

# Swiss Experiences in Addressing Religion in Conflict

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# Swiss Experiences in Addressing Religion in Conflict

Promoting peaceful ways of addressing violent political conflict with religious dimensions is an integral part of Swiss peace policy. It is rooted in the country's rich history of conflicts related to the coexistence of religious communities. These experiences led to norms of solving problems on a practical and local level in a consensual and collaborative manner that have shaped Switzerland's political culture.

By Jean-Nicolas Bitter  
and Angela Ullmann

The majority of violent armed conflicts today include a religious dimension (see: [Re-thinking Mediation: Resolving Religious Conflicts](#), CSS Policy Perspective, 2018). Conflicting religious and secular worldviews can play decisive roles in conflict and need to be addressed. This is why Swiss peace policy puts a special focus on addressing this type of conflict. It concentrates on engaging political actors from different worldviews who are ready for dialog aimed at finding solutions for practical coexistence. This is done through a religiously neutral approach in which civic values, such as respecting the legal framework, renouncing the use of violence, and not imposing particular anti-religious or religious values, are key, but none of the dialog participants are forced to change or give up any of the specific values they may hold.

Switzerland's efforts on addressing conflicts related to the coexistence of religious communities rest on a set of values learned through often challenging historical experiences of religious and denominational conflict over centuries. Historical accommodation and a changing role of religion in society have meant that political tensions between traditional religious communities have cooled off. Nevertheless, some of Switzerland's main political cleavages were once along religious lines, and the country needed to develop operating mechanisms with



Religious coexistence in Switzerland has not always been as peaceful as it is today. Switzerland's peace policy can consequently draw on its own historical experience. A. Wiegmann / Reuters

high integrative power. These operating mechanisms – a mix of basic values, mindsets, and approaches – have become norms for constructively addressing conflicts between religious communities that form an integral part of Swiss political culture and Swiss peace promotion today, and may also lead to insights on how to deal with religion and conflict in other parts of the world.

#### Four Foundational Elements

Four interdependent elements have laid the foundation for Swiss political culture.

First, direct democracy and its antecedents: From cooperatives for the joint use and exploitation of common land (pastures, forests, alpine meadows) to the political organization of those who live in the same territory – in so-called *Landsgemeinden* in the Late Middle Ages (1250–1500) and later in the *Tagsatzung* – the Swiss populace has created a bottom-up, locally-based, participatory approach to political decisionmaking that emphasizes individual responsibility and participation in the political decisionmaking process.

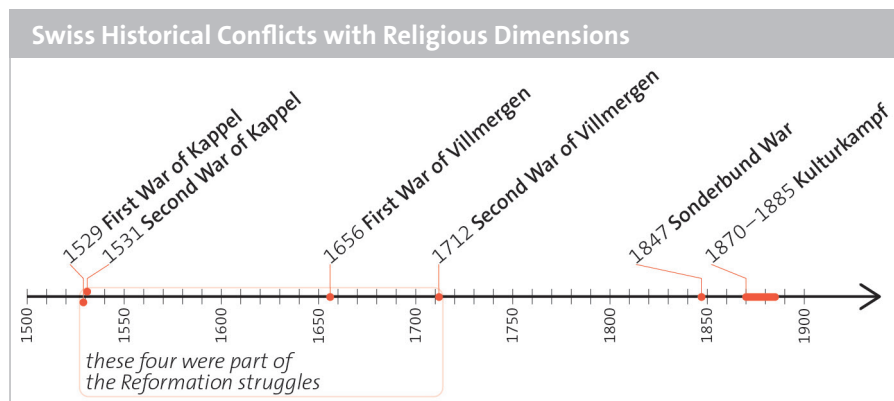
The second element is the traditional sovereignty of the Swiss cantons (and their predecessors), which existed long before the federal state. Respecting cantonal sovereignty was very important when the cantons united into a federal state, and it can also be seen as an effort to reconcile the Catholic community. The modern-day constitution reflects the federalist structure chosen in 1848: the federal state is only responsible for the areas specifically mentioned, while all other matters automatically fall under the jurisdiction of the cantons. Regarding religion, this means that the constitution protects the freedom of its citizens to exercise a religion or not (art. 15 BV) and guarantees peace between its religious communities (art. 72(2) BV). However, all other matters regarding religion, such as its regulation, legal organization, or education, come under the cantons' jurisdiction (art. 72(1) BV).

A third important element of Swiss political culture is the principle of subsidiarity. It implies that decisions are to be taken at the lowest structural level possible. It reinforces the bottom-up approach and offers local solutions to local problems. While the national level deals with questions relating to the Swiss model of society as a whole, the local municipal or cantonal levels enjoy more freedom and creativity in finding tailored solutions in a collaborative and consensual manner for the practical issues of everyday life, which need only to serve the respective municipality or canton and in-

### Conflicts over religion should be first addressed at the local level.

volve only locally concerned players. Addressing conflicts around the practical coexistence of religious communities thus falls to the municipalities and cantons. Examples of such issues include reconciling religious practice and educational requirements, the treatment of non-Christian religious holidays in labor laws, or the compliance of religious dietary requirements and access to non-Christian pastoral care in hospitals and prisons.

The fourth element is the principle of concordance. The goal of concordance is to include all actors (political parties, societal groups, minorities, associations, etc.) in the political process, with preference given to consensual decisionmaking over voting. The desire is to find a consensus whenever possible and to ensure broad consultations before turning to majority-based decision-



making, so as to allow everyone to be represented in the decisionmaking process and thus identify with it. Many formal political mechanisms include mandatory consultation processes before votes. However, informal mechanisms for exchange and debate, including media reporting, are equally important. For example, the decision by the Canton of St. Gallen to create Muslim burial grounds in 2012 was preceded by six years of formal consultations and political debate.

The four elements of direct democracy, federalism, subsidiarity, and concordance have been crucial to the growth of a Swiss political culture that highly values a dialogic, pragmatic, participatory, and consensus-oriented approach to handling differences.

However, tensions exist between these four interdependent elements, particularly between direct democracy and the others. Together, the four elements form a conflict management mechanism; for when solutions cannot be found by consensus at the lowest structural level, the matter can be decided by the majority in a national popular vote. A number of examples illustrate what happens when the balance between the four elements is disrespected and a hierarchy with direct democracy at the top is introduced.

#### Start at the Local Level

A study of Swiss political culture yields two principles for addressing religious tensions that may also be useful in other, comparable contexts. The first is that conflicts over religion should be first addressed at the local level. Most conflicts around religion and religious coexistence are sparked by incidents related to practical and visual aspects of religion, such as rituals, symbols (e.g. clothing), or places of prayer. For ex-

ample, when it comes to enabling compatibility between religious practice and the educational system, the Swiss experience shows that these conflicts are best solved at the local level, where there is more flexibility and freedom to find tailored solutions in a participatory and consensual manner. In the Bernese countryside, pupils from Evangelical backgrounds have been excused from school attendance on specific occasions upon request in the past, in order to allow them to abide by their community's religious rules. Only when local conflicts cannot reach local solutions should they be taken to a higher level. Disagreements that concern the nature of the federal state, such as discussions over values, have to be negotiated at the national level.

#### Focus on Practical Aspects

The second guiding principle for addressing conflicts of religious coexistence is to focus on the practical aspects of shared everyday life instead of doctrinal or dogmatic issues. When concrete conflicts already exist, further debate over religious dogmas and fundamental values tend to emphasize the divisions underlying the conflict. Because values and dogmas are defining elements of the groups' identities, they cannot be compromised without compromising the communal identity. Values can therefore not be negotiated, but coexistence still needs to be organized. Switzerland has learned that focusing on practical actions of everyday life is much more amenable to finding solutions for living together in the short and long term. Religious communities may express the flexibility inherent in any tradition in accordance with their own determination, interpretation, and pace. A current example of such flexibility for reinterpretation from within is the approval by certain Muslim communities for funerals in Switzerland according to Swiss burial regulations, which

require a coffin instead of the traditional linen cloth, and do not guarantee unlimited death rest, which Muslim burial sites are supposed to provide. As interpretations of religious doctrines vary, it is important to take into consideration how they are translated into concrete practice before references to a dogma can be fully understood in a particular case. By focusing on the practical level, religious and secular communities in Switzerland can find solutions that are compatible with their different value systems and worldviews, without imposing any value system and while abiding by the country's legal framework. The application of both these guiding principles to conflicts of religious coexistence has granted a creative process in which solutions cannot be foreseen.

### A Pattern of Failure

Although Switzerland has developed and practiced a political culture that is well equipped to address conflicts over religious coexistence, this does not necessarily mean its principles have always been applied. In certain instances, dogmatic issues have been dealt with through national votes instead of looking for pragmatic and consensual solutions at the local level. Such patterns can be primarily observed when the four key elements of Swiss political culture – direct democracy, federalism, subsidiarity and concordance – are ranked hierarchically, with the first rated as the most important.

During the *Kulturkampf*, the Protestants and liberal Catholics wanted to limit Catholic influence on the young federal state. Instead of negotiating ways of living together in a dialogic and consensual way, several amendments to the constitution were passed by public vote in 1874. These included prohibitions against the foundation of new monasteries and religious orders, an expansion of the ban against Jesuits, and state control over the establishment

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of new dioceses. These so-called religious exemption articles in the constitution were only reversed in 1973 and 2001. Jewish communities were only granted the freedom of establishment in 1866, and in 1893 the Jewish ritual slaughter of animals was banned by popular vote on the basis of animal protection law. More recent years have

seen popular initiatives such as the constitutional amendment to ban the construction of minarets in 2009 and the upcoming vote on banning burqas in public space ten years later.

### Against Foreign Influences

If we want to understand this pattern of failure, we must recognize that the Swiss are worried by the potential negative impact of foreign influence. Any consensus will only include those perceived as “belonging to” Switzerland. The Roman-Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim communities were arguably discriminated against because they were perceived by large parts of the population as foreign or owing allegiance to foreign authorities.

Taking the example of the minaret ban, it is clear that the question, which arose in three municipalities, should have been dealt with under existing cantonal construction regulations. However, large parts of the municipalities were not willing to find a local consensus on a practical level, because Muslims were not perceived as belonging to the Swiss community of consensus and the minaret was perceived as a non-Swiss symbol of foreign rulers' influence in Switzerland.

### Learning for the Future

By making the minaret issue a national one through a popular initiative, an issue over technical building regulations was turned into a fundamental and dogmatic conflict between a Swiss and a “foreign” worldview. The goal of the debate was thus no longer to find local and pragmatic solutions, but to negotiate immigration politics, changes in Swiss identity in times of globalization, and gender equality policy. In Switzerland, the constitution guarantees freedom of belief and of religious practice. A good way of addressing perceptions, in order to prevent politicizing elements from taking over, is to reach out and familiarize oneself with the unfamiliar. The elevation of direct democracy above the other three key principles of Swiss political culture, namely federalism, subsidiarity, and concordance, has not yielded stable solutions. If Swiss history is anything to go by, it may take many years to rectify the currently existing religious exemption clauses – but it will likely be done.

### Swiss Peace Promotion Policy

Switzerland's experiences of religious and denominational conflict have shaped its

## Religion, Politics and Conflicts

“Religion, Politics, Conflicts” (RPC) is a sector of activity at the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). It is dedicated to supporting Switzerland's peace promotion efforts as a center of expertise on the interplay between religion, politics, and conflict. It currently focuses on four regions: the Sahel, North Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Switzerland shares the expertise it has gained on the topic since 2004, for example through the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy or its annual Religion and Mediation Course, co-organized with the Culture and Religion in Mediation (CARIM) program (a joint initiative by the FDFA and the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich), the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers.

foreign policy. Promoting peaceful coexistence between religious and secular communities is a key pillar, as laid out in the constitution (Art. 54 BV). Swiss engagement on this topic is carried out by the Religion, Politics, Conflicts (RPC) desk at the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Switzerland supports its interlocutors in creating more inclusive societies in a religiously neutral way – not by negotiating or reconciling conflicting religious or secular values, but by creating trust between the different communities through concrete cooperation.

For example, Switzerland currently supports a dialog between Buddhist leaders from across the political spectrum in Thailand together with the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies at Thailand's Mahidol University. The goal of the project is to facilitate dialog between key Buddhist actors in order to encourage constructive engagement of the Buddhist community in efforts to promote peaceful coexistence in southern Thailand. In the ongoing conflict in the predominantly Muslim south between a separatist Malay Muslim insurgency and the Thai state, the Buddhist minority feels marginalized.

The dialog aims to address this feeling of marginalization amongst the ethnic Thai Buddhist community by preparing them to engage with Malay Muslims and the authorities in order to seek solutions to their concerns. After initially focusing on building a common understanding and solidarity amongst Buddhist participants, the project has gradually sought to build links

between the Buddhist dialog participants, the authorities, and representatives of the Malay Muslim community, so that decisions affecting the relationships between

## Switzerland's experiences of religious and denominational conflict have shaped its foreign policy.

the communities in the south are achieved in a more consultative and bottom-up manner. As the dialog with other stakeholders is consolidated, it is hoped it will lead to the development of joint practical solutions to address challenges to coexistence in the southern region.

The project has also sought to sensitize key Buddhist actors in the rest of Thailand

about the conflict in the south. Relative ignorance about the conflict amongst Buddhists in the rest of Thailand means that public opinion is susceptible to representations of the conflict as part of a wider threat to Thai national identity from Muslim influences that are portrayed as foreign and hostile. Such views risk encouraging policies that attempt to re-assert a Buddhist hegemony in the south. Since similar

policies gave rise to the conflict in the first place, this would derail local efforts for peaceful coexistence and spoil the ongoing peace process. By sensitizing influential national-level actors to the realities of the situation on the ground, the project aims to foster a supportive environment for solutions that are conducive to practical coexistence, developed jointly at the local level with the affected communities.

Switzerland's engagement in Thailand is just one example of how religious coexistence can be supported without putting the communities' differing values up for negotiation. In this way, the two guiding principles – dealing with conflicts locally and practically – can serve as a useful starting point for developing solutions for peaceful coexistence between religious communities in many contexts around the world.

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