

AUTHORITIES IN RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS AND CONTROVERSIES: FROM PROBLEMS TO SOLUTIONS

Linjakumpu Aini, PhD¹

Abstract: *Religious conflicts take place in various ways. This article discusses the role of religions in low-intensity conflicts occurring in people's daily lives, relationships, and situations. New skills are needed to navigate the mosaic of disputes, rights, and obligations. In addition to ordinary citizens, these skills are needed by professionals in different fields who come across issues and people associated with religions. The article examines the role of the public authorities in encountering issues, problems and conflicts related to religions. While the authorities must safeguard the rights of people belonging to religious movements, they also have to solve problems arising from religions. In the article, the authorities' activities are explored within the framework of religious literacy. The article discusses the basic principles of religious literacy and the ways in which they are manifested in the context of the authorities' work. Religious literacy refers interpreting the role of religion in different phenomena, institutions, actors, and interactions in society. Understanding, contextualization and a critical attitude are key components of religious literacy, which could be seen as a professional competence that supports authorities and other employees in their work.*

Keywords: *religion, conflicts, religious literacy*

¹ University of Lapland, Finland, aini.linjakumpu@ulapland.fi

Introduction

Religious conflicts occur in many ways. The attention is often drawn to the role of religion in wars, terrorism, and other so-called high-intensity conflicts (see e.g. Frost, 2004a; Frost, 2004b; Selengut, 2003; Wellman, 2007). This article discusses the role of religions in a different environment: in people's daily lives and various encounters. These encounters may be devoid of problems, but they may also contain a wide range of conflict-prone features. In this article, the concept of *low-intensity conflict* is used to refer to these problematic situations, relationships, and encounters.

Over the past few decades, the presence of religions in people's daily lives has been characterised by diversification in the field of religion. Increasing numbers of people from other countries and continents are living in different European countries, which has also created a new kind of religious map. On the other hand, the secularisation process has in many countries also changed traditional ways of structuring religions; the role of religion in societies has been in a state of flux. (See e.g. Bendixsen & Wyller, 2020; Kühle et al., 2018)

These trends have contributed to creating new forms of politicisation of religions and religious identities (Woodhead et al., 2021). New skills are now needed to navigate the mosaic of disputes, rights and obligations relating to religions. In addition to ordinary citizens, these skills are needed by professionals in different fields who come across issues and people associated with religions.

In particular, this article focuses on the role of the authorities in encountering issues, problems and conflicts related to religions. While the authorities must safeguard the rights of people belonging to religious movements, they also have to solve problems arising from religions. The authorities' activities are examined here within the framework of *religious literacy*. An authority with religious literacy skills knows how to analyse meaningfully phenomena, structures, difficulties, and needs related to religion. The article discusses the basic principles of religious literacy and the ways in which they are manifested in the context of the authorities' work.²

1. Low-intensity conflicts and religion

What do low-intensity conflicts mean in this context? The term refers to a specific dimension of politics: politics is a conflict between actors, ideas, and issues. At the heart of politics is politicisation, or making something political (Palonen, 1993, p. 91). In practice, politics and politicisation mean disputes, disagreements, and controversial situations (Palonen, 1988, p. 19–20, 30–31). In this article, I am interested in local conflicts that affect the daily lives of ordinary people. Conflict-proneness defines the specific nature of politics and distinguishes it from other social phenomena (including culture, religion or economy).

Conflict is often associated with such concrete actions as armed clashes. It can also be interpreted in a wider sense, in which case conflict means opposition between political actors or parties and their object and between each other (Palonen, 1979, p. 84). In addition to opposition, conflicts in politics are manifested in distinctions and classifications. Consequently, this can be regarded as essential when talking about politics (Palonen 1988, 31).

This view is in keeping with the well-known criterion for politicalness of Carl Schmitt, or making a distinction between friends and enemies. Schmitt defines political activity as follows: "The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy. [...] The distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation (Schmitt, 1976, p. 26). The enemy is the 'other', 'unknown' and differ-

²The article is based on the monograph by Linjakumpu, Sakaranaho, Konttori, Rissanen, Illman, Ubani & Tiilikainen 2023.

ent in some way. Schmitt's distinction includes the idea that, in a certain situation, a conflict between friend and enemy is possible (Schmitt 1976, p. 27). For Schmitt, politicalness inevitably means the existence of conflicts between friend and enemy.

This view means that politics can be positioned relatively freely in different social structures and phenomena. Politics is a process-like phenomenon whose inner nature is dynamic and anti-essential and whose content may vary from one situation to another. Consequently, the definition of actors in politics is equally flexible. Anyone can potentially be a political actor (Linjakumpu, 1999). In this case, 'politics of religion' is pursued not only by actual politicians but also, for example, by ordinary citizens, authorities, the media and other social actors.

In local conflicts associated with religions, religion is politicised in one way or another; religion or religious identities or views become an instrument of political distinctions. This politicisation can take place in many ways and between a wide range of actors. For example, it may manifest itself as tensions and conflicts between religious minorities and majorities, between issues and actors that belong and do not belong to religions, and between people within religious communities. In addition, religion may have a bearing on other social disputes and divisions, such as discussions on abortion, sexual rights or the rights of sexual minorities. These disputes reflect a wider division between conservatives and liberals, which may also take the form of 'culture wars' (Hunter & Wolfe, 2006; Uzlaner, 2020).

2. Religions and authorities

There are local variations in the forms in which conflicts and controversy related to religions are structured in society. The authorities are an example of a group of actors that encounters these conflicts and their consequences in their work. The authorities are responsible for regulation, punishment, support and monitoring associated with civil rights, making them key actors in controlling religious conflicts. The public sector, which consists of central and local government institutions and organisations, maintains well-being as well as order and continuity in society. While decisions are made and legislation is created in the field of politics, these regulations are translated into practical measures in the activities of the authorities. The authorities' activities comprise control and administration in which public power is exercised. (See Linjakumpu et al., 2023, p. 105-107)

In other words, the authorities and service sector employees have the possibility of creating regulation on different issues in their work, provide security and care, interpret legislation and impose penalties. Public sector fields and actors also encounter religious issues in different ways. The need to develop religious literacy in the authorities' activities has become increasingly important, for example as a result of growing immigration: what is the authorities' attitude towards the religious needs of people who represent minority religions, or the challenges arising from them? How are conflict situations associated with religions handled by the authorities? In this article, I consider the roles of the social and health care sector, the police and the judicial system, in particular.

The social and health care sector as well as the police and judicial authorities are examples of the activities in which issues relevant to religions as well as people practising religions and belonging to religious movements are encountered. In addition to these, practically every area of public activity involves religion in one way or another, which makes religion effectively impossible to ignore.

Health care and social work are the 'frontline' where representatives of public power engage a large number of people who have religious beliefs or who are members of a religious community or religion. The backgrounds of these people are also increasingly diverse. However, many studies have found that health care and social work professionals' knowledge of service users' spiritual dimensions and needs is rather limited. On the other hand, research has highlighted a need to understand the

employees' belief systems better, as they may have an impact on their decision-making and practices. Faith and spirituality may also play a role in the processes of healing and recovery. (See e.g. Dinham, 2018, p. 83–85)

The police and the courts have an extensive mandate also in religious matters. It may include protecting religious groups and safeguarding their rights and, on the other hand, preventing problems caused by religious movements to their members or to other people and the definition of sanctions. The police and the judiciary are additionally important users of power whose attitudes towards religious groups and minorities as well as their members are important for these groups' sense of security. The principles of freedom of religion freedom define the rights of both individuals and religious communities. However, freedom of religion and other human rights may be in conflict with each other and, for example, the authorities need an understanding of how to interpret what falls within the scope of religious freedom and when other rights of individuals must be prioritised and religious freedom restricted. (See Linjakumpu, 2015, p.272–276)

The growing complexity and diversification in the field of religion is clearly reflected in the public sector, and this also places increasing demands on the public sector's activities. A number of countries have picked up on this need of the authorities (see e.g. the Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 2020), and in many contexts, there have been demands for a better understanding of religions, accounting for the needs of religions and religious people, and encountering problems related to religions, among other things. (See e.g. Al-Sharmani et al., 2018; Tiilikainen & Mankkinen, 2020) Understanding the role of religion in their work is a challenge for the authorities, however, often leading to a kind of 'blindness to religion'. What, then, would be a well-informed way of dealing with religion? What would religious literacy mean in this context?

3. From religious illiteracy to religious literacy

Rather than being a new concept, religious literacy has been a term used in discussions for several decades, especially in North America and Europe. The need for religious literacy is obvious particularly in secularised states, such as the Nordic countries, but also in countries with a strong religious majority or several religions. Religious literacy is a tool for different types of actors: authorities, researchers, and the media, but also for religious communities themselves (Linjakumpu et al., 2023, p. 151-172).

The idea of religious literacy has been developed in such areas as social and health care, education, and the policing sector, in other words in fields where people belonging to different religious communities are encountered. Religious literacy is consequently often seen as a professional competence that supports authorities and other employees in their work. Religious literacy helps to understand the diversity, changeability in time and place, and internal heterogeneity of religions. Religious literacy can also be understood as a civic skill helping to understand the significance of religions in a person's life and as part of society at large (Linjakumpu et al., 2023, p. 20-21; 153-159).

Religious literacy means interpreting the role of religion in different phenomena, institutions, actors and interactions in society. The key to this skill is an ability to familiarise yourself with another person's viewpoint and see the situation as part of a broader context of time and issues. *Understanding, contextualisation* and *a critical attitude* are key components of religious literacy. They are not only the starting points for religious literacy but also crystallisations of its essential aspects; the ways in which religions can be read inclusively and constructively.

Understanding means 'hearing' and taking seriously issues relating to religions, faith and believing as well as interpreting them and communicating about them. In other words, understanding refers to both familiarisation with religions and making them understandable. Questions associated to re-

ligions and believing cannot be automatically interpreted and explained, and they do not have the same meaning in all people's lives. In this context, religious literacy means getting to know the 'internal world' of religions: how religions work, what their dynamics is like, and how their involvement in society can be interpreted. What does believing mean for individuals, and how are the processes of power and control of religious communities structured? In other words, understanding means examining the self-understanding of religious actors, the way in which religion is 'narrated' and what appears to be essential in your own religion. (Linjakumpu et al., 2023, p. 44-45)

Contextualisation refers to the fact that religions and believing do not make up an isolated zone in human life or society, which is an important starting point for religious literacy. Contextualisation means putting things in perspective: dimensions related to religions and religious phenomena are examined as part of broader socio-political entities. Neither overestimating the role of religions in different areas of society (religionization) nor underestimating them (blindness to religion) are useful. Religion should be seen as part of society at large that is intertwined with the matrices of society's existence; rather than needing to detach it from other areas or categorise it separately from them, we should try to understand it as part of the whole. (Linjakumpu et al., 2023, p. 45)

A *critical attitude* means an open, investigative approach, which is the opposite of dogmatic and inflexible thinking. Critical examination focuses on both religion and the status of religious persons and communities in society. A critical approach does not necessarily mean having a negative attitude, bringing up phenomena in a negative light, or 'revealing' them as false or misleading. Critical attitude refers to the necessity of open discussion and upholding the values of society (including equality, religious freedom and individual's rights). Religions and their different manifestations are open to critical examination in the same way as all other societal issues and phenomena. Religious actors need to be examined as both those that exercise power and as objects of the exercise of power: in this sense, the critical position also touches upon actors outside religions. (Linjakumpu et al. 2023, 45-46).

4. Religious literacy in the public sector

How can the concept of religious literacy be used in the authorities' work? The key is perceiving religious literacy as part of the authorities' professional competence. Religious literacy helps to identify problems, conflicting claims and interests. Religious literacy means that religion is taken seriously, however not uncritically.

According to theologian Paul Knitter, religions must be taken into consideration because they have 'psychological power'. Religions define how people and communities see themselves and their world and how they behave in the world; for religious people and cultures, religion is a key determining factor. (Knitter, 2010, p. 258–259.) In some cases, religion acts as an essential 'marker' of identity. Because of these factors, public sector employees cannot ignore religions and the factors associated with them if they intend their actions in their role as authorities to be meaningful and trustworthy. (Cf. Dinham & Francis, 2015; Crisp & Dinham, 2019.)

Taking the religious dimension into account does not mean that religion or spirituality would become a factor that determines the public sector or that office holders should be personally committed to them (cf. Carlisle, 2015). Rather than religionising the work of the authorities, taking religion into consideration means an approach that supports the client's life as holistically as possible.

Understanding. In the authorities' work, understanding means having at least some kind of notion and awareness of the client's religious and spiritual backgrounds and starting points. For example, this means considering which dogmas have a particular impact on the client's life; in what way they impact it; what kind of social dimension is related to religious practice; how religion affects a

person's health and well-being; and what standards and practices affect the emergence of problematic situations and situations of conflict and violence within communities. Ignoring religion would mean that the authorities do not base their work on all possible and available information. Understanding religions is part of professional competence, as resources and problems associated with religion and spirituality can define clients' lives to a significant degree and ignoring them means that the situation cannot be solved holistically, be it in the field of social and health care or in the sphere of policing. (See Linjakumpu et al., 2023, p. 123-124)

Rather than this merely being a question of respecting religions in the client's course of life, authorities should strive to take advantage of the positive role of religions or to help clients see their potentially harmful impacts in their or their loved ones' lives (Knitter, 2010, p. 267; cf. Schubert, 2010, p. 372). While authorities should consequently understand the client's religious views, they should not be accepted without reservations. They should also recognise the possibility that the client's religiousness or spirituality is at least in some cases a resource for advancing and resolving matters. (See e.g. Schubert, 2007, p. 137–138; Tiilikainen & Mölsä, 2010, p. 318–319) Religion may be a strength in a client's life that, for example, supports the procedures and processes of social work or health care (e.g. Mulder 2015).

Contextuality. In the authorities' work, contextuality means being able to position religion in relation to the society around it, its social layers, and also the client's life as a whole: the same religion can appear quite dissimilar in different places and to different people. It is also necessary to recognise clients' varying forms of religiousness at different life stages; in early childhood, at school, in the workplace, in hobbies and for older people. In the authorities' work, contextualisation of religion means that understanding religion as a dogma or abstraction is not enough; contextualisation analyses religion as a lived experience.

Contextuality also means that the authorities must create meaningful preconditions of existence in society for people belonging to religions or religious movements. While their religious rights must be secured, people must also be safeguarded from possible abuses by religious collectives. In this context, the idea of *religious citizenship* is relevant. Citizenship as a concept refers to a person's rights and obligations in a state. Religious citizenship can be regarded as a form of citizenship that is partly separate from citizenship of a state and that determines the nature of the rights and obligations arising from religion. Members of a religious group – its 'citizens' – have the right to exercise their religious freedom. On the other hand, they have obligations in relation to other people and society as a whole. (See Parker & Hoon, 2013, p. 164–165)

Religious citizenship does not mean the domination of a certain religion in relation to other religions or society. Religious citizenship should be seen as an opportunity for different types of religiousness and spirituality as well as non-religious views to have a meaningful position in society. This way, citizenship is participation in public life, however not exclusively on the specific terms of spirituality or a religious group. (Cf. Parker & Hoon, 2013, p. 165) From the perspective of religious citizenship, the authorities' activities are positioned 'in between' religious groups and the state. The state is an abstraction that becomes reality in different practices, which the authorities also represent. While the authorities implement and interpret the state's duties, legislation and the power to impose punishments, they must also take into account the views and starting points of religious collectives. This is about the concrete placement – or contextualisation – of religions in the logic of society around them. (Linjakumpu et al. 2023, p. 124-125)

Critical attitude. Critical attitude as a dimension of religious literacy in the authorities' work goes in several directions. Whereas the approach should not be excessively 'empathetic' or 'overly' understanding when dealing with religions or religious phenomena, it should be noted that neither is excessively straightforward critical attitude a meaningful starting point. The authorities must assess critically the potential problematic nature of the exercise of religious power and religious practices,

also for the members of the movements. Such an assessment is generally contrary to the interests of the movements and to the forms of control they use. On the other hand, the authorities must notice situations in which persons outside religious movements are causing problems to members of the movements, for example in the form of persecution or hate speech. In this case, the critical attitude focuses on how people outside religions and religious movements can act towards religions. (Linjakumpu et al., 2023, p. 128-129)

Whatever the situation, the critical position must be justified and not based on prejudice. An office holder should also be critical regarding their status as an authority. Consequently, the authorities' religious literacy does not only mean recognising the religiousness or spirituality of religious actors and acting on this basis. Religious literacy also includes understanding how the authorities' personal spirituality or lack of it affect the performance of their official duties. (Cf. Knitter, 2010, p. 263–264)

An employee's religiousness may be a resource in client work when the clients are religious people or the client's problem or the matter to be handled is in some way associated with religions. In this case, an authority's personal religious background may provide them with capabilities for encountering the client's religion. The matter is not as simple as all that, however. According to Paul Knitter, "most of the religions, in one way or another, either expressly teach, or take it for granted, that theirs is God's preferred religion (if they are monotheists) or that their religion has achieved the highest form of enlightenment (if they are nontheists)" (Knitter, 2010, p. 263). This setting causes difficulties in authorities' work, as the views of an office holder's religion may prevent them from understanding the client's dissimilar religiousness, or problems arising from religions. However, this problem may also be present in empathetically secular work of the authorities, in which religion is not perceived as a potentially important factor determining the client's life. In both situations, it is necessary for the employee to reflect on how their personal religiousness or non-religion affect their work as a whole (Cf. Viljamaa, 2009, p. 101–102).

Conclusion

The political nature of religion is often manifested as low-intensity conflicts and controversy at the local level, rather than as transnational wars, hostilities, or terrorist acts that receive a great deal of attention. Low-intensity conflicts affect the people's daily lives as well as their opportunities to operate as citizens and to be part of society. In these and similar situations and circumstances, the authorities play a crucial role; they are the interface regarding religious challenges and phenomena.

In the authorities' activities, religious literacy is a tool that helps to navigate these challenges. Religious literacy is about understanding how religions and religious people are structured from the perspective of society's obligations and rights: in other words, what the contextual position of religions is in society. While the authorities must safeguard religions, they must also protect people from them. Members of religious groups are part of social service systems as well as legal systems. In order for the authorities' actions to be relevant to them, a work approach of religious literacy is needed.

An authority with religious literacy skills knows how to structure the role of religion meaningfully. Overemphasising religion can lead to wrong conclusions; religion does not necessarily play any role in problems within the family, for example, even if a person did belong to a very normative and communal religious movement. Consequently, religious literacy also means being able to see the insignificance of the religious dimension in a situation.

In other words, authorities' work supported by religious literacy means positioning religion in a broader context. This makes religion something that is important for people's well-being and rights, rather than just a spiritual issue. Consequently, religion and spiritual belief become a societally relevant issue, and applying religious literacy to it also helps to resolve low-intensity conflicts and controversy related to religion.

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