In a briefing to the European Parliament in 2016, policy analyst Philippe Perchoc points out: ‘The role of religious groups in conflict and conflict resolution is at the centre of lively academic debate ... International organisations, states and think-tanks are giving increasing consideration to the religious dimension of conflict resolution’ (Perchoc 2016, 1). Paradigmatic for this growing interest in the role of religion on the political level is the European Union’s appointment of its first ever Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union in 2016. This appointment recognises the link between the right of freedom of religion, conscience and thought on the one hand and stability and peace on the other hand. As the EU ‘Guidelines on the protection and promotion of freedom of religions and belief’ state, ‘Violations of freedom of religion or belief may exacerbate intolerance and often constitute early indicators of potential violence and conflicts’ (Council of the European Union 2013, 1). At the same time, this appointment takes the increase of the number of people professing a religion or belief in the next decades into consideration. According to the Pew Research Center, all main religions – except Buddhism – will experience growth in numbers. By 2050, the number of Muslims will have increased to equal Christianity and 10 percent of Europeans will adhere to Islam (Pew Research Center 2015).

The interest in the religious dimensions of societal and political processes in general and in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in particular is fairly recent, however, as the secularisation thesis had dominated academic and political thought for decades. This contribution thus provides a brief overview of the rise of interest in the religious factor, before discussing key concepts in the field of conflict resolution. A third part examines the role of religious actors in conflict and conflict transformation, while a final part relates religion, conflict transformation and political parties. A focus on post-genocide Rwanda serves as a case study.

From a ‘disenchantment of the world’ to a ‘desecularisation of the world’

For decades Max Weber’s pronouncement of a ‘disenchantment of the world’ – in combination with the so-called secularisation thesis – had been dominating discourses in politics and academia. In recent years, however, a different perspective has attracted interest. A ‘return to the question of religion’ (Freeman 2012, 1), even a ‘desecularization of the world’ (Berger 1999) is now being
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proclaimed. Instead of moving towards a more and more secularised world, the role of religion in different contexts and in the making of modern society has become a focal point of attention of policy makers and academics alike. Yet studies dealing with religion generally face the problem that up to now ‘no universally accepted definition of religion or faith exists’ (Ware et al. 2016, 324). Moving beyond substantial versus functional definitions of religion (Werkner 2016), this contribution is based on the pragmatic premise to understand as ‘religion’ what is described as ‘religion’ by interlocutors and communities (Waardenburg 1986).

The contexts in which the role of religion has increasingly become the object of scientific reflection include conflict resolution and peacebuilding as well as political institutions and organisations such as political parties. In line with the global agenda of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), constructive conflict transformation and political institutions need to be seen as embedded in the larger context of sustainable development. Sustainable development is no longer regarded as pertaining exclusively to the Global South, but rather as having worldwide implications. Different from their predecessors, the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs make the inherent connection between sustainable development, peacebuilding and strong institutions explicit. SDG 16 calls for ‘Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions’. It is this connection that UN General Secretary António Guterres underlines: ‘We need a global response that addresses the root causes of conflict, and integrates peace, sustainable development and human rights in a holistic way – from conception to execution’ (Guterres 2017). The question regarding the role of religion in conflict transformation and political parties thus becomes part of the larger question for the role of religion in sustainable development in general. To put it pointedly: ‘The question is no longer whether religion matters for development … The question now is: how to systematically include the potentials of religious organizations for development, and according to what principles and criteria?’ (Religion and Sustainable Development Conference 2015, 7).

**Conflict resolution, conflict transformation, peacebuilding, reconciliation: what are we talking about?**

Conflict is part of the human condition. During its existence, humankind has engaged both in conflicts and in attempts at settling them. Conflict includes the individual, communal, national and international level. Conflict in itself is ethically neutral. Conflict can serve as a means to grow personally and it can be a motor for desirable social change. Instead of conflict itself, it is thus the way conflict is dealt with that becomes ethically significant. **Conflict resolution (CR)** is the term most often employed for describing discourses and activities designed to end conflict in a constructive manner. Rather than employing violent, at times military, means for ending conflicts, conflict resolution aims for solutions that are beneficial to all sides involved, while minimising the use of violence. There is no consensus on an overarching theory that would define scope, objects, approaches and methods of conflict resolution. Instead of constituting an academic discipline of its own or a distinct approach, conflict resolution might best be described as a mode of constructively dealing with conflict that is inter-disciplinary, utilises different approaches and engages both theory and practice.

Louis Kriesberg points out that ‘The CR field is in continuing evolution’ (Kriesberg 2009, 30). In the evolution of conflict resolution, Kriesberg differentiates between four phases:

1 Preliminary developments took place during 1914–1945, when the horrors of two world wars led to a strong interest in finding alternative ways of conducting and ending violent conflicts.
2 The period between 1946 and 1969 served to lay the groundwork of contemporary conflict resolution as numerous governmental and nongovernmental initiatives were designed to prevent future wars. These included the creation of supranational institutions (e.g. the United Nations (UN), the European Economic Community) and projects to facilitate national reconciliation between former enemies.

3 The third phase between 1970 and 1989 is characterised by expansion and institutionalising of conflict resolution.

4 The end of the Cold War in 1989 signalled significant changes for the field of conflict resolution that has since been in a phase of diffusion and differentiation.

The changing world landscape became marked by globalisation that on the one hand brought the spread of economic and political liberalism and an increase in the number of democratic countries, thereby contributing to the decline of the number and scale of international wars since 1989. The 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, however, signalled the advent of a new global situation, marked by terrorism and the instrumentalisation of religion and ethnicity for violence. A different perspective on globalisation became apparent, marked by resentment, demarcation and a sense of humiliation. These developments greatly impacted conflict resolution, which was now increasingly taken up by nongovernmental actors. The recurrence of violence and war, even after a negotiated agreement, drew attention to both the later stages of conflict and conflict prevention. External intervention, reconciliation, relationship building, participatory governance and institution building came more into focus. Attention was increasingly paid to middle- and long-term transformations necessary for building sustainable peace rather than quick and short-term solutions. Since the early 1990s, the concept of conflict transformation emerged as a field of study and practice from within the broader context of conflict resolution.

The development of conflict transformation has been significantly influenced by the author and practitioner, John Paul Lederach (Lederach 1997, 2003). By way of supplementing conflict resolution, Lederach proposes a different perspective on key issues, seeking to relate peace to justice concerns. The focus shifts from content to relationships and from immediate solutions to long-term transformations. These differences are based on a difference in the understanding of conflict itself. While conflict resolution tends to emphasise the need to quickly de-escalate conflict, the transformative view focuses on conflict as a means to produce constructive change. Conflict and change affect four central modes, namely the personal, the relational, the structural and the cultural. With regards to the personal dimension, conflict transformation seeks to reduce destructive effects of social conflicts, while increasing personal growth at the physical, emotional and spiritual level. Conflict transformation in the relational dimension aims at reducing ineffective communication, while enhancing mutual understanding. On the structural dimension, the goals include a comprehensive understanding of the root causes of violent conflict, while minimising violence and promoting structures that meet basic needs and encourage public participation. At the cultural level, the focus is on understanding the cultural patterns that contribute to violent expressions of conflict and on recognising cultural resources for dealing with the conflict in a constructive manner. Like conflict resolution, conflict transformation is a fluid field with no overarching meta-theory and encompassing different ideas and implementations (Bercovitch et al. 2009, Kriesberg 2011, Ramsbotham et al. 2005), yet it signals a shift in focus from a particular conflict in need of resolution to the larger context of building sustainable peace.

The concept of peacebuilding as a field of study and practice was prominently put forward by Johan Galtung among others in the late 1960s. Galtung sought to integrate peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding into a comprehensive perspective on sustainable peace (Galtung 1969, 1976). The 1992 UN document An Agenda for Peace (Boutros-Ghali 1992) helped to
create international visibility for this idea as it served as catalyst for more extensive studies and innovative approaches (Kumar 1997, Lederach 1997, Maynard 1999, Doyle and Sambanis 2000, Pugh 2000, UN 2000, 2004, 2006, 2010, Reychler and Paffenholz 2001). The UN concept of peacebuilding came to rest on four pillars, namely security, development, democratisation and human rights (Chetail 2009). UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding have been criticised for various reasons, including a perceived bias towards Westernised liberal thinking. This perspective can marginalise the role of gender as well as ethnic, religious and national identity issues (Enloe 2004, Porter 2007). Furthermore, UN peace operations focus on structures and tend to neglect actors. In interventions, some of which are highly invasive, top-down approaches and external actors are favoured. Recent work in this field has therefore emphasised the need for a stronger role of NGOs and local stakeholders during peacebuilding. Capacity building must be accompanied by relationship building and more attention needs to be paid to ‘reconciliation, truth recovery, inter-communal dialogue, building empathy and reducing prejudice’ (Ryan 2013, 33). These different approaches can be roughly categorised as representing the two main paradigms in peacebuilding studies. The problem-solving approach focuses on the immediate conflict and short-term solutions, while the critical paradigm seeks to take the wider context and the root causes of the conflict into consideration, including justice issues and power relations in society (Pugh 2013). In general, governments and international organisations are more interested in the policy-oriented problem-solving paradigm, even though this poses the danger of “epistemic closure” or like-minded academics and policy-makers talking to each other and continuation of policy regardless of whether it works or not (Mac Ginty 2013, 4).

While negotiation and mediation are key concepts within conflict resolution, it is reconciliation that has recently attracted special attention of policy makers and academics. Once primarily at home in religious contexts, it has long since become established in political and historical discourses. Especially societies-in-transition employ this term to denote their quest for stability, (economic) growth and a new beginning after periods of violent conflict, the South African Truth-and-Reconciliation Commission being the most well-known example. Reconciliation refers to both a process and a result. Its focus is on the building of long-term positive relationships and the (re-)establishment of mutual trust through incorporating different elements such as the confession of guilt, remorse, asking and granting forgiveness, truth finding and reparations (Schliesser 2018b). Reconciliation incorporates top-down and bottom-up initiatives and includes a transformative, in addition to a retributive perspective on justice. Recent scholarship promotes understanding reconciliation as the overarching paradigm that encompasses conflict resolution, rather than the other way around (Bar-Siman-Tov 2004, Leiner 2018).

Religious actors in conflict resolution and peacebuilding: potentials, problems and challenges

Religion is inherently ambivalent (Appleby 2000). It can serve to fuel hatred and violence, yet it also incorporates potent resources for reconciliation and overcoming violence. Most public and academic attention, however, is focused on the conflictive side of religion. Much less consideration is given to religious peacemaking, despite the fact that ‘religious groups … have recently and collectively increased their peacemaking efforts’ (Haynes 2007, 69, cf. Schwarz 2018). Gradually, however, policy makers and academics have come to realise the potentials of religion for conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Smock 2008, Hayward 2012).

Examples for the productivity of religion in conflict resolution and peacebuilding include both conflicts that do not have an explicitly religious dimensions and conflicts that do. The mediation work of the Catholic community Sant’Egidio has frequently been used as
paradigmatic for religiously inspired conflict resolution (Morozzo della Rocca 2013). Sant’Egidio was significantly involved, for instance, in helping to end the civil war in Mozambique (1977–1992), a proxy war during the Cold War with no apparent religious dimensions. Reverend James Wuye and Imam Mohammed Ashafa of the Interfaith Mediation Center in Nigeria are examples of religious peacemakers within religious conflicts. Wuye and Ashafa have been successfully promoting reconciliation and conflict resolution between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, developing an interfaith methodology for prospective peacemakers that can be used in Africa and beyond (Smock 2008).

**Potentials**

What are the characteristics of religious actors in processes of conflict resolution? While any attempt at generalisation needs to take the vast diversity of religious actors and faith-based organisations (FBOs) into account, certain specific features regarding form and content emerge – even though the borderline can be blurry. Formal characteristics include religious actors’ distinctive capability in building relationships, even between different ethnic and religious groups (Appleby 2006). In addition, religious actors oftentimes enjoy high trust and a reputation of moral competence, especially by economically and socially marginalised people groups (Heist and Cnaan 2016). This trust is related to the perception of religious actors as neutral, i.e. committed exclusively to peace and not pursuing their own interests (Bouta et al. 2005). Religious actors can furthermore oftentimes rely on extended and well-organised networks, supplying financial, institutional and human resources.

Religious communities are, without questions, the largest and best-organised civil institutions in the world today, claiming the allegiance of billions of believers and bridging the divides of race, class and nationality. They are uniquely equipped to meet the challenges of our time: resolving conflicts, caring for the sick and needy, promoting peaceful co-existence among all peoples.

*(World Conference on Religion and Peace, in: Heist and Cnaan 2016, 6)*

For a better understanding of the distinctive contribution of religious actors in conflict resolution and peacebuilding it is helpful to turn to social network analysis and its distinction between ‘weak-ties groups’ and ‘strong-ties groups’ (Granovetter 1973). While members of weak-ties groups are loosely connected to each other, for instance, in a chat forum, members of strong-ties groups are in close personal contact, as in a traditional village structure or in a religious community. Strong-ties groups show a high degree of reliability among their members, yet their strong group coherence and self-referentiality makes the acceptance of new ideas more difficult. Weak-ties group are less dependable for their members, yet their structure allows for the rapid dissemination of new information. Religious actors often originate from strong-ties groups. Due to their strong relationship capabilities, they are able to function as ‘connectors’ between different groups. ‘What is extraordinary about them [i.e. religious actors] is their ability to generate loose ties within and between religious and secular worlds’ (Gopin 2009, 79). This competency is of great significance for processes of social change. If new and unconventional concepts, such as regarding conflict resolution or reconciliation, are to find acceptance within a community, they are dependent on connectors, who are able to quickly reach a large number of people (weak-ties), yet still enjoy enough trust and credibility in order for the new ideas not be rejected a priori (strong-ties). Paradigms shifts in thinking and behaviour as are required in the transformation of conflicts rest on the joint efforts of weak-ties and strong-ties groups, oftentimes connected by religious actors.
Next to these formal characteristics, certain content-based features of religious actors in conflict resolution can be pointed out. These include specific concepts and values. The Christian tradition, for example, offers the concepts of reconciliation, grace and personal transformation. By teaching forgiveness and love rather than retribution and hatred, religious values are disseminated that call for concrete behavioural implications. Attitudes and stereotypes, ways of thinking and acting begin to change (Kadayifci-Orellana 2009).

Religious concepts thus not only serve as motivation for action but also as a framework for ethical orientation. The emphasis on grace and forgiveness includes moreover resources for dealing with guilt, shame and failure, existential experiences inevitably encountered in processes of conflict and conflict resolution. Other religious traditions such as Islam offer concepts including nonviolence, compassion, the pursuit of justice and doing good.

The use of content-based concepts and values has proven to be particularly fruitful in the quest for common ground between different faith traditions. Interfaith dialogue aims at the exchange of religious understandings, including but not limited to issues of peace and conflict resolution, thereby promoting mutual understanding and the reduction of interfaith tensions. The Jordan-based initiative ‘A Common Word Between Us and You’, for example, launched a seminal Muslim–Christian dialogue in 2007 based on the principles of loving God and neighbour (www.acommonword.com). This ongoing project has elicited positive reactions from Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders worldwide and contributes to interfaith cooperation.

In addition, faith-based conflict resolution offers resources for meaning and dealing with trauma. Violent conflicts leave the survivors not only with physical but also with psychological wounds. If these are left unaddressed, they can foster bitterness, feelings of revenge and hatred. Social healing and reconciliation become all the more difficult, which in turn promotes the return of violence, turning former victims into perpetrators. Yet if experiences of loss and hurt can be integrated into a larger horizon, meaning can be restored. The religious perspective offers hope and an eschatological framework that assist in dealing with the past and the present.

This relates to what may be called a holistic perspective on conflict resolution. Religious actors often embrace an anthropology that understands well-being in a comprehensive manner, namely as encompassing the physical and the spiritual, the material and the emotional. Besides bringing material and practical help, religious actors also offer emotional and spiritual support (Bouta et al. 2005). In short, ‘they [religious actors] can draw on behavioural expectations like peace-oriented teachings, or repentance for furthering reconciliation, and use negotiation between denominational or inter-faith organisations to bring people together for dialogue in ways secular NGOs may not be able’ (Ware et al. 2016, 328).

Problems

Religious actors are often associated with two main problems, amplification of conflict and proselytisation. In the context of conflict resolution, the first allegation is all the weightier. ‘It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history’ (Kimball 2002, 1). While this statement seems to resonate with much of popular opinion – and with various conflicts worldwide including the so-called Islamic State, the Northern Ireland conflict or the conflict between Israel and Palestine – it reveals several problems. First, the underlying difficulty of defining religion remains unaddressed. Yet if it is unclear what constitutes religion, religious violence remains equally ambiguous. A selective legitimisation of violence follows. Secular violence is portrayed as rational, controlled and conducive to peace, while religious violence is viewed as irrational, fanatic and totalitarian.
(Cavanaugh 2004). At the same time, the inherent ambivalence of religion is ignored. While religion indeed can be employed to ignite and amplify violent conflict, it can also serve to further reconciliation and conflict resolution. For an adequately complex analysis, both aspects need to be considered.

Concerning proselytisation, it needs to be pointed out that the transformation of thinking and behaviour is part of the central aims of any organisations – secular or faith-based – working in conflict resolution. Normative assumptions are part of any agenda. An adequate response thus aims for transparency rather than denial or disguise. The charge of proselytisation for FBOs therefore needs to be rephrased in terms of discrimination and justice. Is religious conversion made mandatory for gaining access to support? Are individuals or groups privileged or discriminated against on religious grounds? Affirmative answers would give rise to concerns that fundamental principles of justice and non-discrimination are being violated.

**Challenges**

Conflict resolution, understood as including conflict transformation, peacebuilding and reconciliation, continues to be a dynamic field. In view of the role of religious actors, a number of challenges emerge (Hayward 2012, Abu-Nimer 2015).

Integration. According to Mohammed Abu-Nimer, religious peacebuilding ‘operates in the fringes of peacemaking and peacebuilding field, which itself is in the fringes of realpolitik or government policy making’ (Abu-Nimer, in: Hayward 2012, 7). While some progress has been achieved in terms of integrating the religious factor in conflict resolution by both policy makers and academics, much of secular and religious engagement is done independent from each other. The policy maker/researcher/practitioner divide is further deepened by the religious/secular divide. In order to reduce ignorance and suspicion on all sides, further studies and joint initiatives are necessary.

Evaluation. The need for integration points to another desideratum, the ‘pressing need for greater monitoring and evaluation of religious peacebuilding work – and peacebuilding generally – to understand better which interventions, led by whom, and in which situations, have the greatest effect’ (Hayward 2012, 8). A deeper understanding of the nature and methods, of the strengths and weaknesses of religious conflict resolution will help integrate it into mainstream conflict resolution.

Women and youth. While conflict resolution in general has been criticised for neglecting gender aspects (Buckley-Zistel and Stanley 2012, Rehrmann 2018), religious conflict resolution faces the same challenge. Engaging religious leaders oftentimes means engaging older men. Yet women have been particularly efficient in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts (Marshall and Hayward 2015, O’Reilly 2013, Rehrmann 2018). Besides engaging women, conflict resolution theory and practice must do better in including the youth. The so-called ‘youth bulge’ in many countries of the Global South has been noted as a potential destabilising factor. So not only in terms of resolution, but also from a prevention perspective it is vital to integrate children and youths in peacebuilding education, for instance, through partnerships with local churches and mosques.

Indigenous and non-Abrahamic religions. Much of Western conflict resolution scholarship and practice has focused on the Abrahamic religions Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The wisdom offered by indigenous and dharmic religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, has so far been largely neglected. With its concepts of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and *shanti* (peace) Hinduism, for instance, contains powerful resources for conflict resolution.

Politics/political parties. While the interplay of politics and religion has meanwhile become a focus of attention (Copson 2017, Haynes 2016, McGraw 2010, Rosenberger 2012), the intersection of religion, conflict resolution and politics, political parties in particular, remains
understudied (Barkan and Barkey 2015, Steen-Johnsen 2017), not least due to the inherent complexity of each factor in itself and the diverse configurations than can form between these three factors. The following attempt aims to provide an example for a possible analytical framework in the context of post-genocide Rwanda.

**Conceptualising religious actors, conflict resolution and political parties: the example of post-genocide Rwanda**

Present-day Rwanda is marked by its history of violent conflict. Civil war erupted in 1990, culminating in 100 days of genocide in 1994 that left up to one million children, women and men dead. While most of the victims were Tutsi and most of the perpetrators Hutu, countless moderate Hutu were killed as well. The terms Hutu (84 percent), Tutsi (15 percent), and Twa (a minority of about 1 percent) are not considered conventional ethnic descriptions. Rather, they refer to social groups sharing one and the same language, religion and culture. Rwanda belongs to the smallest, yet most densely populated countries in Africa. Perpetrators and survivors must therefore find a way to live side by side. To encourage social cohesion, development and sustainable peace, current president Paul Kagame has initiated a ‘National Politics of Reconciliation’. Christian churches, as major actors in Rwanda’s civil society, partner with the government by supplementing its mostly top-down approaches with bottom-up initiatives (Schliesser 2018a). In order to conceptualise the relationship between religion, conflict resolution and political parties, a modified version of Mohseni’s and Wilcox’s multi-dimensional framework (Mohseni and Wilcox 2016) is employed. The term ‘political party’ is understood here in a wider sense, considering that in practice political parties can be difficult to distinguish from other political groups. Religious movements may, for instance, act as ‘indirect parties’ (Duverger 1963), such as by recruiting and supporting candidates.

**Regime type.** Rwanda is a unitary dominant-party presidential republic. After a constitutional referendum in 2003, a multi-party system was established. As before, the 2018 parliamentary elections were dominated by the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) ruling party of President Paul Kagame, whose coalition won 74 percent of the seats (Kwibuka 2018). Rwanda has been frequently criticised for its disregard of basic human rights, including freedom of press and political opposition (Thomson 2015). Officially, religious freedom is granted under article 37 of the 2003 constitution, which was amended in 2015.

**Religious marketplace.** Over 90 percent Christian, Rwanda is one of the most ‘Christian’ countries. Christian churches constitute significant players in Rwanda’s civil society (Kubai 2016). Rwanda’s religio-scape changed significantly after the genocide in 1994 (National Institute of Statistics 2012). The membership of the Catholic Church, hitherto the strongest religious player, dropped from 65 percent of Rwanda’s population in 1990 to 44 percent post-genocide. Protestant denominations almost doubled in membership to 38 percent of the population, with Pentecostal and charismatic churches being currently the fastest growing religious groups. The Seventh-Day Adventists Church increased from 8 to 12 percent. Muslims make up about 2 percent of the population.

**Religious institutional structure.** Rwanda’s religio-scape exhibits a mixture of hierarchical (Catholic Church) and decentralised (Protestant churches) structures. Next to the Catholics, the Pentecostal Church in Rwanda (ADEPR) is the largest denomination (ca. 2,000,000 members). The Province of the Anglican Church in Rwanda has about 1,000,000 members. Countless independent churches vary in size and membership. In 2018, the government shut down up to 700 churches, mainly Pentecostal, officially due to safety and hygiene concerns. Observers suspect, however, that the crack-down has political motivations (Clark, in: Müller-Jung 2018). The
exponential growth of Pentecostal churches with large numbers of followers collides with the
government’s policy of tight control over all areas of political and social life.

The associational nexus of religion and political parties. In Rwanda, religious institutions have
created a large net of associations involved in social and community work. Religious actors are
highly engaged in various kinds of service delivery including schools, hospitals and different
types of social work. Oftentimes, the churches partner with the government in caring for the
infrastructure and supplying personnel.

Party system. Rwanda exhibits a hybrid system that includes a proportional system as well as a
‘consensual’ system. The system contains certain stipulations, for instance, the party that won
the parliamentary elections cannot have more than 50 percent of seats in the government and
specific social groups (women, youths, disabled) are granted representation in parliament. No
religious party is represented in parliament.

The stance of religious groups towards the state and government. Multiple factors led to the churches’
complicity in creating and sustaining the conditions in which the 1994 genocide could occur,
including the close relationship between church and state, the churches’ endorsement of ethnic
policies, power struggles within the churches, and a problematic theology emphasising obedience
to authorities (Schliesser 2018b). At the same time, various church-led initiatives for peace and
reconciliation prior to and during the genocide indicate a more complex picture of church
involvement. In general, Christian denominations today strive for good relationships with the
state. With regards to conflict resolution work, the churches support the state-led initiatives for
reconciliation and social healing. Quantitative studies indicate that there are no systematic di-
ferences between different religious groups and their engagement in peacebuilding (Bazuin 2013).
The government’s rhetoric of forgiveness, reconciliation and unity is easily compatible with the
churches’ religious principles. The close relationship between religious groups and the govern-
ment becomes apparent as prominent religious leaders have accepted major government positions,
such as Anglican bishop John Rucyahana, president of the National Unity and Reconciliation
Commission (NURC). While the churches’ collaboration with the state, especially in matters of
reconciliation, aligns with their own Christian concepts and values, it needs to be pointed out that
the Rwandan state has a firm grip over all levels of society and is not lenient towards criticism.
Opposition is silenced swiftly and effectively, even over matters as Catholic criticism of its family
planning policy (Bureau of Democracy Human Rights and Labor 2005, 2011). While there is
some inner-church critique of the lack of prophetic stance towards the government (Kazuyuki
2009, Nsengimana 2015), most denominations ‘try to see how to gain favor from the state instead
of challenging it’ (Nsengimana 2015, 108).

Reconciliation initiatives of state and church actors. The government has pushed its ‘National
Politics of Reconciliation’ throughout society. On the national level, the NURC has imple-
mented various sensitisation and reconciliation projects throughout the country, including
mediated perpetrator–victim encounters and ‘reconciliation villages’. The designations ‘Hutu’,
‘Tutsi’ and ‘Twa’ were banned. Instead, a new national identity is being forged under the
official motto ‘We are all Rwandan’. On the judicial level, the so-called gacaca courts were
established (2002–2012), traditional conflict resolution mechanisms that encompass retributive
and restorative approaches to justice (Molenaar 2005). Furthermore, in its attempt to build a
new national identity, the state is creating an official discourse of remembrance. The official
memory often excludes deviant narratives, for instance, regarding the massacres executed by the
now ruling RPF against the Hutu population. The churches complement and support the
government strategies on the grassroots level. Their peacebuilding initiatives can be structured
along four levels (Nsengimana 2015), namely the intrapersonal level (including Bible study,
prayer, meditation), interpersonal level (including various congregational activities such as

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Sunday worship, Bible study groups, youth and women groups, commemoration of the genocide), structural level (including programmes against HIV/AIDS, inter-religious dialogue, school programmes) and cultural level (including the dissemination of democratic values and the incorporation of the arts in peacebuilding).

Stance towards the state. The churches in Rwanda are generally pro-state. Prophetic critique is rare.

The religious orientation of the party. Most Christian churches in Rwanda are conservative in outlook and so are their politically active members. Based on this framework, a complex picture of religious actors, conflict resolution and political parties in Rwanda emerges. With over 90 percent of the population Christian, the Christian churches function as major players in Rwanda’s civil society. Rwanda has no religious parties, yet the interconnections between politics and religion are manifold and include individual religious leaders in prominent political offices as well as common concepts such as reconciliation and forgiveness. With their various bottom-up, grassroot-based initiatives, the Christian churches supplement the government’s top-down ‘National Politics of Reconciliation’. In general, the churches are pro-state, with little prophetic critique, despite or perhaps because of the authoritarian regime and its neglect of basic human rights.

Conclusion

The secularisation thesis and its prediction that the influence of religion would decline fail to explain the resurgence of religion in many political systems and societal processes worldwide. Policy makers, academics and practitioners are increasingly turning their attention towards the role of religion in processes of social change. This holds also true for the fields of conflict resolution and peacebuilding that need to be seen as embedded in the larger context of sustainable development. The question here is no longer if religion can contribute towards these processes, but rather what kind of potentials and problems are connected with religion’s contribution. With much attention being paid to the conflictive sides of religion in furthering conflict and violence, this chapter focused on the constructive resources of religion, examining both formal and content-based characteristics.

Three insights for conflict resolution theory and practice emerge from the discussion above. First of all, the constructive contributions of religious actors in processes of conflict resolution need to be recognised and appreciated. A second insight aims at the necessity for further critical reflection and research on both the potentials and the problems of religious conflict resolution, especially in connection to politics and political parties. Finally, the success of desired processes of social transformation as constituted by complex processes of conflict resolution depends on the collaboration of all relevant actors. For it is in the cooperation of all actors, religious and non-religious, that ‘the overall potential for change is phenomenal’ (Freeman 2012, 26).

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