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**UNIVERSITÄT
BERN**

**Interfaculty Research Cooperation
Religious Conflicts and Coping Strategies**

Interfaculty Research Cooperation (IRC) Religious Conflicts and Coping Strategies: Structure, objectives, concepts and methods

Interfaculty Research Cooperation (IRC)

By opening a call for Interfaculty Research Cooperations, the rector's office of the University of Bern intended to promote interdisciplinary research across the faculties.

Our IRC "Religious Conflicts and Coping Strategies" has been launched on 1 April 2018 and is scheduled to run for a period of 4 years. It consists of 12 subprojects and brings together more than 40 researchers. They work in theology, psychology, legal sciences, religious studies, Jewish studies, Islamic studies, political sciences, history, communication studies, philosophy, gender studies and German studies. In this way, the IFK joins researchers from the faculty of theology, the faculty of law, the faculty of humanities, the faculty of human science, the faculty of business, economics and social sciences as well as the interdisciplinary center for gender studies. Moreover, few project leaders belong to the universities of Basel, Zurich, Fribourg, Munich (Germany) and Hangzhou (China). Many subprojects have international cooperation partners. In total, 28 project leaders supervise 10 PhD students and 12 postdocs. The project groups organize subject specific workshops and conferences as well as interdisciplinary lectures. For the young researches, there are regular meetings in which they discuss methodological and theoretical approaches and read selected literature on conflict research. In this way, they practice interdisciplinarity on a regular basis. The program is completed by public annual conferences where all the members of the IRC take part and to which external guests are invited.

As an overall goal, our research cluster aims at building a context-sensitive model to analyze and describe religious dimensions of conflicts. This model will be based on the results coming from all subprojects.

The coordination team – Prof. Dr. Katharina Heyden (director), Prof. Dr. Martino Mona (deputy director), Dr. Sophie Caflisch (program manager) und PD Dr. Christine Schliesser (communication) – is advised by an internal scientific board, which consists of eight project leaders who work in different fields.

"Grassroots interdisciplinarity"

Research on religious conflicts has been important at the University of Bern for several years, but a corresponding network was missing. This field has been proposed as the subject of an Interfaculty Research Cooperation from the conviction that, for a better understanding of complex conflicts with religious dimensions, it is necessary to bring together *emic* religious perspectives – which are theologies or religious philosophies – and *etic* perspectives of cultural studies and sociology on religion. In order to enable this dialogue even at the lowest level, each subproject within our IRC is directed by two or three senior researchers of different disciplines. In the proposal, we call this „grassroots interdisciplinarity". Thus, we try to ensure that the fundamental conceptual and methodological questions are continuously dealt with in an everyday context. Doing so, we hope to avoid a common stumbling stone of many interdisciplinary research clusters, or at least to treat it wisely.

For the model building process, we have developed a questionnaire. The project leaders will answer to these questions once a year and the answers will be evaluated by the coordination team. By means of this questionnaire, the various religious dimensions of conflicts will be collected with a bottom-up method, and the working definitions outlined below will be constantly reviewed and improved. Those are preset by two members of the internal scientific board, Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz (Religious Studies) and Hansjörg Znoj (Psychology).

Working definition of Religion following Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz (Religious Studies)

It is not possible to give a universally applicable and essential definition of the term "religion". What we need for our purposes is a heuristic definition, which is flexible enough to meet the needs of all approaches put together in the IRC. Ways of conceptualizing religion are usually differentiated into essential and functional definitions. Essential definitions of religion are content-oriented; they try to determine what the essence of religion is. In contrast, functional definitions ask for the capacity of religion in the practical life of individuals and societies. Both do not go far enough in times of the "return of religions". In recent years, so-called polythetic definitions of religion have come into focus. In these conceptualizations of religion, a whole set of essential as well as functional characteristics is determined, who all together enable us to identify phenomena as religious. Such a flexible concept of religion will serve as a starting point inside our IRC:

> Religion serves the integration and identity formation in societies through collective obligation. It contributes to the explanation of collective and individual experiences and answers to questions raised by individual experiences of contingency. At the same time, religion is more closely defined as an ensemble of beliefs and practices that refer to an 'other than empirical' reality.

Working definition of Coping following Hans-Jörg Znoj (Psychology)

The second key term, coping, originally comes from individual psychology and has to be transferred to societal conflicts with religious dimensions within the framework of our research. In contrast to the concepts hitherto common in conflict research – conflict resolution and conflict transformation – the concept of coping is not result-oriented but serves as a tool to describe various ways of dealing with conflicts. Therefore it is especially suitable for the intended bottom-up model building. Moreover, it paves the way to consider the sociological understanding of conflicts as catalysts of societal integration, as first explained by Georg Simmel.[1] Finally the concept of various coping strategies enables us to analyze the handling of conflicts where resolution strategies failed. The term coping will allow us to take into account religion's various roles when a conflict emerges, evolves and is resolved – or not.

> In psychology, the concept of coping describes a cognitive or behavioral process that is flexible, targeted, differentiated and applied to reality in order to deal with stressful conflict situations. In contrast to mere defensive mechanisms that distort reality in a rigid and undifferentiated manner, coping strategies are deliberate and intentional processes in which humans are no longer understood as passive beings exposed to certain developments but as active beings capable of shaping themselves and their environment.

A distinction is made between problem-oriented coping, emotion-focused and meaning-based coping. Problem-oriented coping strategies aim at changing the conflict-situation by changing the conflictual structures and conditions. Emotion focused coping strategies aim at changing the emotional relationship with a stressful conflict situation which cannot be changed. Meaning based coping aims at alleviating harm or suffering by cognitive re-evaluating of a situation. All three ways of coping can be relevant with respect to religious conflicts. We will investigate which coping strategies came and come to effect in conflicts past and present and how they fueled or resolved these conflicts. The scientific board expects that the open and differentiated concept of coping will prove itself as a suitable analytical category and a suitable travelling concept in interdisciplinary conflict-research.

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[1] Georg Simmel , Soziologie. Über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung. Berlin 1908. Siehe auch Tobias Werron, Zur sozialen Konstruktion moderner Konkurrenzen. In: Tyrell, Hartmann / Rammstedt, Otthein / Meyer, Ingo (eds.), Simmels große ‚Soziologie'. Bielefeld 2011, 227-258.

Bottom up model building

As a starting point for the common bottom up model building, we take a model for the description of conflicts outlined by Anton Pelinka, a Viennese political scientist, in the "Handbuch für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung".[2]

According to Pelinka's model, first, each conflict is caused by the experience of shortage. Pelinka mentions the shortage of resources such as land and food, but also the shortage of education. With reference to Charles Taylor further non-material resources like appreciation and participation should be added. Second, the conflicts induced by experiences of shortage break out along ,cleavages' which are essential for the social identity of human beings. Pelinka mentions five of them: class, ethnicity, gender, generation and religion. Third, conflicts are said to have ideological superstructures which often severely worsen the situation. All three levels are intertwined with questions of power.

This model refers to the socializing function of conflicts and focuses on the function of conflicts in the process of identity building respectively identity strengthening of social groups. Religion is only mentioned on the level of cleavages. As often seen in the field of cultural studies and social and political sciences, only its functional aspects are taken into account. As a consequence, much has been said about the instrumentalization of religions in the context of conflicts. In this argumentation, religions do not cause or shape conflicts but are misused to defend other – for example economical – interests. This is rejected not only by the findings of academic theologians and historians, but also by the public perception of contemporary conflicts and their presentation in the media. As a result, the dialogue between academia and society with respect to this matter is often very difficult.

Our polydimensional concept of religion, as outlined above, suggests examining the influence and ambivalent potential of religion on all three levels of a conflicts according to Pelinka's model. Considering the roots of conflicts, we have to ask if and to what extent religions shape the awareness of shortage. Can experiences of contingency be perceived as experiences of shortage and in this way cause conflicts? At least, with regard to radicalization and fundamentalism we can ask whether the experience or the claim of a lack of religiosity can cause conflicts. On the other hand, religious appreciation of spiritual values and devaluation of material requirements sometimes impede that latent resource conflicts erupt or cause shifts in their structures. Furthermore we need to ask which role the much-evoked religious feelings play in the dynamics of conflicts.

Secondly, with regard to religious groups who shape social identities and Pelinka's conflict cleavages we have to reflect on the strong internal differentiation within the established major religious communities. Do attributions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism in the singular form correspond to the complex realities and have they ever done so? How do trends going across them such as liberalism, conservatism, orthodoxy, fundamentalism or even secularism influence the identity of individuals and the building of social groups?

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[2] Anton Pelinka, Konfliktforschung, in: Friedensforschung Konfliktforschung Demokratieforschung. Ein Handbuch, hg. v. Gertraud Diendorfer, Blanka Bellak, Anton Pelinka, Werner Wintersteiner, Köln u.a. 2016, 18-34.

Do they relativize or even annihilate traditional classifications in religions and confessions – and make conflicts more confusing but at the same tame open new space for reframing?

Finally, religions as interpretations of self, world and 'other than empirical' realities obviously affect also what Pelinka calls the ideological superstructures of conflicts. We therefore have to examine religious rhetoric and discourse and theological reference systems as matters of conflicts and as coping strategies, which can alleviate or fuel given situations.

In the process of building a model, it will be important to consider the impact of religions on each of these three levels as well as to understand their interaction.

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