

flashMOOCs – Transcript

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Video: «How to Cope with Religious Conflicts – Insights from History»

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1. Introduction

Today's world news are packed with reports about religious conflicts. And so are our history books. Since the dawn of civilization, religious conflicts have shaped humankind. On the other hand, almost every religion has peace as a central value. Many people choose to get involved in peace work for religious reasons. The relationship between religion, peace and violence is characterized by ambivalence. Religion, it seems, can be as much a cause of conflict as it can serve as a force for peacebuilding. The fact that religion is acquiring new visibility and heightened attention, including in secular Western societies, raises the questions:

- How can we cope with religious conflicts?
- What lessons can be learned from how past conflicts were dealt with?

Views on the role of religion in conflicts are split – both in the public opinion and according to academic research. Considered by some as the primary cause of conflict, others see religions as inherently peaceful and simply instrumentalized to advance conflicts. However, history has taught us that neither of these views holds generally true. It is important to understand the political, historical and social context in which religion becomes relevant in conflicts. We need to understand how conflict factors and religious dimensions are intertwined.

This video will introduce you to a model that provides a tool for differentiated, context-sensitive analysis of religious conflicts. You will also be familiarized with three historical case studies that will show you different coping strategies used in the past, and the effects of these strategies. In the chapter "How to Cope with Historical Sources", you will learn about the challenges historians face in relation to sources and how they approach these challenges.

2. Model for a Context-Sensitive Analysis of Religious Conflicts

Conflicts arise when diverging interests clash. According to sociologist Georg Simmel, conflicts are a necessity because of their integrative role and significance for societies. Therefore, rather than working towards resolving conflicts, our focus should be on managing conflicts so as to enable their socializing potential. This can take the form of coexistence, cooperation or competition.

There is widespread agreement in research that one essential factor in every conflict is some sort shortage, be it real or felt. This can be shortage of food, territory, raw materials or money - but also non-material goods such as education, power, social recognition, political participation and even religious freedom.

Conflicts over these limited resources break out along specific lines. These lines are societal identity markers, such as gender, generation, ethnicity, religious affiliation or social class. Moreover, every conflict has its own rhetoric, interpretations and symbols. This is referred to as the factor of discourse. So how do these conflict factors relate to religion?

To answer this question, we need to understand what "religion" is. To date, there are as many as two hundred different definitions available. Some of them focus on religious content, others on the function of religion, and yet other definitions endeavor to combine the two. However, what almost all of these definitions have in common is that they differentiate between the various dimensions of religion. Firstly: Religion addresses contingency and gives people guidance on how to feel and behave by providing rituals and guidelines for life. Secondly: Religion contributes to forming identities, both individual and group identities. And thirdly: Religion influences how people interpret the world by providing symbols, narratives, interpretations and teachings using rhetorical means and images. The described dimensions of religion interact with our three conflict factors. It is important for us to understand how these interactions work in specific situations.

To complete our model, we need one last concept: The concept of «Coping». It originates from psychology and describes how people deal with stressful situations. A distinction is usually made between three different types of coping: Emotion-based coping strives to change the emotional relationship with an unchangeable situation. This is the case, for instance, when commemoration ceremonies are held for victims of acts of violence. Problem-oriented coping is targeted at changing the structures and conditions that are causing a given conflict. With regard to the Israel-Palestine conflict, you can think of negotiations and agreements on land sharing and access to water. Meaning-

focused coping aims to alleviate harm or suffering through cognitive re-evaluation of a situation. A typical example of a meaning-focused coping strategy adopted by people of faith is to see and accept an event as God's will.

Conflicts are often aggravated because emotional, factual and interpretive levels get mixed up. This makes it essential to distinguish between the three coping strategies in the analysis of conflicts with religious dimensions. The concept of Coping helps to extend the approach of conflict transformation. Through the integration of emotional and rational aspects, coping offers a means to better understand and deal with conflicts that cannot be resolved or transformed at a factual level.

Now, our model is complete. Let's see if it helps us to better understand religious conflicts of the past.

3. How to Cope with Historical Sources – Methodological Remarks

Our view of the past will always be through the lens of the present. This is legitimate and inevitable of course. However, we must bear in mind that historical sources cannot answer all of our present-day questions. History remains an attempt to reconstruct aspects of the past. Which means that we have no access to the past in its entirety.

When using and making reference to historical sources, we need to pay attention to various methodological issues: Firstly, sources were often shaped, conveyed and controlled by people in power. At least as often, the survival of sources was a matter of coincidence. In most cases, we do not know why a particular source survived, nor do we know what we could have learned from other sources that did not survive. Secondly, it is hard to provide an adequate interpretation of the sources available to us. What were the author's intentions? What influence did those intentions have on his or her presentation of history? Who was the target audience? What did the author want to convey? And do these objectives affect the credibility of the statements in the source? Thirdly, when evaluating the source, one of the most dangerous pitfalls is to measure and criticize it by applying the standards of our current knowledge and values.

As historians, we want to understand aspects of the past. To do so, we must focus on the question as to what the respective author and audience may have thought and expressed in their day and age. Historical sources are "distorted mirrors" of the past. Interpreting them is a challenge for which academics have come up with an entire set of instruments. A brief summary of the most important methods is available here.

Our knowledge of the past is very limited. And from our present-day perspective, much of what we learn from the sources is very strange to us. The only way we can learn from the history, is by processing and applying this knowledge analytically and creatively.

4. Historical Case Studies

4.1. Eating instead of Fighting: Swiss Religious Wars in the 16th Century and the “Kappeler Milk Soup” (Author: Janine Scheurer)

This painting by Heinrich Thomann dates back to 1605 and depicts a meal that is said to have taken place in 1529 near the town of Kappel situated in the heart of the Old Swiss Confederacy. The painting is called the «Kappeler Milk Soup». Eight men, clearly from two opposing groups, are gathered around a bowl of soup. Most of them are armed and there are weapons on the ground. Yet they are sharing a meal together, each equipped with their own wooden spoon. Numerous artists chose to paint this motif, which has since become very famous. We cannot tell for sure if the story depicted in the painting is fact or fiction. But this pictorial window to the past has become a symbol of how to handle conflicts peacefully. In order to understand why, we have to delve deeper into history.

In the 1520s, four cantons of the Old Swiss Confederacy converted to Protestantism, seven cantons kept their Catholic faith, and two cantons allowed both religions. A conflict arose between the Catholic and the Protestant cantons. The conflicting parties were fiercely aggressive in their quest to convince each other of their respective religions. Their differences culminated when the Catholic forces burned a Protestant pastor. Whereupon two of the Protestant cantons armed their soldiers and marched to Kappel situated on the border with the Catholic cantons. The troops from five Catholic cantons set up camp on the other side of the border. All of the other cantons took a neutral stance and tried to mediate between the conflicting parties.

During those long days of mediation, when on guard duty, the soldiers from both sides of the conflict met at the border that divided their camps. Many of them knew each other from previous military battles when they had fought side by side against common enemies. The leaders on both sides of the conflict knew this and were aware of how it might impact their soldiers' willingness to fight against each other. This may have facilitated successful mediation between the parties which in the end led to a peace treaty.

The described events were so extraordinary that several chroniclers of the time wrote about them. One of them was Protestant pastor Johannes Stumpf who took part in what is known today as «The First War of Kappel». The chronicles he provides offer us some legendary details: The soldiers of the Catholic cantons suffered from a shortage of bread. Knowing that the Protestant soldiers had enough bread, they filled a large bowl with milk and placed it right next to the border. Then they invited the Protestant soldiers to share a meal with them, in the hope that they would bring along some bread. This is how the Catholic and Protestant soldiers ended up sitting around a bowl of soup and sharing their milk and bread.

Heinrich Bullinger is another Protestant writer who reported on the event. In his chronicles of 1564, he reports that foreign ministers who came to mediate between the parties were deeply impressed by the confederates for upholding the value of friendship in spite of conflict. The protestant writer wanted to teach his readers to never forget the importance of peaceful coexistence.

The first Peace of Kappel did not put an end to the disputes, as the cantonal authorities continued to renegotiate the border situation. The ensuing tensions led to a violent armed conflict only two years later. But the events of 1529 became a key anecdote and a symbol of Switzerland in the 16th and even more so in the 19th century.

Why did eating milk soup fail to offer lasting peace? Let's take a look at our Analytical Model.

Case Reflection

When the mercenaries decided to eat soup together rather than fight, they chose a very pragmatic response to a concrete shortage - namely the shortage of food and the resulting need they shared in common. For a short time, they elevated their shared need for food above the divisive line of religious affiliation. In many cases, such pragmatic, problem-oriented actions help to de-escalate acute outbursts of conflicts. But, as the case of Kappel shows, they are not sustainable. Not long after that shared meal the controversial issues resurged. The battles for territory and power as well as the dispute over religious truths could not be eliminated in this way.

If you take a closer look at the picture, you can see that the soldiers are actually fighting during the meal – not with spears but with spoons. We can also see from this example how meaning-focused coping shapes perception and even reality itself. Eating together is an ancient Christian symbol of peace. Although the celebrated peace proved unsustainable, the «Kappeler Milk Soup» became a symbol of peaceful, pragmatic conflict resolution in Switzerland. To this day, the «Kappeler Milk Soup» is served to celebrate successful negotiations. And, more importantly, the search for common goals and pragmatic solutions is considered a typical trait of Swiss conflict mediation.

4.2. Overcoming Violence by a Universal Philosophy: The Medieval Philosopher Ramon Llull

In the age of the Crusades, Ramon Llull tried to prevent physical violence by way of rational means. This medieval manuscript shows events from Ramon's life and his basic philosophical ideas. It was commissioned in Paris by one of Ramon's disciples ten years after his death.

Ramon was born in Palma de Mallorca circa 1230. He grew up at the court of King James I, in Palma de Mallorca, where he was exposed to Christian, Muslim and Jewish culture. Once a troubadour and a wealthy courtier with a wife, two children and several concubines, he became a Franciscan monk at around thirty years of age. After his conversion, he dedicated his life to missionizing Muslims. But rather than resorting to physical force, which was commonplace during the Crusades, Ramon tried

to prevent violence through rational means. He relied on language learning, logical reasoning and argumentative persuasion in personal encounters to convert Muslims to Christianity.

Learning Languages

With a view to enabling Christians to missionize Muslims, Ramon suggested setting up language schools for Hebrew and Arabic. He began by buying a Muslim slave who taught him Arabic and how to read the Quran. Soon after, Ramon and his slave started arguing over the truthfulness of the Quran. The Muslim slave attacked Ramon and said: "You are a dead man! How I wish I hadn't taught you Arabic! And why did I show you the Quran and Mohamed's law? You want to fight against it with reflections of necessity!" Ramon fended off the attack and had him put in chains. Shortly thereafter, the Muslim hanged himself.

Logical Reasoning

Ramon was convinced that the world in its entirety and even God could be understood through principles of logical reasoning. He believed he had found a universal philosophy that could reconcile and unite all religions. This becomes visible in this miniature that depicts an army of philosophers trying to free truth from the "tower of falsehood". Riding at the front of this philosophical army are Ramon himself and the philosophers Aristotle and Averroes. Their horses are called "Right Intention", "Rational Reasoning" and "Imagination".

Persuasion in Personal Encounters

In 1307, Ramon sailed to North Africa, on a mission to preach what he called the «necessary reasons» for the Christian faith. He was brought before the city's highest judge, the Qadi, where he proclaimed Christianity to be the only true religion and accepted by God, and the Muslim faith as false. After reminding Ramon that blasphemers will be sentenced to death, the Qadi said: «If you believe that the Christian law is true and the Muslim law is false, then prove it with logical arguments.» Ramon countered: «Let us agree on something we have in common, and then I will give you the necessary reasons. Isn't God the most perfect infinite goodness?» The Qadi agreed. Then Ramon wanted to prove the existence of the Trinity. He stated that God, in his perfect infinite goodness, must be in eternal operation, and said to the Qadi: «As a Muslim, you believe that God created the world. You have to argue, therefore, that God attained his perfect goodness when he created the world. I, by contrast, argue that the operation of goodness has been a part of God in eternity.» He concluded by claiming any other notion of God to be absurd. The Qadi was not convinced. The listening crowd began to beat Ramon who was subsequently taken to prison. He was later released and set sail for his hometown.

Case Reflection

Were Ramon's strategies to cope with religious differences successful?

From a modern-day perspective, Ramon's principle of avoiding physical violence must be seen as extraordinary in the time of the Crusades. In his own view, he failed to accomplish his mission on at

least two levels: He did not succeed in converting non-Christians. Moreover, he failed to avoid physical violence, even provoking it on several occasions.

If we take a look at the Analytical Model, we can assume that Ramon's intentions were doomed to fail because he devoted himself only to the rational, meaning-focused aspects of religion. He ignored the fact that Islam was fundamental to the identity of society in North Africa and, thus, could not simply be replaced with a universal philosophy. Moreover, he acted with a habitus of intellectual superiority and hurt other people's feelings. To this day, some people in Western societies lament a lack of logical reasoning in non-Western religious communities. This patronizing attitude is often an aggravating factor in conflicts. Ramon Llull's story shows that this has been the case for many centuries.

Select another case study or continue the video by clicking on one of the buttons.

4.3. Interreligious Hospitality: Cultic Coexistence at the Shrine of Abraham in Late Antique Palestine

Nowadays, Hebron is a place of violence. The tombs of the biblical patriarchs Abraham and Sara, Isaac and Rebekka, Jacob and Lea are sacred to Jews, Muslims and Christians and fiercely contested. Things were very different in antiquity. As it is reported in the biblical book of Genesis and depicted in this mosaic from the «Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore» in Rome, the grove of Mamre near Hebron was believed to be the place where Abraham and Sarah were visited by three divine men. Arabs, Jews and Christians travelled to the grove and celebrated the manifestation of God and the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah. Every summer for at least six centuries, a major festival with a large market took place at the sanctuary of Mamre.

Archaeological findings, including artefacts with religious symbols, confirm that Mamre was the site of diverse cultic practices. The religious authorities tried to prevent this multi-religious worshipping. The rabbis deemed the sanctuary impure and forbade the Jews to take part in the festival. And in the fourth century, Emperor Constantine ordered the site to be ritually cleansed and had a Christian basilica built on it. However, all efforts to ban cultic diversity proved futile. The Christian basilica was built. But even hundred years later, Jews, pagans and Christians continued to celebrate cultic feasts together at this cultic shrine.

According to a description provided by Christian historian Sozomen, they went to great lengths to participate in the shared festivities. They all had their own religious interpretation and cultic use of the place: The pagans worshipped the appearance of angels, the Jews venerated their patriarch Abraham and the Christians remembered the revelation of the Trinity in the three visitors of Abraham. This multi-religious festival had its own rules of conduct. For example, illicit behavior was prohibited and husbands had to refrain from getting close to others wives. It seems that the sanctuary of Mamre

was not abandoned before the seventh century. And for many centuries, it served as a place of hospitality and interreligious encounters.

Why did the multi-religious use of the sanctuary in Mamre work in antiquity?

Case Reflection

Coexistence occurred on the level of specific actions and religious rituals. Every visitor was permitted to perform the cultic rites that fit his or her respective religion. This freedom held considerable appeal: People with different religious affiliations came to Mamre, and all participants benefited economically from the prosperity of the sanctuary. The common economic benefit rendered religious diversity and cultic coexistence tolerable – perhaps even desirable.

With regard to the Analytical Model and at the level of discourse, it can even be said that the ritual coexistence and the competition for religious interpretations enhanced the appeal of the site. The attempt of the religious authorities to prevent the common use of the sanctuary was a problem-oriented coping strategy that failed. Their claims of the site being ritualistically impure can be understood as a meaning-based type of coping. Giving the place a symbolic meaning failed because, for the people involved, the pragmatic, economic cooperation was more decisive than the need for religious clarity.

5. Conclusion

The three historical case studies show the complexity of conflicts with religious dimensions. This is because not only material resources, but also immaterial goods, strong values and world views are contested in such conflicts. Previous conflict research and practical conflict mediation have, therefore, attempted to focus on specific, pragmatic common goals. For example, religious groups are instructed not to argue about truths, but to build a school. In our model this means that conflicts are not conducted on an emotional or meaning-focused level, but on a problem-oriented level. However, experience shows that these pragmatic solutions are not sustainable. Whereas they may help to de-escalate ferocious conflicts, they do not generate a sustainable coexistence. At the end of the day, when the school is established, Muslims, Jews, Christians and Buddhists will need to discuss what and how the schoolchildren will be taught. And, then, it all comes down to values, world views, rituals and emotions. Therefore, in order to find appropriate, sustainable coping strategies for conflicts that involve religion, we need more research that takes into account the intertwined nature and interplay of all relevant aspects.

The Interfaculty Research Cooperation «Religious Conflicts and Coping Strategies» at the University of Bern is dedicated to this goal. Some 50 academics are devoting their efforts to examining religious conflicts and coping strategies employed in the past and the present. Together, we will further develop the Coping Concept and the Analytical Model. Our vision is to provide the analytical basis

for coping strategies in past, current and future conflicts in which religious groups or religious issues are involved.

Further information: www.flashmoocs.unibe.ch