Konferenzbericht / Conference Report

Religion, Conflict and Development

Passau, 25–27 June 2007

The conference was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation and was attended by 25 speakers from ten countries in Europe, South- and Southeast Asia, USA and Australia. The organisers were particularly happy that several scholars from Burma were able to attend. The focus was on general questions concerning the relations and tensions between religion, violence, development and conflict with special reference to Sri Lanka, Burma and Southern Thailand.

Six panels (*Political uses of religion in Theravada countries; Everyday religion: Function and meaning; Charisma and conflict: Religion why and for what ends? Parochialisation of religion and sacralisation of violence; Dharma and development: Interdependencies between religion and development policies; Religion as a reservoir of public and private meaning*) were held over three days with three or four papers in each. Two keynotes by Bruce Matthews and Monique Skidmore and an endnote by Martha Zechmeister framed the proceedings. To facilitate discussion and documenttation, different facilitation and visualization methods were used, which were evaluated as very useful by all participants, because they allowed a full discussion of all questions and comments without running over time and also enabled discussion of issues identified as central in summary sessions. Some of the papers can be downloaded at www.iseap.de under 'Conferences'.

The individual papers covered a wide range of topics and aspects, though certain questions and issues resurfaced continuously:

1) What is the relationship between the transcendental and material basis of religion; and how is the resulting competition dealt with? This raises the question of the moral economy.

2) Can religiously defined insurgencies be understood as social movements as well? This led to what was called the problem of the triple R: How are religion, rule and resistance linked.

3) Does religion manifest itself differently in the public and the private sphere? What is the meaning of public and private? And how do we then look at conflicts at the everyday level? In other words, how does a *Veralltäglichung* of conflict occur, and can coping and/or exit strategies be derived therefrom or does it lead to the opposite result: a perpetuation of conflict and violence? This raises the question of how militarization of a society changes both its values and the local culture.

4) Can religion become a surrogate identity? How is the relationship between religious form and content taken into account?

In her somewhat controversial endnote, Martha Zechmeister summarised the proceedings by turning to the theme of liberation theology. She questioned whether the world would be less violent if religion were abolished, since secular modernity, a Eurocentric concept, was only in resistance to the church and its state legitimising role.

She termed syncretism an encounter of different cultures that can turn subversive and considered the current phenomenon of fundamentalism a reaction to modernity and thus, following Eisenstadt, as modern in itself. All fundamentalism basically tries to reduce complexity and thus insecurity by demonising the Other.

Religion shows a distorting, but therefore often true, mirror to a world in which an absolutist ideology demands human sacrifice: neo-liberalism and its worship of Mammon offering human sacrifices to the Golden Calf.

Religion constitutes a very broad range of meanings that can be used in contradictory ways. It allows violence, suppression and exploitation to be legitimised, but at the same time, it provides meaning for resistance, pacification and liberation.

Zechmeister showed that violence as portrayed in various sacred texts allows for three distinct interpretations. Violence against non-believers (even genocide) can be considered as a divine command *(jihad)*. Alternatively, it can be interpreted as a warning against violence, and even as a demand to stop human sacrifices. As Fr. Emmanuel pointed out, man is not for religion but religion is for man. This implies that the interpretation of religion is part of social and political life. In other words, it is integrated into existing power relations. Most presentations showed quite clearly that a direct translation and/or adaptation of the scriptures to state ideologies, religious movements or everyday life is neither possible nor actually attempted. In fact, the theological interpretation of basic dogma concerns the political application of religion only marginally.

The decisive question was why religion has become so prominent a factor in violent local conflicts. One reason may be found in the international

"conjunction". In international politics and the media, religious reasoning finds a ready audience and is seen as a more or less legitimate means to bring about social and political change. In contrast, during the seventies socialism was the main ideology used to legitimise and enforce such changes. Since the eighties, it has been superseded by religion, even though most of the issues, like political and economic equality, dignity and identity among others, remain the same. Why this 'turn' has occurred is still unresolved, though the question is asked less often than should be expected. One answer may be that socialism has failed as an instrument of rule and/or change, but that the prevailing capitalism provides neither solutions nor legitimacy.

Religion is the new promise and a vision of the good (better?) life. There is, however, a basic difference between a secular ideology like socialism and ideologies pertaining to sacrality: In secular ideologies - except fascism - the opponent is still taken as subject. He is an enemy to be defeated, but not annihilated, and the ideals propagated apply in principle to humankind as a whole. Ideologies defining their base as sacred, in contrast, frequently tend to either limit their membership or endeavour to annihilate their opponents, either in terms of identity, or even in physical terms. This is unfortunately sometimes true even for religions, like Buddhism and Christianity, that emphasise the basic humanity of all mankind.

Religious ideologies can therefore become attractive to both a repressive state that has lost most of its legitimacy (Burma, Sri Lanka), or groups using random terror (Southern Thailand). Both cases have in common that their aim is to establish a regime of fear, either exerting or emerging from non-recognition of cultural or ethnic identity and physical existence.

If religion provides a universe of multiple meanings that can be systematized in particularistic and exclusive interpretations either as national religion (Sri Lanka, Burma) or as a motive for violence (Southern Thailand), and if such interpretations are connected to existing power relations within a society, then an analysis of the actors, or rather strategic groups, who use certain interpretations as a rationale for strategies and actions becomes crucial. In other words, who uses religion in what way? To use religiously based ideologies to justify violence seems to be a strategy of small minorities that cannot gain public acceptance through generalised political demands, objectives of social change or visions of a better life. This becomes obvious when one looks at objectives of development. In Sri Lanka and Burma such objectives are either not made explicit (Burma) or are negative ('destroy the Tamils'). In southern Thailand the objectives of the "movement", as far as they can be identified at all, remain on a vague, general level like the introduction of the *sharia*, or establishing Pattani as a

Muslim state. The lack of an ideology mobilising a wide cross-section of the population beyond these interested minorities is compensated for by creating terror and fear in the public.

From a strategic group perspective, these minorities can be considered strategic groups that use violence and terror as their main power resource within the social and political system. The problem is that violence is implicitly always destructive and disintegrative. In a historical perspective, such minorities evolve in processes of change or even disintegration as in rapid modernization.

Consequently, the higher the level of destruction and disintegration, the stronger the power position of these minorities becomes. This assessment poses questions for reconciliation and conflict resolution. Minorities – whether dominant or underprivileged – using religion as a tool to legitimise violence would lose from reconciliation. Since their position is primarily based on fear, its reduction through compromise and conciliation would destroy this position. Thus, reconciliation can only occur under two conditions: either these minorities are able to occupy new positions, i.e. can transform themselves into another strategic group, or they are dissolved. Dissolution is only possible if popular resistance emerges. Such resistance is based on social cohesion that has been continuously destroyed by violence, so the chances for popular resistance and/or acceptance of compromise by a majority of the population (who have been indoctrinated according to the interests of the ruling elites, like in Sri Lanka) are small. In Thailand the situation looks less difficult, since here violence is limited to three provinces and the state has been following a policy of co-opting the population and strengthening local resistance to violence since last year.

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