people of no religion.

- 2) See Peter L. Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview", in Berger (ed) *The Secularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Washington, 1999.
- 3) Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation*, London 1996, p. 127.
- 4) Yvonne Haddad, *The Globalisation Islam: the return of the Muslims to the West*, in John Esposito (ed) *The Oxford History of Islam*, Oxford 1999.
- 5) Samuel B. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the remaking of World Order*, London, 1997, p.20.
- 6) One example of this call, often said but not officially stated, was a Christian document drafted by the « Islam in Europe » committee. It was debated in 1996 and 1997 among Christians and Muslims from Europe and the Middle east and was subsequently revised. In recent years, a number of religious leaders spoke publicly the language of « reciprocity » although official Church texts, such as the pastoral document on relations with Muslims issued in 1998 by the Catholic Bishops Conference in France, deemphasize this notion.
- 7) This explains for example the virulent reactions in Egypt against the initiatives of the (official) US Commission on International Religious Freedom.
- 8) Jean-Pierre Valognes, *Vie et Mort des Chrétiens d'Orient*, Paris 1994.
- 9) Jacques Rupnik (sous la direction de), *Le déclin des nations*, Paris 1995, pp 19-20.
- 10) *Striving together in Dialogue: A Muslim-Christian Call to Reflection and Action*, The World Council of Churches, Interreligious Relations and Dialogue. Geneva, 2001, no.28.