

Faith and Friction: Underlying Causes of Religious Conflicts in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Religious wars have existed since the beginning of humankind but in the 21st century they have become more complicated and intense because of globalization, technological discovery, socio-political changes and the cultural identity crisis. This paper explores the background of modern religious wars by investigating motives that include political factors, cultural and historical aspects and identity issues. The main objective of the research is to examine the interaction of all these varying issues that promote tensions between different religious groups in various regions. This will provide insight into the nature of religious conflict and how it can develop into violence. Areas of research include the importance of the struggle for political power, resource-based rivalry, past resentment, social inequality, media intervention and the fear of identity-loss, which have all been reasons for the continuation of religious wars. This article has a qualitative approach since it is based on the use of case studies located in different regions of the globe to study the patterns and dynamics of religious conflict. It also has a multi-theoretical approach that integrates Social Identity Theory, Relative Deprivation Theory and Instrumentalism to analyse the psychological, social and political aspects of these conflicts. Research indicates that religious conflict does not have one definite cause but is a result of an interplay of structural inequalities, political exploitation, and cultural unwillingness to change as well as the globalization of ideas and stories. However, the current technologies of communication can help to reduce tensions and offer the possibility of initiating dialogue. This paper could contribute to the process of policy-making, interfaith cooperation and peacebuilding across an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world by uncovering major causes of religious conflict and the implications of dealing with them.

Keywords: Religious conflict, Political exploitation, Social identity, Instrumentalism, Historical grievances, Cultural change, Peacebuilding

Introduction

Religion is a significant aspect of human society and has influenced politics, changed the paths of cultural development and shaped social structures throughout the ages. Religion played a politically decisive role in the power play and transformation

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of society both during the Reformation in Europe and the Ottoman-Safavid conflict in the Islamic world. Although these conflicts are usually presented as theological conflicts, they were often the result of economic interests, political ambitions, and identity politics. Hence, these conflicts were not only about religious faith but about the use of power in society (Keller, 2017). History has shown that religion has been both the umbrella and the dividing fault-line that could move populations either in the direction of collaboration or mass violence.

The growth of colonialism between the 16th and the 20th centuries also made use of religion as imperial nations took advantage of some existing religious divisions to keep them in power. Divide and rule was the policy of the British in South Asia and this has intensified Hindu-Muslim differences, which are still evident in modern politics (Garrison, 2014). Colonial boundaries, which disregarded ethnic and religious inclusiveness, have institutionalized fault lines in the Middle East that have burst open many times since the struggle for independence. Long-standing historical grievances that were present in the collective memory of nations have been used by religious groups to shape perceptions of injustice and legitimacy (Keller, 2017).

In the contemporary world, religious identity is strongly associated with national identity in many societies. This has strengthened the perception that political sovereignty and religious authenticity are inextricable entities. An example can be found in the rise of nationalism in Europe of the 19th century, when Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox identities were used as the rallying points for political movements. Also in the Islamic world, the revival of religion has been coupled with allegations that revivalist movements were returning to power on the basis of Western secularism (Anderson, 2021). These movements, regardless of their differing ideologies, were influenced by a history of defeat, occupation and cultural displacement.

In the aftermath of World War II, religious confrontation took on innovative geopolitical aspects. The cold war changed certain religious conflicts into ideological conflicts in which opposing blocs supported anti-war alliances depending on strategic benefits. To take an example, the struggle by the Afghan people against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, which had been defined in religious terms, turned out to be a proxy war in the worldwide conflict between communism and capitalism. Similarly, superpower interventions increased sectarian conflicts in the Middle East, which were incorporated into geopolitical rivalries at the global level (Schmidt, 2016).

Although globalization and modernization have transformed the scene of religious conflict, the history behind these conflicts is still significant. Religious wars, historical and theological disputes about authority, ritual and interpretation are all evident in the conflicts that continue to exist in the contemporary political and economic world. In South Asia, religious nationalism justifies its present trends and concerns in historical terms. Sectarian rivalry in the Gulf and inter-religious conflicts

in Africa also use historical considerations to convince policymakers. Modern communication technology can speed up the dissemination of such narratives but the content of such narratives is usually based on stories of persecution, resistance and the divine mandate developed over a long period of time (Martinez, 2020).

Hence, it is necessary to contextualize religious conflicts in the 21st century by viewing them in the protracted context of the past. However, historic resentment, identity constructions, and the politicking of religion are not simply factors arising out of the historical past but also influence the way contemporary groups perceive current events and choose either to engage in dialogue or to resort to confrontation. Historical perspectives enable us to develop a more overarching and nuanced explanation of religious conflict and can explain how these conflicts evolve in contemporary circumstances and provide reasons why they are so elusive and difficult to solve despite modern global cooperation.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the historical, political and socio-economic reasons why religious conflicts have become a focus of interest in the 21st century.
2. To examine how identity, historical grievances and political manipulation of religion work together and use Social Identity Theory, Relative Deprivation Theory and Instrumentalism.
3. To determine the influence of globalization and the media in escalating or reducing religious tensions in different cultural settings.

Research Methodology

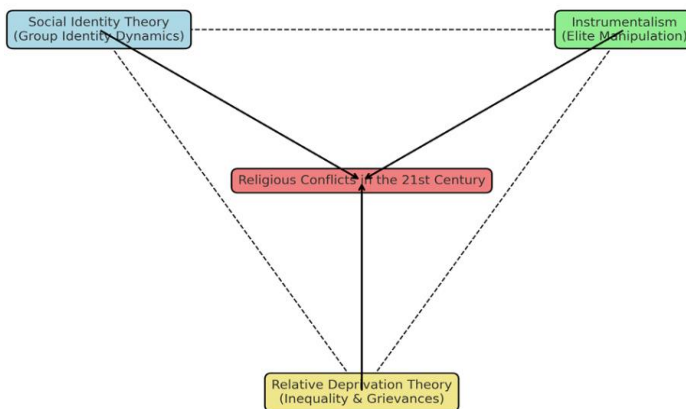
This qualitative, analytical and descriptive study analyses the complicated and interconnected causes of religious conflicts of the 21st century. The analytical component of this approach allows us to structure the causes of conflict into thematic definitions, which include politicization of religion, economic inequality, and globalization. The cause-and-effect interplay of these factors can be identified with the help of such an analytical framework. This research mainly uses secondary sources such as academic texts, books, reports of established think-tanks and publications of international organizations. Analysis of both traditional and digital medium can help assess factors affecting the promotion of religious animosity through the influence of news-framing, news discourse and online messages (Martinez, 2020). Media studies may provide reasons for Research Objective 3, which is to measure the effect of globalization and media to create, boost, or prevent religious tensions in an organized manner. The research design will involve a case study approach that will lead to an analysis of certain conflicts by recognizing common patterns. These case studies can reveal the way in which historical legacies, political ambitions and socio-economic inequalities relate to each other and thus provide arguments for Research Objective 1.

Social Identity Theory, Relative Deprivation Theory, and Instrumentalism are used to explain the results of the case studies.

- **The Social Identity Theory** (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) clarifies the way religious identity contributes to the formation of an in-group and an out-group based on the experience of prejudice, rejection, and animosity.
- **Relative Deprivation Theory** (Gurr, 1970) is based on the observation that unequal opportunities in the economic system, political power, and social recognition breed discontent and result in mobilization among marginalized religious groups.
- **Instrumentalism** (Brass, 1997) exposes the manipulation of religious identity by political masters in an attempt to seek power, influence resources or enhance legitimacy.

The combination of these theoretical explanations meets the requirements of Research Objective 2 because it enables the research to explain religious conflict as the outcome not only of structural inequality but also as the result of the political manipulation of religious conflict, which is often based on historical legacy (Garrison, 2014). The combination of theory, case studies, and thematic coding makes the research not only descriptive but also explanatory. For example, in the case of the Rohingya crisis, the methodology would allow an analysis of the historical process of marginalization (Objective 1) under the colonial and post-independence regimes, the role of religious identity in strengthening exclusion (Objective 2), and the role of international human rights activism and online hate campaigns (Objective 3). These conclusions could also be reached by an analysis of the Sunni-Shia conflict, Hindu-Muslim tensions and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Figure 1: *Theoretical Framework, Triangular Influence Model*

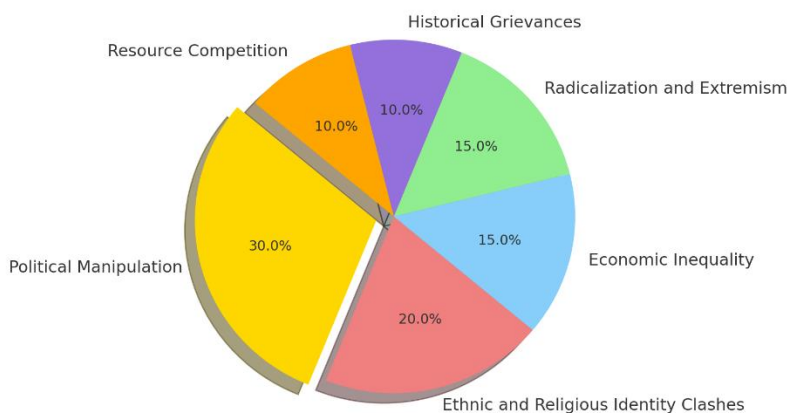


The Primary Reasons for Religious Wars in the 21st Century

The situation with regard to religious conflict is rather complicated in the 21st century because theological debates are not the only factors that contribute to this phenomenon. Though different beliefs may be a source of division, political leaders tend to exploit them to consolidate power or to raise divisions in order to gain supporters and institutionalize certain forms of discrimination against the minorities. Religious identity has also contributed to the rise of religious wars because it is used as a unifying factor among the marginalized or threatened groups, which are influenced significantly by economic inequality, past wrongs and the scarcity of land and water.

Moreover, with the growth of globalization and the use of social media, such processes create a paradoxical effect because, on the one hand, they promote unity while, on the other hand, advance the influence of extremist and misleading ideas through the use of propaganda that creates fear and intolerance. Hence, modern religious wars are not simply religious in nature but are the result of a combination of religion, politics, history, and socio-economic circumstances influencing each other to form a combustible and lengthy cycle of violence.

Figure 2: *Distribution of Causes for Religious Conflicts in the 21st Century*



Differences of Religious Belief

There are significant differences in religious doctrine, theology and practice among various denominations and this tends to divide society into different groups. Although diversity in belief has the potential of enriching societies, it has also led to misunderstandings, mistrust and rivalry based on claims of religious legitimacy. Hostility has been reinforced by intolerance of other religions and by the belief that one's own religion is the only truth. The negative effect of prejudice can be increased by fear of the unknown and by historical injustices, e.g. the memory of past conflicts

that still affect social relationships. To take another example, the Sunni-Shia division in the Middle East dates back to centuries-old theological differences even though it is seen today as a contemporary political and social fault line. On the same note, Hindu-Muslim tensions in India usually spring from religious differences of an historical nature. In Myanmar, the conflict between the Buddhist majority and the Rohingya Muslim minority provides an example of how ideological conflict and ethnic identity can result in persecution and eviction.

Personal Interest and Political Power

Religion tends to make use of politics. Elites in politics often take advantage of their religious identity either as a claim to power or to block resistance or even as a means to seek popularity. The institutionalization of discrimination can marginalize the minority and establish a religious national identity. An example of the way religion can be linked to issues of territory and nationalism is evident in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Moreover, during the Syrian Civil War, domestic and foreign actors used sectarian conflict to further political interests. Furthermore, the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria is an example of the amalgamation of extremist religious ideology that depends on the interaction of politics and religion.

Religious Extremism

Extremism is the result of excessively rigid interpretation of religious ideas and ideologies that opposes pluralism and co-existence. Socio-economic deprivation, political intentions, and personal identity crises usually aggravate this phenomenon. The internet and social media networks have helped to facilitate the distribution of extremist ideas as seen in the globalized world where groups recruit members from several different countries. The emergence of ISIS is one of the clearest illustrations of how political grievances, a crisis of identity and the prevalence of technology is used by extremist groups to recruit members from every part of the world. State support of extremism in the Middle East has also contributed to the division of sectarian militias by which the combatants of opposing states welcome cross-border support to achieve geopolitical interests.

A History of Conflict and Grievance

Modern day religious conflicts have historical origins. The impact of colonial memories, past persecutions and ancient wars have a lasting influence on modern identities and political boundaries. Colonial powers benefited from religious discord in a bid to hold onto their own power. This resulted in fragmented societies. In 1947, prompted by the Partition of India and Pakistan, religion became a major point of division leading to continued violence in the modern era. Even the historical memory of the Crusades of the Middle Ages still has an impact on Christian-Muslim relations today. Moreover, political leaders in contemporary Turkey and the Middle East have used their Ottoman legacy as a way of showcasing certain nationalistic or sectarian

policies. Despite the negative effects on the minds of people, historical injustices can be utilized politically in an attempt to create nationalism.

Competition for Natural Resources

Religious wars are frequently caused by competition for land, water and economic resources. The scarce availability of these resources can serve as a focal point for various groups to compete for these precious resources. The scarcity of natural resources has been worsened by the effects of climate change and this fact has also increased social and political tensions. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has nothing to do with religious and national identity but is a question of access to land and water. The distribution of oil-wealth in Nigeria has led to conflict between Christians and Muslims, especially in resource-endowed areas. The civil war in the Sudan has ethnic, religious and resource-related roots and illustrates how the lack of resources can be mixed with identity politics.

Social inequality

Economic inequality and the political marginalization of religious groups can create bitter feelings. The segregation of society into different groups can be strengthened by discriminatory policies and laws, lack of access to equal education, and feelings of superiority. Broader discrimination usually includes caste and religious-based discrimination such as Dalit groups in India. Sunni and Shia communities are diverse in terms of wealth and political influence and this leads to mistrust and occasional violence, especially in the Middle East. Not only are such tensions, inequalities and conflicts a source of social exclusion but they tend to make vulnerable groups more vulnerable to radicalization.

Globalization

Globalization has brought about inter-connectivity and the exchange of culture in various regions but it has also led to issues of self-identity for numerous religious groups. The globalization of culture or westernization can be critical and even reject certain traditional religious values. The huge increase in population in recent years and the migration of people can also result in tensions among diverse religious groups and even to conflict. Islamophobia, fed by media narratives and security concerns, has become much stronger in the West since the World Trade Centre attacks of 11th September 2001. Moreover, the case of the Rohingya in Myanmar demonstrates how the international spotlight on human rights violations can provoke religious frictions at the domestic level. Furthermore, secularism and religious expression has led to tensions in France between the Muslim minorities and the State.

Misinterpretation of Religious Texts

Religion texts are subject to a distortion of meaning through selective or even politicized interpretation. This can lead to the justification of intolerance and even of

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violence. Islamists misinterpret the meaning of *jihad* and use it to justify their actions. In fact, this is a common characteristic of extremist groups who use the word of God as a weapon. Moreover, some religious leaders in India use selected passages from the Hindu scripture to promote nationalist sentiments and to justify discrimination of non-Hindus. Events in past history, such as the Crusades, are also examples of the way religious language can be misused in order to justify religious wars even decades after these wars were fought.

Media Influence

Media has described religious conflicts among various religious groups according to the perception of the masses. Partisan coverage, tabloid reporting and editorials often widen the rifts between religious groups. Misinformation and hate speech spreads very quickly by the use of social media. Online hate campaigns were engaged in Myanmar where the Rohingya were targeted and this has led to mass violence. Religious riots in India have been fuelled by pseudo voice messages on media messaging. In certain countries, where the media is controlled by the State, sectarian scrips with a religious identity are used as instruments of political power.

The Loss of Identity

A sense of belonging is closely associated with religious and cultural identity. When communities feel that their identity is under threat because of migration, globalization and demographic shifts, they could use defensive tactics that are violent in nature. In this way, Hindu nationalism in India has been provoked by the fear of the loss of Hindu cultural heritage because of the influence of the Muslim and Western cultures. In Myanmar, the Buddhist majority believes that the presence of the Muslim minority population is a threat to national and religious identity. This has led to exclusionary policies and violence against the Muslim minority in that region. Such fear is heightened by political rhetoric and media discourse, which describe diversity as a threat.

Cultural Changes

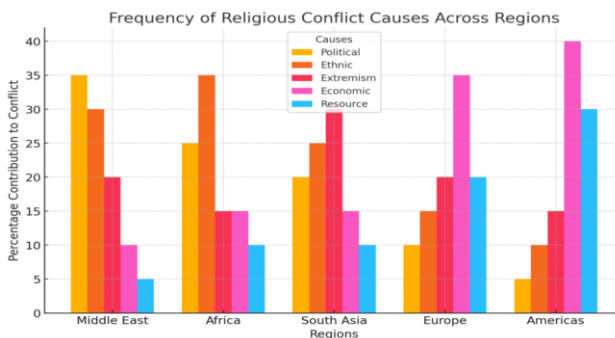
Cultural changes that occur during a short period of time, whether caused by globalization processes, technological or social changes may cause tension between the beliefs and customs of traditional religion and contemporary norms of society. Conservative religious communities can consider secularism, gender equality and other cultural trends introduced by young people as a threat to their traditional cultural values. Political and social divisions in Turkey are the result of the clash between secular rule and Islamic revivalism. In France, the *hijab* became a cause of protests when it was banned throughout the country, an action that was perceived as discriminatory. The culture of revivalism and traditional strength in Iran has at times been perceived to be in conflict with the younger generations who would like to have more individual freedoms.

Findings

The results of the research points to the fact that both ancient and modern factors contribute to religious conflicts in the 21st century. One of these factors is the political instrumentation of religion, which has proven many times to be a strong provocation of religious conflict. Political leaders and governing elites have made strategic use of religious identity to accumulate strength and to mobilize their followers to overcome opposition and entrench their power. Nationalist narratives also consolidate divisions and mobilize conflict. In addition, the continued existence of socio-economic disparities, economic marginalization and minimal access to the political process make it possible for religious bias to remain strong and exposes disadvantaged communities to continued radicalization and instability.

Historical resentment has also proved to be a major influence provoking religious tension. Unresolved conflicts dating back to the colonial period, historical conflicts and territorial divisions that have persisted until the present continue to affect the perception that communities have of each other. These relics from the past are not simply nostalgic memories but are constantly recalled, politicized and mobilized as part of popular struggles. These past conflicts are compounded by cultural changes brought about by globalization, migration and the advancement of technology. Although cultural exchange can be enriching and help to create awareness, it can also result in identity crises when religious communities fear that sharing cultural values erode their traditional ways of life.

Figure 3: *Frequency of Religious Conflict Causes Across Regions*



One of the main findings is the inter-connection of political, economic, cultural and historical factors resulting in religious conflict and war. No one cause is independent of the others. Hence, political use of religion is more frequently the result of preexisting historical resentments. Economic disadvantages are enhanced by state discrimination and cultural transformation results in the loss of identity. In the Sunni-Shia split, for example, the theological divergence cannot be separated from geopolitical conflicts and conflict over access to resources among countries in the contemporary world. In the same manner, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar is more

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than simply a question of religious identity but has taken the form of ethnic marginalization, control of resources and political power.

The media and globalization do not begin the war but are responsible for its continuation. This is because the traditional media and the digital media have a big influence on the narratives of those in conflict. The media is selective with regard to information and frequently turns religious conflict into sensational stories, thereby further polarizing those in conflict. Moreover, social media sites have facilitated the spread of misinformation, hate speech and the spread of extreme propaganda to such an extent that in some cases they have caused real-time violence. Although globalization can lead to greater tolerance, it has also led to increased tensions within societies that lack suitable policies of integration and in societies where majority groups view demographic and cultural shifts as threatening.

The above analysis provides evidence of the applicability of the three theoretical lenses used in this research. The Social Identity Theory explains the resilience of in-group and out-group phenomena and the way that religious identity is used as an indicator of insiders and outsiders. Relation Deprivation Theory provides insight into the way that certain groups articulate their supposedly economic and political disparities and, in some instances, use violence to achieve their goals. Instrumentalism clarifies the reason why religious variations are strategically exploited by political elites to achieve their own goals. All these theories have provided different but complementary dimensions of religious conflict and, in this way, can become an excellent watchdog to explain the dynamics of religious conflict in the 21st century.

Finally, the results confirm that religious disputes in the contemporary world were not the result diverse beliefs or doctrines. Religious conflicts and wars are the result of the friction created by the intersection of various grievances, political power and the politics of identity, which becomes intense because of present-day communication technology and the interconnections of the world economy. These interconnected factors must be identified and understood in order to design sophisticated conflict prevention and resolution strategies.

Conclusion

The study has confirmed the fact that many conflicts in the 21st century are connected with religion and that these conflicts are caused by a number of political, economic, cultural and historical factors. Moreover, we can conclude that religious conflicts are never due simply to doctrine and theology independently of larger power struggles related to economic resources, issues of identity and religious diversity, which are all very complex issues. One of the most persistent causes of religious conflict has been the political use of religion. State actors and political elites have used religious identity on many occasions to reinforce their power, oppress opposition and enlist mass support. This blatant use of religion for political purposes not only deepens

existing rifts but also introduces new divisions in society that become increasingly difficult to deal with.

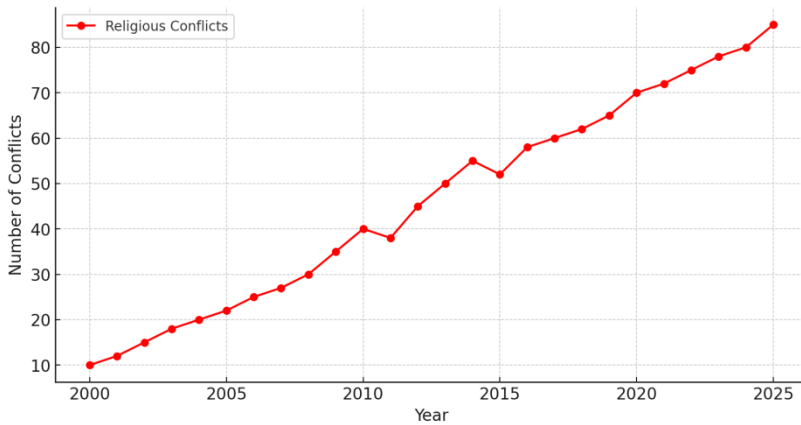
Together with political manipulation, economic inequality and rivalry over the availability of natural resources also cause division among the religions. When access to land, water, energy or livelihood is allocated on the basis of religious affiliation, either deliberately or as a result of inequality, tensions come into the open and can lead to radicalization especially in the marginalized sectors of society.

Another important observation made was that, in an era of globalization and migration, fears about identity have increasingly led to religious conflict. The constant movement of people and the exchange of cultures, ideas and values have not only brought societies together but have also enabled religious traditions to confront each other more than in the past. Although this new situation has resulted in a certain mutual understanding among different religious communities, it has also become a source of insecurity for religious traditions that feel threatened by this sudden increase in their encounter with different traditions. In this new context, insignificant events can spiral into serious conflicts through provocation by political propaganda or publicity.

The history of past conflicts between religious communities still looms over present-day encounters between the same groups. Hostilities can easily be justified by memories of past conflicts dating back to the colonial period or to past periods of history, which can be politicized. Memories of past events can be coupled with cultural changes brought about by modernization, secularism and generational change, thus making living together in harmony even more difficult.

In short, there is ample evidence that contemporary religious issues cannot be solved with a one-dimensional approach. Effective resolution of religious conflict requires the recognition of the interdependence of political power games, socio-economic inequality, lack of security about one's cultural and religious identity and a series of historical narratives. It is only when all these factors are addressed together in an atmosphere of interfaith dialogue, social equality, and inclusive governance that religious communities can hope to minimize violence and the recurrence of religious wars in the 21st century.

Figure 4: *Trend in Religious Conflicts (2000-2025)*



Recommendations

Religious conflicts in the 21st century are deep, multi-stratified, and have political, economic, cultural and historical explanations. As the evidence of this study shows, they cannot be addressed through short-term peace deals or minor policy changes. Instead, the root causes must be identified and a comprehensive plan of action should be developed that involves governmental and civil policy, religious leadership, the media and international organizations (NGOs) in order to deal with the core issues. The last part of this study consists of a few recommendations that may be useful to reduce existing religious tensions and contribute to lasting stability.

1. Encourage Inter-Religious Dialogue and Collaboration

Religious co-existence and harmony, which is the fruit of understanding, respect and trust between different religious communities, is essential for the reduction and elimination of conflict. Interfaith dialogue is much more than polite exchange and should include opportunities for sincere exchange of views and perspectives. Such exchanges, which are facilitated by religious leaders, teachers and local activists, can emphasize values that are held in common and help to disregard misconceptions and stereotypes. Collaboration on social projects that enhance community services would reduce the effect of divisive rhetoric and behaviour.

2. Separate Religion from Political Manipulation

Prevention of the use of religious identity by governmental institutions for political purposes ought to be guaranteed by legal provisions. Elections should not be allowed to campaign on the basis of religion and high-ranking officials should be held to account for using sectarian rhetoric. Independent watchdog organizations and civil institutions should act to prevent the misuse of religion in politics and should make politicians accountable for such behaviour.

3. Address Socio-Economic Disparities

Religious division is often linked to economic disparity and competition over natural resources. Governments should ensure that each religious community has equal access to education, employment, health services and political representation. Moreover, access to land, water, and energy should not depend on religious belonging. Regions that are more vulnerable to climate change should be given special protection to reduce the possibility of violence.

4. Education Can Reduce Radicalization and Misinformation

Education is an important means of preventing extremism. Critical thinking, acceptance of diverse views and knowledge about other cultures and religions should become part of the school and college curricula. Courses dealing with comparative religion can also help students understand religious diversity and avoid stereotypes. In addition to traditional subjects taught in schools, digital literacy training will provide individuals with the ability to recognize and dismiss extremist propaganda and other forms of fraud that can be found on the internet. Insight into the harm caused by extremism could be deepened by inviting former extremists to explain the way they were lured into the process of radicalization.

5. Accountability of Media Coverage and Restraint of Hate Speech

Since the media has such an enormous influence on the development of religious perception, adequate training should be given to journalists and broadcasters so that they adopt ways of reporting religious matters that are devoid of sensationalism and bias. Social media platforms and governments should collaborate to control hate speech, misinformation and propaganda about violence by moderating the content of reports and collaborating with independent fact-checkers and community forums to deal with harmful content.

6. International Mediation to Settle Long-Term Conflicts

Some grievances about religious conflicts have not been resolved despite a long history of local efforts at reaching a solution. In such cases, international mediators such as international organizations (e.g. the United Nations), regional actors (e.g. the European Union or the African Union), or other respected international leaders can be asked to facilitate negotiations in order to resolve these issues. Initiatives by external agents should focus on truth and reconciliation so that affected groups can clarify their grievances and expect some level of closure. Sincere efforts to resolve issues that demand a longer period of time may actually provide solutions that result in a more permanent peace and reconciliation.

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