

The Instrumentalization of Religion in Conflict

Peacebuilders and policy-makers often accuse political elites of exploiting religion in conflicts for the purpose of achieving political objectives. However, diagnosing religion's presence as 'instrumentalization' may be a barrier to conflict transformation.

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The war in Yemen grinds on, instability persists in the Central African Republic, and the peace process in southern Thailand proceeds in fits and starts. Each of these conflicts poses its own particular challenges to conflict transformation. One aspect they all have in common is that each has a religious dimension. This is not surprising. The proportion of internal armed conflicts where religion plays a role has been on the rise since the 1970s. By 2015, well over half of all civil wars had a religious dimension. The entanglement of religion in conflicts matters because it complicates efforts to address them. Fortunately, there has been a growing awareness amongst policy-makers and peace practitioners of the importance of understanding religion's role in conflict. Nevertheless, we believe that efforts to transform conflicts with religious dimensions are being held back by an over-emphasis on the concept of 'instrumentalization.'

When practitioners or policy-makers are confronted with conflicts involving religion, the term 'instrumentalization' is frequently used to try to make sense of the situation. The term is employed both by secular actors – who often dismiss religion as irrelevant for

political analysis – and by religious actors – who fear that 'their' religion is being misused or sullied by being associated with politics. We argue that a tendency amongst

Key Points

- While religion can shape conflicts in many ways, this does not necessarily mean that it is being instrumentalized.
- Since it is difficult to assess the motives of actors, peacebuilding practitioners and policy-makers can be wrong about whether actors are instrumentalizing religion and may therefore misdirect their responses.
- Even though instrumentalization does happen, third parties seeking to transform conflict and contribute to peace should suspend judgement about intentions and avoid using the term 'instrumentalization.'
- Peacebuilders who accuse actors of instrumentalizing religion may struggle to engage with these actors. They also risk neglecting the genuine concerns of people who support the alleged 'instrumentalizers.'
- Rather than judging others' use of religion, practitioners and policy-makers should focus on whether their own engagement with religious actors occurs in a respectful way, and is based on jointly agreed actions.

secular Western actors to accuse conflict parties of instrumentalizing religion is based on a widespread normative assumption that religion and politics ought to be kept separate. While we accept that instrumentalization does happen, we believe that focusing too heavily on determining whether it *is* happening often gets in the way of conflict transformation efforts. Specifically, by labelling actors' references to religion as 'instrumentalization' peace practitioners and policy-makers create three potential obstacles: First, they risk misdiagnosing what is going on. Second, by judging actors' intentions rather than their actual behavior, they alienate those parties that should ideally be included in efforts to transform the conflict. Third, they may play down grievances that should in fact be addressed.



Supporters of the Law and Justice party walk with a portrait of late Pope John Paul II during a pro-government demonstration in Warsaw, Poland, December 2015. *Kacper Pempel / Reuters*

The Instrumentalization of Religion

Talk of actors instrumentalizing religion usually refers to three kinds of situations. First, it may refer to religious leaders that use their religious authority to rise to positions of political power, such as Cardinal Mazarin in France in the 17th century or Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran in the 1970s. Second, it is often tied to accusations of politicians playing identity politics with religion, emphasizing the salience of religious identity, and presenting themselves as defending the interests of a particular religious group in order to gain favor amongst important constituencies. Such criticisms were levelled against political leaders during the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and are regularly heard in contemporary discussions of sectarian conflicts in the Middle East. Governments, and particularly authoritarian regimes, are regularly accused of purposefully inflaming sectarian differences as part of a 'divide-and-rule'-strategy. Finally, political leaders have also been accused of instrumentalizing religion when they justify and seek support for particular policies, decisions, or behavior with reference to religious scripture or teachings. For example, many perceive the use of Islamic concepts by groups such as the Islamic State or Al-Shabaab as purely instrumental.

What, then, does it mean to say that someone is *instrumentalizing* religion? In common usage, the term 'instrumentalization' has both a descriptive and a normative component. It *describes* how something has a causal role in bringing about a particular effect – that is, how it is instrumental. It also *judges* someone by implying that they are exploiting, or taking advantage of, that causal power. To say that someone is 'instrumentalizing religion' is to suggest that their appeals to religion for the purpose of justifying political choices or policies are not based on shared concerns with the community, whose identity or beliefs they

reference; rather, they are pursuing their own separate political agenda, and simply framing their appeals in a way that they believe will mobilize the support of that community. In short, 'instrumentalizers' are accused of using people, through their relationship to religion, as a means to an end, rather than valuing them in their own right.

We suggest that the term 'instrumentalization' functions as a kind of cognitive framing or heuristic device that causes people to conflate these two components of description and judgement. As a result, any situation in which religion is instrumental (i.e. has an effect on a situation) is judged as a morally suspect manipulation of religion for political ends. We believe that this conflation is often based on a narrow understanding of the relationship between religion and politics.

The Relationship between Religion and Politics

The legacy of the religious wars in Europe and the Enlightenment period mean that it has been common, particularly in the West, to draw a distinction between the political and the religious realms. While politics is understood as the process of decision-making related to the organization and governance of a society, religion has been relegated to the private realm and characterized as describing and engaging with an 'other-worldly' reality that is separate from that of the political world.

This effort to separate religion and politics has long been influential in Western thinking. This is, however, an artificial separation based on a specific conception of what 'religion' is. It is certainly not how many religious people and communities understand their religion, for they tend not to think of the existence of a separate religious domain that is solely concerned with private, spiritual matters. For many, their religion provides, and is part of, an all-encompassing worldview that has much to say about how indi-

viduals should live their lives, as well as about how society should be organized and governed. In some contexts, the term 'religion' does not even exist, as it would be nonsensical to have a word that describes someone's beliefs, practices, and way of life, and thereby treats these as something distinct. Insofar as we accept religion as a separate analytical category, the relationship between religion and politics is most obvious when political actors ground their political projects in a particular religious worldview, such as in the case of actors inspired by liberation theology or Islamist movements. However, even in so-called secular states, the basic values that underpin constitutions can often be traced back to a certain religious tradition. Religion can also shape power relations in a society, namely when someone's religious identity will likely affect what rights and freedoms they enjoy, who they might vote for, or whether their voice is heard. While individual practitioners and policy-makers may have their own personal views about the desirable relationship between religion and politics, the reality is that in both implicit and explicit ways, religion and politics cannot be neatly separated.

Obstacles to Conflict Transformation

Peace practitioners and policy-makers who accuse an actor of instrumentalizing religion run three risks. The first is that such a judgment is simply erroneous, and that, as a consequence, any policy decisions flowing from this assessment will be misdirected. That religion is often *instrumental* in politics is a fact. However, this fact alone does not suffice to automatically infer that religion is being *instrumentalized*. While it is likely that many actors do instrumentalize religion, in the sense that they treat religion purely as a means to an end, it is impossible to know whether this is happening in a given instance. As social scientists are quick to point out, it is notoriously difficult to infer motives and intentions from behaviors. Philosophers call this the 'problem of other minds'; we simply cannot know for sure why someone does something, which makes it well-nigh impossible to determine with absolute certainty whether a political actor's references to religion are 'genuine.' While it may be reasonable to make inferences about the motivations of those whom we know well and who operate in an environment that we understand, the opposite is also true. The less familiar we are with the people we are judging and the world they live in, the less reliable our inferences will be. Religions are highly heterogeneous, with multiple combinations of interpretations and practices producing many different strands of any one religion. This makes judgements about instrumentalization very difficult.

The second risk is that actors will interpret any third party accusations that

the former are instrumentalizing religion as an attack on their credibility. Accusations of instrumentalization are themselves often used by conflict parties. One may accuse the opposing other of instrumentalizing religion in order to delegitimize them. Consequently, any expression of judgment about an actor instrumentalizing religion by practitioners and policy-makers might be seen as taking sides, which, in turn, will make it difficult to assume the role of an impartial third party seeking to engage key actors in a process of conflict transformation.

The third risk is that this leads to an ignorance or a downplaying of the role of religion in the conflict at hand. Whether it is instrumentalized or not, religion often becomes a dimension of the conflict. When a group of people are mobilized by appeals to their religion, they genuinely feel that their religious identities are threatened, or that their beliefs require them to support certain kinds of actions. These feelings need to be taken seriously. If practitioners and policy-makers dismiss people's concerns as the product of instrumentalization, they risk alienating the very people who need to be engaged if the conflict is to be transformed.

Engagement without Instrumentalization

In facilitating conflict transformation processes, practitioners and policy-makers should begin by checking their own impulse to diagnose instrumentalization of religion. Since the latter can antagonize, efforts should also be made to keep the term out of the conflict transformation processes that are to be supported or facilitated. To achieve this, third parties can introduce their dialogue participants to the principle of 'judging actions, not intentions.' Parties should be encouraged to jointly agree on accepted standards of behavior and actions that are off-limits. Actions can then be assessed against these standards, while leaving aside any judgements about intentions. Where no consensus can be found, third parties should seek to identify the lowest common denominator – that is, the minimum 'rules

Further Reading

Sins of Omission: What 'Religion and Violence' Arguments Ignore

Cavanaugh, W. T., *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2004.

Cavanaugh elegantly shows how enlightenment-inspired thinking can lead to problematic analyses of the role of religion in conflict.

Dialogue with Salafi Jihadi Armed Groups: Challenges and Opportunities for Conflict De-escalation

Göldner-Ebenthal, K. and Dudouet, V., *Berlin: Berghof Foundation*, 2019.

This recent research explores the possibilities for dialogue with a class of actors regularly accused of instrumentalizing religion.

