

THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE SACRED: RELIGION AS A SOURCE OF CONFLICT AND PEACE¹

At the beginning of the third millennium we face a large number of armed conflicts throughout the world. In many of these conflicts, military leaders as well as politicians legitimate their claims – or even their violent measures – by referring to religious traditions. At the same time, on the contrary, religious leaders emphasize the appeasing and pacifying impact of the religions they profess. Frequently, they blame the appropriation of religious traditions by military leaders or politicians as a misguided abuse of religion.

To give only two examples: At the occasion of the visit of Pope Francis in Egypt in April 2017, an international peace conference was held in Cairo. In his address to the participants of the congress the pope underlined: “Religion [...] is not meant only to unmask evil; it has an intrinsic vocation to promote peace, today perhaps more than ever”.² Remembering the international meetings of leading representatives of the world religions, who have been meeting in Assisi since 1986, Francis evoked the indispensable responsibility of religious leaders involved in armed conflicts to promote peace and to make reconciliation possible.

As a second example, I refer to the interreligious document on “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” signed on 4th February 2019 in Abu Dhabi. In this document, Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, declared “that religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood.” Moreover, Francis and el-Tayeb called upon all concerned “to stop using religions to incite hatred, violence, extremism

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- 1 This article is based on my paper presented at the international conference “Religion, Conflict, and Conflict Transformation”, Beirut, 8th June 2017.
 - 2 Cf. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco_20170428_egitto-conferenza-pace.html (16.06.19).

and blind fanaticism, and to refrain from using the name of God to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression. We ask this on the basis of our common belief in God who did not create men and women to be killed or to fight one another, nor to be tortured or humiliated in their lives and circumstances. God, the Almighty, has no need to be defended by anyone and does not want His name to be used to terrorize people.”³

How can we explain the apparent contradiction between those who have every reason to blame religions for fostering violence and those who emphasize the pacifistic impact of religions?

In order to answer this question, the following reflections will initially refer to some peacebuilding initiatives rising out of religious traditions. Subsequently, two opposing theories respecting the relationship between religion and violence will be presented. According to the first theory, any claim for religious truth inevitably incites violent means to enforce the truth in society. According to the second theory, only religion transforms to harmony the endemic violence that is inherent to any human community.

Respecting these opposing theories, an alternative explanation of the ambiguity of religion is proposed. It claims to illuminate religiously legitimated violence as a sort of ritual that ensures identity by deepening belonging to a particular community. On that basis and finally, some elements of peacebuilding are outlined.

1. RELIGION, POLITICS AND PEACEBUILDING

Unlike in the past, Western states realize more and more the crucial influence of religions and their adherents on issues of violence and peace worldwide. Many political institutions and administrations make efforts to involve religious actors in their political strategy.

This is also the case in Germany. In May 2017, the German Federal Foreign Ministry organized an international peace conference in Berlin.⁴ More than hundred dignitaries and scholars representing the three monotheistic religions participated in the conference. Islamic scholars, Jewish rabbis,

3 Cf. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html (16.06.19).

4 Cf. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/publikationen/konferenz-berliner-treffen-friedensverantwortung-der-religionen--735170> (16.06.19).

Catholic archbishops, Orthodox clergymen and Protestant pastors, Anglicans and Copts, Baha'is, Sufis and Druze, Shias and Sunnis – they all assembled in the building of the Ministry to discuss the “Responsibility of Religions for Peace”. Not surprisingly, they all underlined the pacifistic impact of their particular religious traditions.

Almost the same happened in a follow-up conference organized by the Foreign Ministry in June 2018. This time, religious dignitaries and scholars mainly from Asia gathered in Berlin. The German Foreign Ministry held this second conference in cooperation with the Foreign Ministry of Finland, which has a leading and exemplary function in cooperation between politicians and religious authorities. In particular, the Finnish Government supports the international „Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers“.⁵

Since September 11th, 2001, similar initiatives and different forms of dialogue between politicians and representatives of various religions have been established in many Western states. Respecting 9/11 and its aftermath, the European community committed itself to open, transparent and regular dialogue with religious organisations. Article 17 of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the EU* (TFEU), contracted in 2007 and introduced by the *Treaty of Lisbon*, provides a legal basis for an open, transparent and regular dialogue between the EU institutions and churches, religious associations, and philosophical and non-confessional organisations.⁶ Usually, these dialogues are associated with foreign affairs, development aid policy, or issues of intercultural exchange. They aim at establishing a structured exchange between politicians and religious actors anywhere in the world.

In the last century, the impact of religions in political conflicts has usually been seen as a source of conflict and violence. However, this view is changing. More and more, political scientists and sociologists point to the fact that in conflict zones religious actors are often the only relevant societal players. They know how to deal with problems; they enjoy respect among local populations. Therefore, religions' self-imposed obligation of facilitating peace enjoys a more and more positive resonance among political scientists and diplomats.

Discussing the peacebuilding role of religions in conflict, very frequently reference is made to the Community of Sant'Egidio, a private Catholic organisation. In 1992, Christian lay people managed to achieve what

5 Cf. <https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/> (16.06.19).

6 Cf. http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/tfeu_2012/oj (16.06.19).

international diplomats had failed to do: After 16 years of civil war and almost one million deaths, they negotiated a peace agreement between combatant factions in Mozambique. To this day, that agreement is still considered a milestone of what religious engagement can achieve on the diplomatic level. In Colombia, Sant'Egidio played a vital role in the peace negotiations between FARC and the Colombian government.

Nevertheless, the success of the Community of Sant'Egidio is by no means unique. In his book *Was Frieden schafft* (What Creates Peace) published in 2014, German peace researcher Markus Weingardt lists ten regions worldwide where religious actors achieved peacebuilding including Sierra Leone, the Congo and Cambodia.⁷ Markus Weingardt works for the "Foundation for a Global Ethic" (*Stiftung Weltethos*), founded in 1995 by the Catholic theologian Hans Küng. In 1993, Hans Küng prepared an interfaith declaration on peace that was signed at the "Parliament of the World's Religions" in Chicago by more than 200 leaders from 40 different faith traditions and spiritual communities.

However, on broadcast, TV and internet, it is not peace-making that dominate the scene but violent outbursts promoted by religiously affiliated actors. There are countless examples of this, ranging from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan and Indonesia. Religiously justified violence is associated with Jewish settlers as well as with Christian fighters in Myanmar or Uganda. Religions are involved in intra-state conflicts as in Nigeria or in Yemen; they are involved in international conflicts as it is the case between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Frequently in literature, the phenomenon that religions foster violence and are capable to make peace is called 'ambiguity of religion', or 'ambivalence of sacred'.⁸ Ambiguity in this context means that religious arguments can be used to justify or even foster violence just as easily as to minimize or abate violence in conflicts. Some essayists call this the 'Janus-faced nature' of religion – referring to the two-faced Roman deity who looks both to the future and to the past.⁹

7 Cf. Markus Weingardt, *Was Frieden schafft. Religiöse Friedensarbeit – Akteure, Beispiele, Methoden* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014).

8 Cf. David Baily Harned, *The Ambiguity of Religion* (Philadelphia 1968); R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred. Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000); Daniel Philpott, "Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion", in *American Political Science Review* 101 (2007), pp. 505-525.

9 Cf. Heinrich Schäfer, "The Janus Face of Religion: On the Religious Factor in 'New Wars'", in *Numen* 51 (2004), pp. 407-431.

2. MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS FOSTER VIOLENCE:

JAN ASSMANN

In recent years, the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann prominently promoted the opinion that religions foster violence. According to Assmann, particularly monotheistic religions provoke and justify violent behaviour and acting. The reason is that monotheistic religions – regardless substantial differences – consistently refer to a certain concept of revelation. Revelation, in turn, is the basis of a particular and excluding truth claim. Whoever accepts this truth claim is obliged to enforce it at all cost – including the use of violence.

Referring to the relationship between religion, truth, and violence, in 2003, Jan Assmann presented his concept of “Mosaic Distinction” or “Mosaic Turn” to the public.¹⁰ According to this concept, the Biblical figure of Moses introduced the distinction between “true” and “wrong” into religion. This distinction, according to the memories of the people of Israel testified in the Holy Bible, caused uncountable violent outbursts of formerly unknown extent. As “original scene” of religious violence, Assmann quotes Moses’ command to kill all adorers of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32). The story continues with the conquest of the Land of Canaan, the killing of the Baal’s prophets on the Mount Carmel by the prophet Elijah (cf. 1 Kings 18), and it did not stop with the war of the Maccabees against Antiochus, king of the Seleucids, in the 2nd century B.C.E.

In order to clarify the motives underlying the “Mosaic Turn”, Assmann refers to German Protestant theologian Theo Sundermeier’s distinction between *primary* and *secondary* religions. “Primary religions” are characterized by a sort of “embedment” of religious convictions and practices within a social community. The typical primary religion is that of national gods and national cults. It is closely associated with natural phenomena.¹¹

10 Cf. Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (Munich 2003); transl. by Robert Savage, *The Mosaic Distinction or The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

11 Cf. Theo Sundermeier, Art. „Religion, Religionen“, in: Karl Müller / Theo Sundermeier (Eds.), *Lexikon missionstheologischer Grundbegriffe* (Berlin: Reimer, 1987), pp. 411-423; Theo Sundermeier, *Was ist Religion? Religionswissenschaft im theologischen Kontext* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1999); Andreas Wagner (ed.), *Primäre und sekundäre Religion als Kategorie der Religionsgeschichte des Alten Testaments* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 364), (Berlin/ New York: De Gruyter, 2006).

Specifying the turn from primary religion to secondary religion, Assmann refers to the fact that primary religions usually emerge in polytheistic forms, while secondary religions emerge being monotheistic. Usually, monotheism sees its origin in revelation. While primary religions are handed down orally, secondary religions require writings and texts. In terms of civilisation, secondary religions are based on the “culture of memory”. Most important: They do no longer claim external cult but internal conviction. They demand conversion.

Monotheistic religions no longer rely on ritual practice but emphasize the personal conviction of a human being, Assmann argues. Religion no longer refers to the public realm principally but to the individual’s heart. When shifting from a primary religion to a secondary religion, a “psycho-history” (*Psychohistorie*) takes place: a change with and within man, a change in his soul (*psyche*). This change is reflected in religious texts that testify a henceforth modified manner of rituals, belief, and behaviour.

Where religion touches the individual’s heart, according to Assmann, a kind of existential earnestness is involved. Therefore, monotheism usually presents itself as spiritualized and devoted to ethics. At the same time, in monotheism God appears as guardian of truth, right, and ethos.

The relationship between truth, right, and ethos is reciprocal: According to the adherents of a monotheistic religion, the “monotheistic God” requires the “development of the inward man” – and vice versa: The “inward man” requires the monotheistic God. The “break-through to transcendence” that is linked to monotheisms and the emergence of the “inward man” are two sides of the same coin, Assmann argues.

Regarding biblical traditions and texts, Assmann connects the initial turn from primary to secondary religion with the mission of Moses. Progressively, the prophets of Israel accomplish it. The shift goes along with an internalization of religion, while the one and only God of Israel more and more becomes transcendental and monotheistic. Over the centuries and on the long run, the God of Israel doesn’t need any offerings or sacrifices – neither the blood of rams and bulls (cf. Hebr. 9,13) nor the material gifts of human beings. The only things that still please that one God are devotion, spirit and ethos, and he demands them now from everybody.

It is exactly here that we face the violent dimension of secondary religions. The one and only God finds in the act of his turning to the world no other partners than the human being that are faithful to him. Everybody who is *not* willing to believe in him and to obey his demands has to be converted or erased. For either the

person who refuses is *ignorant* – then he has to be convinced of the one and only truth by all necessary means. Or he is not *willing* to accept it – then he has to be *forced* to accept. If he continues refusing, he has to be punished or killed.

The turn to the “inward man” introduced by monotheistic religion obliges every human being to accept the one and only *truth* of the one and only *God*. Assmann concludes that the belief in a one and only God inevitably provokes intolerance and violence. Monotheism obliges human behaviour to orient itself towards unanimity of beliefs. It legitimates and even fosters violence against opponents by stressing the importance of truth, loyalty and faithfulness. Finally, monotheistic religions foster violence against adherents of divergent religions by the emphasis they place on *belief*.

3. THE PACIFISTIC FUNCTION OF RELIGION ACCORDING TO RENÉ GIRARD

Contrary to Assmann’s position, some argue that religion is a means to *enclose* violence in society and to create conditions for lasting peace. Among others, the French literary scholar René Girard (1923-2015) has proposed this position. For the first time, Girard presented his theory of religion, violence, and sacrifice in his book on *Violence and the Sacred* published in 1972.¹²

Girard’s basic assumption is that violence is endemic to any human society. Therefore, human beings inevitably have to deal with the violence in their midst. How can societies keep social coherence? How can they escape the risk of dissolution?

In order to answer such questions, Girard endeavours to clarify the following question in advance: Why is violence endemic in human societies? To this, Girard refers to the theory of *desire* proposed by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981). According to Lacan, the human mind is fundamentally governed by *desire*. However, human desire at its origin has no specific object to aim at. How then does desire achieve at a specific object? It is by *mimesis* that human beings learn that a particular

12 Cf. René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré* (Paris: Éditions Bernard Grasset, 1972), transl. by Patrick Gregory, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

object is worth enough to be aimed at. If somebody else desires something, this object of desire must be somehow desirable – desirable for the *other* as well as desirable for *oneself*. Consequently, the self feels urged to desire the same object that is desired by the other. The other and his desire are perceived as a *model* of one owns desire.

However, mirroring the model's desire inevitably leads to conflict. Transforming one man's desire into a replica of another man's desire leads to rivalry; and rivalry inevitably transforms desire into violence. The reason for this is that now two human beings aim at the same object. Therefore, *mimesis* of desire is a source of continual conflict in society.

Mimetic desire threatens to destroy the social cohesion and the harmony that should prevail in human community. Therefore, the following question arises: Is there a way to escape rivalry and dissolution in order to preserve peace and harmony in society? According to Girard, it is only by *sacrifice* that communities can resolve endemic violence. Only by sacrificial practices, human beings can prevent social cohesion from dissolution and destruction.

Consequently, we should conceive sacrifice as a *surrogate victim* that halts the process of rivalry and destruction. In a certain sense, sacrifice is “ritualized mimesis”. It stems the conflictual mimesis by directing violence towards an object that is common to every member of the community without causing rivalry. By offering a sacrifice, all the actors perform the same role – with the exception of the “surrogate victim”, which is banned from community. Human beings are doomed to rituals and sacrifices because they transform “bad violence” into “good violence”. By continuously repeating the process of sacrificing the “surrogate victim”, they reproduce the operation of violent unanimity. An endless practice of ritual sacrifice is established that ensures social stability within community and society. Religion, then, is far from being useless. It protects man from his own violence by taking it out of his hands and ritualizing it. Sacrifice focalises endemic violence on a single victim who serves as replacement for all the other members of the community.

It is by pure chance why a certain object serves as a “surrogate victim”, Girard argues. Anybody can play the part of surrogate victim – a human being as well as a scapegoat. It is useless to look for specific distinctions between the surrogate victim and the other members of the community. Based on the psychodynamic mechanism of *mimesis*, the choice of the victim is purely arbitrary. Frequently, however, the choice of the “surrogate victim” is rationalized by telling some myths referring to its origin.

Although these myths are arbitrary as well, their function is similar: They hide the pacifistic mechanism of the surrogate victim.

In the light of fairly different myths, the “surrogate victim” always appears being extremely ambivalent: It is the legitimate object of mimetic violence. Simultaneously, it is the source of pacifistic effects on the society. In a certain sense, the surrogate victim is “guilty” and “holy” at the same time: It is guilty because the myths declare the victim accountable for the endemic violence in society; it is holy because sacrificing the victim confers harmony and peace to the community.

Girard claims that his theory of violence is the first to truly take into account the double nature of all primitive divinities: The blending of beneficent and maleficent that characterizes all mythical figures who involve themselves in mortal affairs.

With his theory of the “surrogate victim”, Girard develops not only a theory of myth and ritual but also a comprehensive theory of religion and culture. For him, particularly the various “scapegoat” phenomena in culture and religion is the very basis of cultural unification. All religious rituals emerge from the surrogate victim, and all the great institutions of humanity, both secular and religious, emerge from ritual. Such is the case with political power, legal institutions, medicine, theatre, philosophy and anthropology. Not at least the working basis of human thought, the process of symbolization is rooted in the surrogate victim. Sacrifice stops the rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and violence. It redirects violence into “proper channels” – admittedly at the expense of the victim.¹³

However, sacrifice is an efficient instrument of prevention in the struggle against violence. Religion then does not foster violence but develops as a means for man to protect himself from his own violence. It is the basic source of culture, freedom, and peace.

¹³ It is exactly here that Girard criticizes all religions except Christianity. According to him, exclusively in Christianity the fact that the victim is innocent is uncovered.

4. BEHAVIOUR, BELONGING AND BELIEF:

DOUGLAS MARSHALL

Evidently, Assmann and Girard propose two opposite theories regarding the relationship between religion and violence. Thus, what is the outcome of the conceptual impasse we are facing?

In order to answer this question, it might be helpful to refer to the work of the American sociologist Douglas Marshall.¹⁴ Marshall describes religion in terms of belief, behaviour and belonging. These three dimensions of human existence are closely interrelated. Their mutual interrelations justify the assumption that it is too simple to derive human behaviour from a certain mind-set only. We cannot derive concrete modes of behaviour directly from a certain worldview, from political conceptions or from religious convictions. Usually it is a complex set of ideas, individual or shared memories, or personal experiences that deliver the motives for a particular behaviour or a certain action.

Insofar as human behaviour in a strict sense finally derives from the inner core of human identity, we may say that mere *knowledge* is insufficient for human epistemic needs. Regarding behaviour, our reliance on constructed mental models requires more than knowledge. The required surplus is indicated by the term “belief”.

As stated by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), “beliefs” are alliterated ways to express certainty, credulity and confidence in a certain interpretation of reality.¹⁵ Beliefs are integral and unconditional; they are secured against the variety of doubt-producing anomalies that come about regularly in societies. Therefore, “belief” may be characterized as a step beyond *knowledge*.

Accordingly, we may characterize “belonging” as a step beyond *membership*. Belonging refers to a larger idea, composed of attraction, identification and cohesion. While we usually are members of different communities, maybe by chance or by choice, membership is a certain external fact. Differently, “belonging” refers to a psychological dimension of human being. The term

14 Cf. Douglas A. Marshall, “Behaviour, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice”, in *Sociological Theory* 20/3 (2003), pp. 360-380.

15 Cf. Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and its Method*, ed. by Steven Lukes, transl. by W. D. Halls (New York: The Free Press, 1982), pp. 34-47.

refers to a certain kind of membership that is characterized by solidity, effectiveness, and security. Similar to belief, “belonging” refers to the innermost core of human identity.

According to Douglas Marshall, religions combine different degrees or emphases of belief, behaviour, and belonging. However, when religion was blamed to legitimate or even foster violence, this claim has often been related to the first two dimensions of human being only: *belief* and *behaviour*. One cannot deny that arguments over doctrine and even rituals have led to violent clashes. Even today, such arguments are used to legitimate violence towards those who do not share the same beliefs and practices.

However, when it comes to violence in the name of religion, Marshall argues that this usually has far more to do with *belonging*. Belonging affirms who we are and at the same time who we are not. Whether distinctions and differences are viewed positively or negatively depends overwhelmingly on the context in which we find ourselves belonging to a certain community or society.

This observation is even more compulsory in a globalized world where identities are questioned in many ways. In a context of real or perceived threat or out of a sense of historical or current injury, human beings turn to their identities for fortitude and reassurance. However, and all too often, this leads to a sense of self-righteousness and a tendency to denigrate “the other”. In seeking to give an answer to the basic question who we are, religion is bound up with all the components of human identity. Religion thus plays a key role in providing a sense of value and purpose, especially where identities are threatened or denigrated.

However, in doing so, religion can intensify self-righteousness. The result is that opponents – or those who are different – are delegitimized and conflict is intensified. The tendency to intensify identity by stressing a certain “belonging” usually generates a mind-set in which people see themselves as part of a community of the “elect”. Frequently, they find themselves in conflicts with those who do not share their worldview or even deny their claim to be elected. Ideologies of election, however, can be powerfully attractive to those alienated from wider society, especially younger people seeking a sense of self-worth or even prestige.¹⁶ Unfortunately, it frequently legitimizes violence directed to the “other”.

16 Cf. Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Referring to the opposing positions of Assmann and Girard, one can learn from Marshall's reflections that it is not simply "truth" that incites violence. Instead, it is a matter of social belonging and identity that incites violence. This applies even more if one does not acknowledge the "other" and his genuine right to be different.

Consequently, it is not *mimesis* exclusively that incites violence in communities. Instead, violent behaviour is frequently introduced by human concern to loose identity. Such fear incites human beings to achieve and preserve dominance und supremacy over their neighbours. Therefore, it needs a mind-set that effectively provides a reliable sort of identity that does not rely on violence. Identity, in turn, is the ever vibrant result of behaviour, belonging, and belief. However, a stable identity might serve as a basis for overcoming violence by accepting plurality and diversity in society – and far beyond.

5. CONCLUSIONS: ELEMENTS OF PEACEBUILDING

There are clearly times when physical violence must be opposed directly. However, such a step alone cannot alter the mentality that leads to it. The utmost must be done to dry out the soil – whether political, social or economic – on which violence raises.

It is evident that identifying the sources of mentalities relying on violence is highly disputed. Are they religious, economic, political – or whatsoever? The same applies with respect to the measures promising being effective in altering these mentalities.

Peace-building is not limited to the establishment of rights but extends to an internal habitus of benevolent attitudes to adherents of different religious traditions. Thus, one might identify three elements of peacebuilding.

The first element is acknowledgment of difference, maybe social, cultural or religious. Such an acknowledgement will replace any ideology that strives for cultural and religious supremacy and uniformity. In the past, such ideologies very frequently have been enforced by violent means. Instead, acknowledgment of difference implies tolerance and the acceptance of different worldviews, traditions, religious practices, and much more.

The second element of peacebuilding is compassion. "Compassion" means the readiness to alter one's own position in order to view a conflict from

the other side. It demands to perceive and recognize the sufferings, sorrows and grievances of human beings who became victims of economic, social or political circumstances. Readiness to alter one's own position and agency is even more urgent if we recognize that we are accountable for the suffering of the other.

The third element of peacebuilding is the ability and readiness for critique and discernment. The practice of critique and discernment should start from a readiness to criticize one's own convictions and practices in order to proceed to a sympathetic and peaceful openness towards other convictions and practices.

Frequently, self-critique of one's own religious convictions is challenging because religious truth claims are involved. It is even more necessary to remember that in religious perspective divine reality transcends all human knowledge. Consequently, one might justify acknowledgment of social, cultural or religious differences particularly based on religious convictions. The need to highlight inter-religious cooperation is of the greatest relevance in territorial conflicts that involve identities rooted in religious traditions. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a particular case in this context. In the past, politicians who have tried to resolve this conflict expelled religion and its representatives as much as possible. However, the idea that by marginalising or avoiding religion one is more able to achieve a resolution seems to be a fallacy. Failure to engage in the peace-seeking religious mainstream plays into the hands of extremists who precisely wish to transform this territorial conflict into a religious one.

To counter this, we should highlight the voices of the overwhelming majority of religious institutions and authorities that repudiate violent abuses of religion. In particular, we should remember occasions where religions show respect for other communities and traditions. A notable example is the *Declaration of Marrakesh* signed by more than 250 Muslim scholars in January 2016.¹⁷ This declaration reminds of the historical *Charter of Medina* as a commitment to the values of citizenship and the civil rights of religious minorities. Moreover, the above-mentioned document on *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* signed in February 2019 by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb goes even further by declaring that "pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings".¹⁸

17 Cf. <http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/> (16.06.19).

18 Cf. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html (16.06.19).

Consequently, respect for different religious communities and traditions appears as a cornerstone of peace and harmony in society.

If we do not want religion to be part of the problem, it must become part of the solution. This can be achieved by highlighting religious support for peace-making initiatives and by intensifying inter-religious cooperation.

In March 2017, the Lutheran bishop Munib Younan, from 2010 until 2017 President of the Lutheran World Federation, addressed in Jerusalem the US-administration's emissary to the Middle East Jason Greenblatt by saying: "Religious leaders alone are not able to make peace, but it will not be possible to make peace without them."¹⁹

19 Quotation: David Rosen, Violent extremism: Is Religion the Problem or the Solution?:<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/05/violent-extremism-religion-problem-solution/> (16.06.19).

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