



## Understanding Religious Identity and the Causes of Religious Violence

*Saira Yamin*

### **Abstract**

The paper examines various scholarly works that explore the causes of religious violence. It addresses questions such as: what elements of religion contribute to violence and protracted conflict; how does religious identity motivate groups engaged in aggressive behavior; other than threat to and preservation of religious identity, what might be significant underlying causes of the conflict; and, what parallels could be drawn with ethnic conflict in the construction of religious identity and group organization? In conclusion, the paper proposes an analytical framework for designing an intervention in religious conflicts.

### **Author Profile**

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"Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point." ("The heart has its reasons that reason does not know at all.") *Les Pensées*, (Thoughts) Blaise Pascal, 1665

### The Problem

Empirical research reveals that "about two thirds of contemporary wars turn on issues of religious, ethnic, or national identity. Less than 10 percent begin as interstate conflicts."<sup>1</sup> What causes conflict between religious groups and why does the preservation of religious identity lead to violent conflict? The post 9/11 state of world affairs has revived an interest in scholarly research in investigating the causes of "religious" violence. Religiously motivated violence is not a recent phenomenon, however the post 9/11 rhetoric, much of which seems to promote theories such as Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, is a compelling enough reason to explore whether the world order is really in the process of being redefined by major civilizations and religious groups.

Amongst the many possibilities of confrontations that Huntington's thesis examines, foremost are the existing frictions and hostilities between Islam and the West, the latter, to a certain extent, being an allusion to Christian culture and values.<sup>2</sup> Huntington maintains that trends in global conflict after the end of the Cold War are increasingly appearing at the civilizational cleavages illustrated in Figure 1. Examples of wars such as those following the break up of Yugoslavia, in Chechnya, and between India and Pakistan have been cited to substantiate his thesis. The notion that religion plays a critical role in the mobilization of ethnic conflicts is also being actively investigated by social scientists. In predominantly Muslim Chechnya, which has been experiencing high and low intensity warfare since 1991, the roots of the conflict between the Muslims and the Russian authorities can be traced back to the mid-eighteenth century. Likewise, religious cleavages between the Catholics, the Serb Orthodox and Muslims of former Yugoslavia have been cited as a distinctive factor in the disintegration of the country. The case of India's partition at the time of liberation from the British Raj in 1947 was also premised on the struggle for identity by the Muslims of British

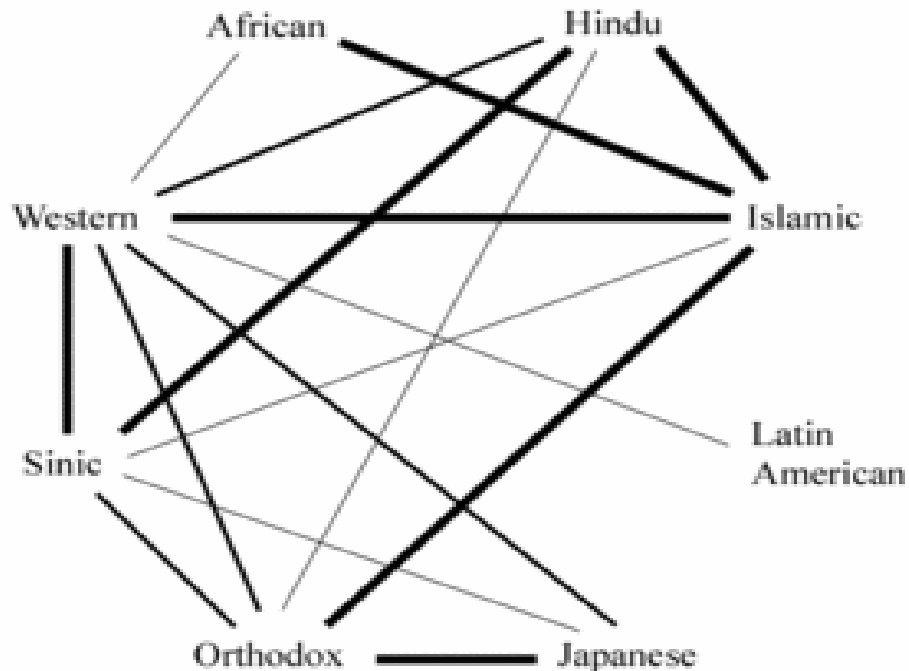
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<sup>1</sup> R. Scott Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), p.17.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp. 204-245.

India. One attempt to estimate the loss of Hindu and Muslim lives at the time of partition places it at two million.<sup>3</sup>

Most recently, the Global War on Terror (GWOT), spurred by the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and perceived by various quarters as a wider Islamist threat, has been observed as the the most blatant manifestation of the clash of civilizations.



**Figure 1**  
**“The Clash of Civilizations” as per Huntington’s thesis (1996)**  
*Greater line thickness represents greater conflict in the civilizational relationship*

Huntington’s theory has generated immense debate in the developments since 9/11 with the launch of the GWOT, and others incidents that have signalled an escalation of tensions between Islam and the West. Events that point towards the salience of a clash of civilization of sorts, include the recently released Dutch film “Fitna” featuring verses from the Quran out of their context, as evidence of Islam’s hostility towards other religions. A Dutch newspaper’s cartoon caricatures of Prophet Muhammad in 2006 which had offended Muslims around the world, and

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Crane, “*Postwar Ethnic Cultural Conflicts: Some Quantitative and Other Considerations*” (N.Y.: Ms. Hudson Institute, 1968) cited by Harold R. Isaacs, *Idols of the Tribe: Group Identity and Political Change* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.3.

Pope Benedict's subsequent comments regarding violence as Prophet Muhammad's legacy, were also deemed highly controversial. The US-Iran standoff on the latter's nuclear program, observed in the hawkish rhetoric on both sides, has been a cause of great concern in the international community. The Iranian leadership, on the one hand, has expressed a desire to annihilate Israel, a Jewish state and the closest U.S. ally. The U.S. leadership, on the other, has voiced a consideration of obliterating Iran with a nuclear attack. These incidents have reinforced the perception that a clash of civilisations, manifested mostly in religious cleavages, is well underway.

Huntington's clash of civilizations theory is not the only lens which brings out the religious dimensions of conflict. Religion is often used to justify conflict, and becomes a source of conflict, even though most religions of the world emphasize peaceful coexistence and tolerance. Many scholars, including Johan Galtung, have pondered over religion's ambivalent nature and suggested that it contains, in varying degrees, elements that contribute to both war and peace.<sup>4</sup>

Consider, for example, the deep rooted and protracted conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims in the Middle East. While the conflict seems embedded in religious ideology, it has political and psychological overtones as well. Among the underlying causes of the conflict are a multitude of factors including deprivation of basic human needs; competition for scarce resources including territory; extreme levels of insecurity and fear; historical grievances; a psychology of victimization; and an incessant cycle of asymmetric warfare which has caused untold trauma, loss of life and collateral damage. The existence of a number of non-Muslim Palestinians in the struggle for liberation from Israeli occupation is evidence also that the conflict in the Middle East does not stem entirely from religious ideology and exclusivism. Notable among the non-Muslim activists for the Palestinian cause has been Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, an eminent scholar and peacemaker, belonging to the Christian faith.

The conflict in the disputed territory of Kashmir, bearing a strong religious dimension, is another case in point. In trying to generate options for resolution, it would be imperative to address the interstate territorial dispute, and equally importantly if not more so, to bring to the fore, the plight and concerns of the indigenous communities, as well as to steer processes that shall promote conflict transformation in the area. As with most deep-rooted and protracted conflicts, however, diagnosing the Kashmir issue is an extremely complex task. Huntington's thesis vis-à-vis the protracted conflict between India and Pakistan suggests that the seeds of contention lie in the civilizational cleavages between

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<sup>4</sup> Johan Galtung, "Religions, Hard and Soft", *Cross Currents*, Winter 1997-98 (1997).

Hindus and Muslims. Ironically, however, it is not just large groups or civilizations that have mobilized in the name of religion - there are many states where groups belonging to the same faith, albeit of different sects, are at loggerheads with each other, ready to kill and to die in the name of religion.

Reflect on the history of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, or the Sunnis and Shias in Iraq for instance. In Northern Ireland, the protracted conflict which emerged in 1920 was primarily rooted in religious identity and contextualized in the Protestant aspirations to unite with Britain, and the Catholic struggle for a united Ireland. While the 1998 Good Friday Agreement has contributed to a slow and steady restoration of peace, it is claimed that in some parts of Ireland "the sectarian mindset seems as strong as ever."<sup>5</sup> Iraq, the other case in point, is also deeply split along sectarian lines. The cleavages between the majority Shias and the minority Sunnis, who have been at the helm for many years, have been attributed to a power tussle that extends beyond its boundaries, in the wider Middle Eastern region. Interestingly since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the addition of another party in the physical conflict environment, the Shia-Sunni divide in Iraq has become more intense than ever.<sup>6</sup> Why does religious identity become a factor in group mobilization and violence in such cases?

Against this backdrop, this paper proposes to explore the following questions:

- What elements of religion contribute to violence and protracted conflict?
- How does religious identity motivate groups engaged in aggressive behavior?
- Other than threat to, and preservation of religious identity, what might be significant underlying causes of the conflict?
- What parallels could be drawn between ethnic conflict and the construction of religious identity and organization?

Scott Appleby poses some important questions: why is religion a source of "intolerance, human rights violations, and extremist violence, but also of non-violent conflict transformation, the defense of human rights, integrity in government, and reconciliation and stability in divided societies?"<sup>7</sup> This paper addresses these questions in light of Vamik Volkan, Marc Gopin and Scott Appleby's psychoanalytical insights on identity and collective religious violence. It will examine the applicability of these frameworks in finding answers to the

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the subject, refer to <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/panorama/7334308.stm>

<sup>6</sup> Mike Shuster, "Shia-Sunni Conflict Forces US Shift in Iraq", available online at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7439998>

<sup>7</sup> Scott Appleby, "Religion as an Agent of Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding, in Chester Crocker et al (Eds.), *Turbulent Peace* (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006), pp.821-840

myths and realities of religious and sectarian identity. It will identify the similarities and contradictions in these paradigms, as well as comment on how these theories may complement other work in the field of conflict resolution. In the final analysis, the paper presents a synthesis of the causes of religious violence based on the discourse, and makes suggestions for addressing religious conflict.

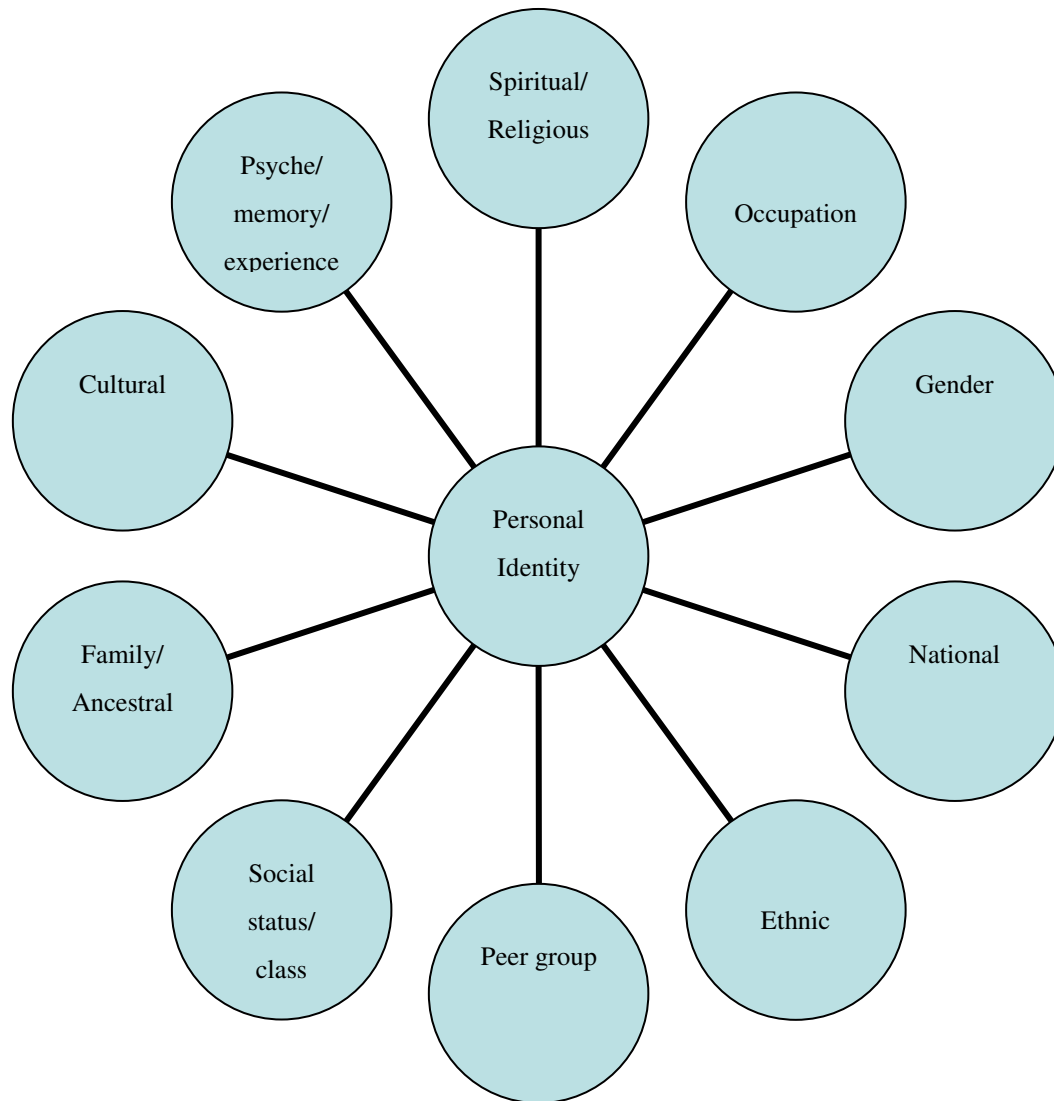
### **What is Identity?**

A person's identity has many attributes. It is a representation of one's unique personal experience, memory, ethnicity, culture, religious orientation, gender, occupational role, amongst various other factors. Erikson refers to identity as "some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image."<sup>8</sup> Identity may be defined as one's consciousness of one self and others' perception of one's individuality. Figure 2 illustrates some traits of one's identity that are timeless and could be applied to a person across cultures, religions, and boundaries. The attributes suggested in Figure 2 could become more pronounced at certain times in one's life, such as the sense of one's ethnicity, occupational role, or religious orientation, depending on the stage in one's life cycle and unique experiences of a person. The relationship of identity with personal development has been the subject of extensive psychological research. Erik Erikson explores how the teenager's sense of identity derives from occupational and sex roles, relationships, politics, and religion.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> E.H. Erikson, "Reflections on the Dissent of Contemporary Youth", *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 51 (1970), p.18.

<sup>9</sup> E.H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton Press, 1968).



*Figure 2*  
**The Components of Identity**

### **Individual Identity and its Relationship with the Group**

The website [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com) defines identity as the *set of behavioral or personality characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group*. A person's individual identity is therefore, invariably linked with one's group identity which may derive from one or more of the affiliations given in Figure 2. It appears also, that the term identity per se is understood by psychologists as connoting a "*subjective and persistent sense of sameness*" referring essentially to

group identity.<sup>10</sup> The element of “groupness” is inherent in some of the elements shown in the diagram, such as nationality, ethnicity, peer grouping, social ranking, family, culture, and even religion. However groups may not form along these lines in all conditions and circumstances. Also, a person may not at all times be aware of his or her “group” or the need to be part of one.

### **Formation of Large Group Identity: Psychosocial Theories**

How does a group form and what is group identity? Volkan suggests that identification with a large group (such as a religious, ethnic or national one) begins in childhood and each member’s core personal identity is intertwined with the large group identity.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, Volkan refers to Erikson’s theory of “pseudospeciation” which reinforces his understanding of large group identity and the development of a group’s sense of superiority over other groups.

To borrow from Volkan’s discussion on the process of pseudospeciation:

“...at the outset of human history, each human group developed a distinct sense of identity, wearing skins and feathers like armor to protect it from other groups who wore different kinds of skins and feathers. Erikson hypothesized that each group became convinced that it was the sole possessor of the true human identity. Thus each group became a pseudospecies, adopting an attitude of superiority over other groups.”<sup>12</sup>

Erikson’s hypothesis, however, is specific to distinctive racial attributes. What his argument does not reflect upon are the forces that trigger “groupthink” or the underlying conditions that lead to group formation. These causal dynamics may include: competition over resources; power asymmetries; shared history; ethnic cleansing; heightened awareness of the perception of “the other” and dehumanization; opportunities for bonding with one’s group; threat or perception of threat from the “other” group, inter alia.

Volkan elaborates upon these as conditions that promote the mobilization of large groups, such as chosen trauma and glories, shared grievances, and collective history.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Vamik Volkan, *Killing in the Name of Identity* (Virginia: Pitchstone Publishing, 2006), p.14.

<sup>11</sup> Vamik Volkan, “Large Group Identity, Large Group Regression and Massive Violence”, *International Newsletter of the Group-Analytic Society*, December 30, 2005 (2005), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Vamik Volkan, *Killing in the Name of Identity* (Virginia: Pitchstone Publishing, 2006), p.15.

<sup>13</sup> Vamik Volkan, *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), pp.50-80.

## Religious “Pseudospeciation” and Group Mobilization

Given the presence of the aforementioned conditions, could Erikson’s theory of pseudospeciation be applied to the formation of religious groups? I would like to propose that religious groups under similar circumstances may be highly prone to such attitudes. It may be observed that group formation serves many purposes, and is as natural and instinctive among humans, as in animals and birds. Groups represent safety, strength, harmony, and familiarity. They fulfill the needs for bonding, identity, cohesiveness, integrity, recognition and security.

The “grouping” instinct will emerge in conditions that politically and economically discriminate against and marginalize religious communities; promote conflict along ideological lines, when the threat perception is high and when competition for scarce resources is intense. Social scientists have discussed identity as a basic human need, the fulfillment of which comes through affiliation with a group. It sometimes emerges as a response to aggression through group mobilization, and functions as a defense mechanism for the individuals involved. It is the teaming impulse. Comparison and the consciousness of the “self” and “the other” is the logical consequence of group identification. It also creates the required distance and boundaries to dehumanize the other. A culture of pseudospeciation advanced on the basis of religious distinction is often difficult to resist or challenge, because it is grounded in non-negotiable values and the sense of one’s identity and self-esteem. The threat to religious identity, therefore, is potentially a source of high levels of violence and conflict that are often extremely difficult to resolve.

## Historical Grievance and Collective Identity

Why is an acute sense of group identity sometimes visible in social structures that are fairly equitable and just? What are the factors that feed into the sense of collective identity in post-conflict situations as years go by? Volkan proposes that aggression is a necessary defense against psychotic anxiety; that people need enemies and when they lose one they will, by implication, need another one. He maintains that there are human needs that define a group’s friends and enemies. Thus, human beings possess an inherent need to have both enemies and allies. Freud was, in effect, the first to advance the idea of the death instinct and its fulfillment through aggressive behavior.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> R.D. Nye, *Three Psychologies: Perspectives from Freud, Skinner and Rogers* (Wadsworth, 1999), pp.7-43.

How does the need for enemies, as stated by Volkan, converge with religious identity in a post-trauma environment? He argues that collective history, shared memory of grievances and trauma often feed into, or are consciously infused in collective identity in groups through “transgenerational transmission” which is the reinforcement of memory across time and space.<sup>15</sup> The repertoire of the past is passed down to new generations through story-telling and other rituals. Strassberg offers an insight that substantiates Volkan’s thesis. In sharing her experiences as a Polish Jew who immigrated to the United States, Strassberg mulls over the development of the Polish Jewish identity.<sup>16</sup> She emphasizes that group identity is shaped by the experience of violence and post-traumatic grief. In her essay on identity she remarks that “*identity re-membered in community can be more than the sum of the past's fragmented and violent experiences*”. Further, she comments on the need to remember the past, and elicits endorsement from Malpede’s words in “Thoughts on a Theater of Witness”: “What was dismembered needs to be remembered; . . . it requires the gathering together of forgotten and denied fragments from dreams, memories, history. It asks to bear witness to the shattered narratives of survivors. . . The wholeness. . . suggests that the true self is fluid, changeable, inclusive. . . that it might be broken and then be re-membered, emerging stronger and more varied than before.”<sup>17</sup>

Here, it would be useful to recall Volkan's reference to the concept of “*time collapse*”<sup>18</sup> in which parties to conflict, as in post-traumatic stress syndrome, can regularly re-experience a “*chosen trauma*”, on each occasion as if for the first time (e.g., the effect on Catholics, of the annual “Marching Season” in Northern Ireland which primarily celebrates Protestant victories and Catholic defeats).<sup>19</sup>

A South Asian take on the sectarian Shia-Sunni dynamic in Pakistan and its correlation with historical memory is offered by Ahmed who refers to the notion as a “specialization of hatred.”<sup>20</sup> Ahmed infers that sectarianism in Pakistan was a

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<sup>15</sup> Vamik Volkan, *Killing in the Name of Identity* (Virginia: Pitchstone Publishing, 2006), p.17.

<sup>16</sup> B. Strassberg, *Talking Across Boundaries: Cultures of Violence -- Cultures of Peace* (Paper presented at The Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies University of Notre Dame, April 3-4, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> K. Malpede, “Thoughts on a Theater of Witness and Excerpts from Two Plays of Witness: Better People, The Beekeeper’s Daughter,” in Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn (Ed.), *Genocide, War, and Human Survival* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), p.518.

<sup>18</sup> Vamik Volkan, *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), pp.50-80.

<sup>19</sup> “For more than 200 years, the marching season has been a source of conflict between Northern Ireland’s Protestant and Catholic communities. Members of the Protestant Orange Order, who stage the vast majority of the parades, insist it is part of their cultural heritage to march in commemoration of key historical events. Catholics argue that they should not have to endure the “triumphalist” parades, mostly celebrating Protestant victories over Catholics, through their neighborhoods.”

For more on the Marching Season, refer to

<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2000/n.ireland/marching.html>

<sup>20</sup> K. Ahmed, “Pakistani Madrassas and Apostatisation of the Shia”, *The Friday Times* (December 16-22, 2005).

spillover from the Arab-Iranian conflict in the Middle East and the Arab influence in Pakistan during the Afghan *jihad*. He suggests that the main factor in the sectarian 'hate specialization' is the "secret nature of the Shia faith (taqiyya) especially in some aspects of the historic quarrel with Sunni Islam. The clerics who target the Shias dig into early Islamic history to find evidence of 'insult' offered by the Shias to the Companions of the Prophet."

### **Religious Contextualization of Identity-based Conflict: Role of History and Religious Leadership**

Marc Gopin puts forth the relevance of socio-economics and religious psychology in understanding violent trends in religious cultures. He suggests that economic reality is imperative for understanding the conflict dynamics between minority and majority groups, but emphasizes that the former often have the status quo due to cultural or religious distinctions. Like many of his contemporaries, Gopin maintains that the response to the status quo may also "*express itself in religious terms.*" Gopin takes into account the influence of religious texts, myths, metaphors, laws, values and traditions which promote trends that engender conflict and provide inroads to peacemaking, in the pro-social and antisocial values they advocate. He underscores that religion is embedded in the inner life and social behavior of millions of people.

"Group conflict is constituted by a series of unique human beings who evolve, for one reason or another, into a complex interaction of adversarial relationships. To understand this, we cannot suppress the roots of that human being, or group of human beings, in the historical cultures and religions from which they have emerged. Connecting the human being to her cultural moorings will help us understand why and when she fights and when she makes peace."<sup>21</sup>

In reference to the Jewish community in Israel, Gopin adds an important dimension to his understanding of religious conflict, namely the "fear of life", a perception of acute threat, on the part of a group, which leads to aggressive manifestations of conflict behavior giving semblance to religious fundamentalism.

In some cases, the exploitation of the religious card to promote a political cause effectively encourages radical behavior. Gopin cites the example of the Israeli Left which tries to garner support through religious justification rather than by separating religion from the ground realities of the conflict. Osama Bin Laden's manipulation of religion to elicit support for his terrorist campaign has also been denounced by a vast majority of the global Muslim community. Quite appropriately, Gopin's debate on the importance of understanding religious sub-

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<sup>21</sup> Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.5-6.

cultures and conflict also takes into account the role elites play in using religious metaphors, symbolism and myths to legitimize their agendas.<sup>22</sup>

Demagogues often tend to incite a sense of religious pseudospeciation by distortion or selective use of religious texts, to generate hatred and dehumanize the other. They may also create the perception of fear and marginalization to make people feel victimized. Group grievances may be imagined or real. It is a moot point, therefore, whether many of the identity conflicts justified in the name of religion are actually based on real or imagined threat from the other. In many cases, the cycle of violence appears to be a self-fulfilling prophecy based on lessons from history. Consider Bin Laden's religious stance against the "infidels" in the West, and the response by President George Bush in launching the GWOT referring to them as the "crusades", although he later retracted his words.

Gopin's thesis may also be considered in the context of Kashmir. An analysis of the conflict is indicative of underlying socio-economic and political factors in the formulation of religious identity. Although the conflict appears to have emerged at the partition of British India and independence from colonial rule, the friction between Hindus and Muslims in the region dates back a few centuries. In exploring the Hindu Muslim dynamics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a renaissance of Hindu religious identity is evident. Some scholars such as Rai and Chitrlekha claim that religion (Islam) was used as a political tool for social mobilization in response to political and economic processes introduced by Dogra Rajahs and British colonialists.<sup>23</sup> Research suggests that the intervention of the Dogra State in disputes for sacred space and political legitimacy in conjunction with socio-economic reform, prevented the articulation of a wholesome Muslim identity, thereby sowing the seeds of rebellion against the Hindu ruling clique. While the Dogras did not seek to glorify Hinduism, they were essentially exploring avenues to establish their authority. Gilmartin reports that "battles over the right to control spaces were a manifestation of religious, landed and commercial elites' struggle to maintain their social and financial positions in a rapidly changing social and political milieu."<sup>24</sup>

It would be useful, here, to cite Schafer's work (2004) on the dual character of religion. Gopin (2002) and Appleby (2000, 2006) also take note of this dichotomy. Schafer views religion as deeply ambivalent and as both a basis for respect and coexistence; and for violence and war. Using Bosnia as a case study, Schafer

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.19.

<sup>23</sup> M. Rai, *The Question of Religion in Kashmir: Sovereignty, Legitimacy and Rights, c. 1846-1947* (Ph.D. Columbia University, 2000) and Z. Chitrlekha, *Community, State and the Nation: Regional Patriotism and Religious Identities in the Kashmir Valley, c. 1880-1953* (Ph.D. Tufts University, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> D. Gilmartin, "Shrines, Succession and Sources of Moral Authority" in Barbara Daly Metcalf (Ed.), *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: UCLA Press, 1984). pp.221.

discusses religious interventions to mobilize communities within conflictive environments. The war in Bosnia Herzegovina lasted from 1992 to 1995, and killed more than 200,000 people. It has been the most violent and destabilizing development in Europe since World War II. "Most of the victims were Muslims, killed in the waves of expulsions - or so-called ethnic cleansing - as the Serb army and paramilitaries swept through eastern and northern Bosnia".<sup>25</sup> Schafer's study elucidates upon religious socialization; collective ethnic identity; emotional security drawn from religious rituals and rites; and the significance of sacred places and shrines. All of these elements, Schafer claims, contribute towards the framing of religious identity in politics. What is egregious, however, is the inability of religious groups to share sacred sites with others, or to relate with other religious communities as equal human beings. It is undoubtedly the exclusivist nature of many religious cultures that they perceive a grave threat in opening up their environment to the "other" or in welcoming opportunities to co-exist in peace.

If we examine the issues pertaining to religious identity raised by Schafer, we see that his analysis is equally relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian case. It seems apparent that in societies where religion is deeply embedded in social life, people tend to derive their emotional strength and stability from religious identity and traditions which set them apart from those not adhering to them. They also possess a strong individual and group attachment to religious sites and sacred places as well as territory. Any threat of detachment or denial of access to these is perceived as an assault on identity. Gopin also offers an explanation for the militant guardianship of religious sites. He submits that collective trauma is liable to become ingrained in religious identity which has a consequential bearing on religious violence.<sup>26</sup>

"If a group suffers massive injury, this is a direct challenge to faith in a providential deity, unless the trauma is seen as part of some divine plan. Traumatic events then become the center of spirituality. Responding to this violence becomes the crux of religious faith." Gopin's understanding of trauma and its linkage with the formulation of religious identity resonates with Volkan's (2005, 2006) and Strassberg's (1998) interpretations of the impact of historical grievances in group formation and religious violence.

### **The Militancy and Misuse of Religion: Myth or Reality?**

Appleby suggests that the dual nature of religion is impractical in both instances - whether it generates conflicts or peace. He contends that the use of violence or

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<sup>25</sup> A brief summary of the conflict is available online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1032685.stm>

<sup>26</sup> Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.57-58.

nonviolence as a strategy in the name of religion is militant, passionate and fundamentalist.<sup>27</sup> Appleby borrows from Eck's description of three broad typologies of religious diversity: the *exclusivist*, the *inclusivist*, and the *pluralist*, which is useful in classifying religious trends around the world. These typologies are helpful in deciphering religious texts, traditions and scriptures, and interpreting the behavior of religious groups towards their adversaries.

In investigating collective violence, Appleby underscores religion's capacity to engender fundamentalism, religious nationalism and liberation theology. He highlights in particular, *ethnoreligious nationalism* which is when people identify their religious tradition "so closely with the fate of a people or a nation that they perceive a threat to either as an assault on the sacred."<sup>28</sup> Like fundamentalists, they may demonize missionaries of other faiths, foreign business people, troops stationed on the country's sacred soil, educational and social service volunteers, relief workers and international peacekeepers."

He refers to the predisposition of religious leadership to look for *scapegoats*, a concept he borrows from Girard, a cultural theorist. The scapegoat is "a sacrificial victim who served as a surrogate for the enemy."<sup>29</sup> This concept was technically used as a psychological device to create cohesion within a group and promote alienation from the "other". Appleby substantiates his argument by citing the targeting of Bosnian Muslims as scapegoats, by the Serbs and Croats in the Bosnian war.

In further applying Girard's theory to religion, Appleby takes the notion of ethnic chauvinism and compares it with the predisposition for self-exaltation and self-glorification evident in religious sub-cultures. Although he says this tendency was typical of primitive tribes engaged in fierce competition for territory and control, he observes similar patterns in the religious appeal to ultra-nationalism and ethno-religious violence. According to Appleby, human rights abuses, religious violence and atrocities are committed against other religious groups in defense of the principle that other doctrines are a threat to their own.<sup>30</sup>

Analyzing the role of leadership, Appleby adds that they often mobilize uneducated youth towards political ends. This is true of many developing countries where unemployed youth are recruited and indoctrinated by religious demagogues. The emergence of the Taliban is a case in point. An interesting

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<sup>27</sup> R. Scott Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), p.11.

<sup>28</sup> R. Scott Appleby, "Religion as an Agent of Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding" in Chester Crocker et al (Eds.), *Turbulent Peace* (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006), pp.824.

<sup>29</sup> R. Scott Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), pp.78-79.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

explanation for adolescent males' vulnerability to provoked aggression, which supports Appleby's theory of vulnerable young males, is offered in a study by Olweus, Mattsson, Schalling and Low. The research study conducted on normal adolescent human males suggests that circulating levels of testosterone in the blood had a direct causal influence on provoked aggressive behavior: "A high level of testosterone led to an increased readiness to respond vigorously and assertively to provocations and threats. Testosterone also had an indirect and weaker effect on another aggression dimension: High levels of testosterone made the boys more impatient and irritable, which in turn increased their propensity to engage in aggressive-destructive behavior."<sup>31</sup>

Appleby also observes the use of media propaganda by religious demagogues to inculcate a sense of victimization in groups and to instigate collective violence. Information technology has turned the world into a global village where swift and effective mechanisms are available to disseminate information, indoctrinate, induce grievance, and organize.

### **Demographic Issues in Religious Violence**

Group population as a proportion of a country is one of the major indicators that Ted Gurr uses to explain ethnic group formation, and this factor must be given due emphasis in deconstructing collective religious violence as well.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, where the religious minority is relatively small in size and well-integrated with the mainstream community, outbreaks of religious violence are less likely. Its geographic consolidation and the role of leadership in inspiring the movement would be equally critical in predicting the propensity for collective religious violence.

### **External and Internal Alliances and Influence**

Gurr identifies a linkage between alliance formation and ethnic conflict. His theory focuses on the effect of alliances on conflict initiation and behavior.<sup>33</sup> It appears that many religious groups engaged in conflict receive external support that tends to prolong the conflict. Exogenous and endogenous influences often act as catalysts in collective religious and political violence. The allies may have religious or ethnic ties with the group that receives their support, or they may be framing their benefactors in a proxy war with their common adversary. For example, it may be noted that the problem of sectarianism within Pakistan between some Shia

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<sup>31</sup> D. Olweus, A. Mattsson, D. Schalling and H. Low, "Testosterone, Aggression, Physical and Personality Dimension in Normal Adolescent Males", *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 50, (3) (1988), p.261.

<sup>32</sup> Ted Robert Gurr, "Why Minorities Rebel: A Global Analysis of Communal Mobilization and Conflict since 1945," *International Political Science Review*, 14 (1993), pp.161-201.

<sup>33</sup> C. Sprecher and V. Krause, "Alliances, Armed Conflict, and Cooperation: Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Evidence," *Journal of Peace Research*, July 1 (2006), pp.363-369.

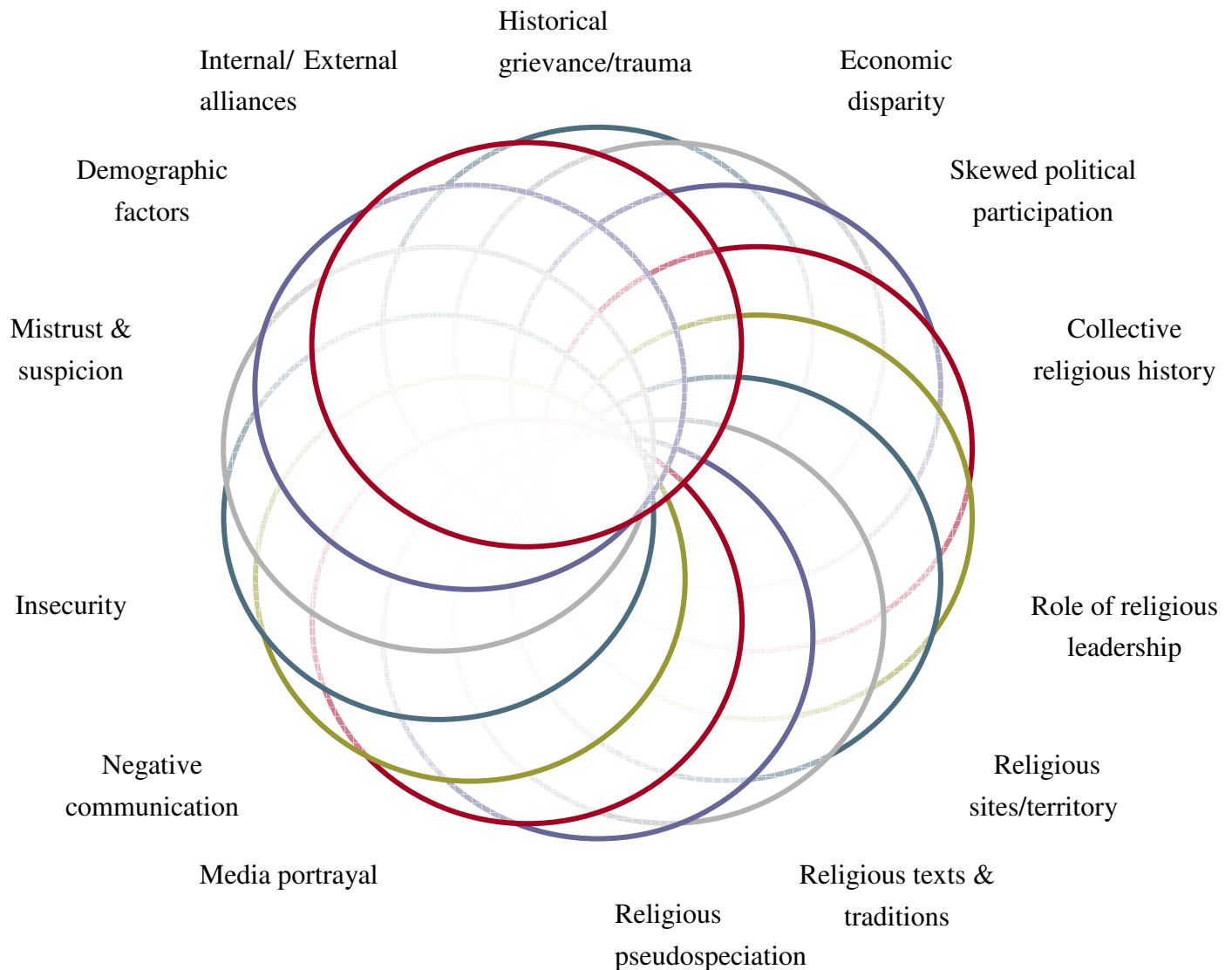
and Sunni militant groups thrives on funding and armament from foreign governments such as Saudi Arabia and Iran to advance their own sectarian and political ideologies.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

Finally I would like to submit that there are a host of complicated issues that contribute to collective religious violence (recapitulated in Figure 3). It would be important to consider as many of these variables as possible in attempting to design an intervention strategy. One must examine how they have evolved in a particular social, economic, and political milieu; their relationship and bearing upon each other and the local, regional and international environments.

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<sup>34</sup> S. Anwar, *Anatomy of Sectarianism*, <http://www.onlinenews.com.pk> (November 17, 2006).

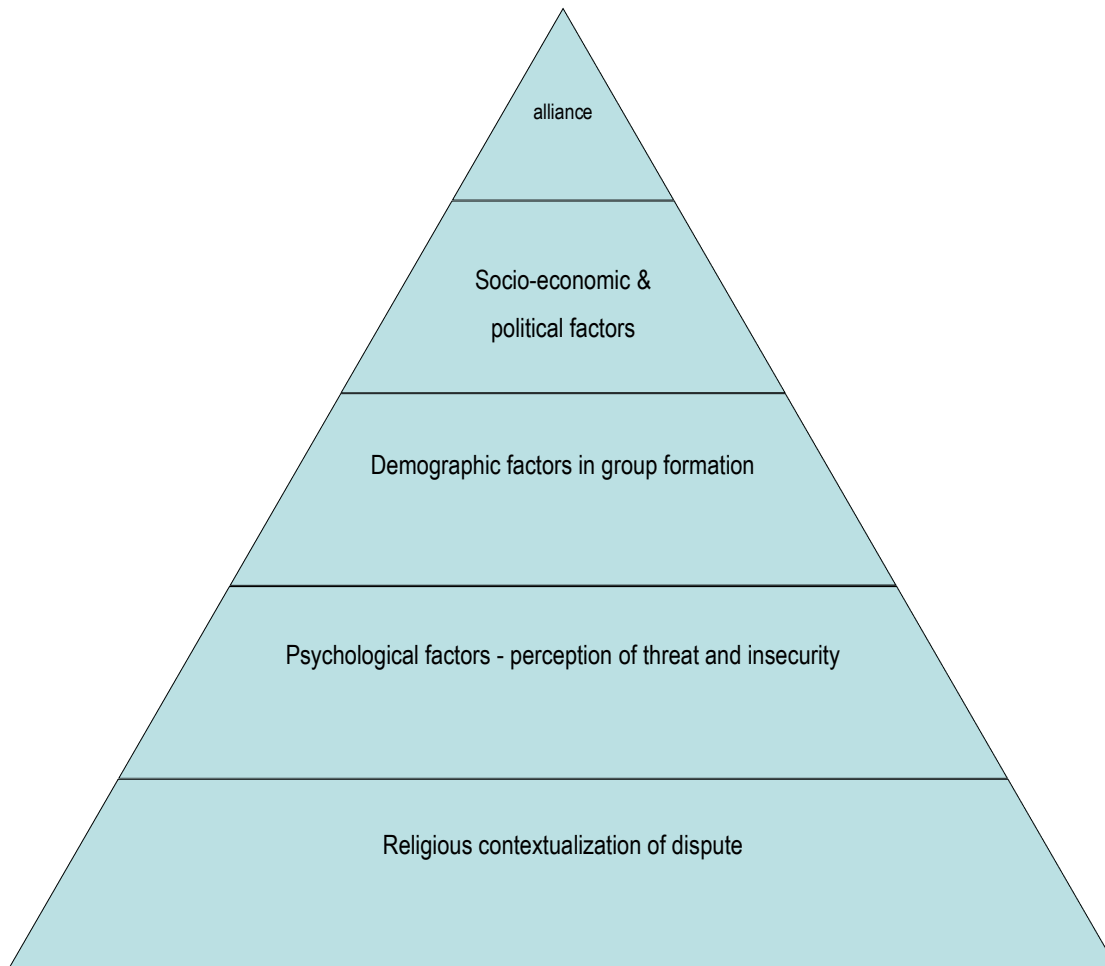


**Figure 3**  
**Elements Contributing to Religious Identity and Group Violence**

Further, I would like to propose as a point of departure, Figure 4 which presents a hierarchy of the salient features of religious identity and collective violence. In presenting Figure 4, I hope to provide a *preliminary* analytical framework to explain the formulation of religious identity and the propensity for collective violence in religious sub-cultures. (A key is provided below Figure 4, briefly explaining and summarizing its contents.) It is hoped that the model will be able

to inform the diagnosis of the problem and the development of a conflict resolution and transformation strategy for religiously motivated conflict behavior.

*Figure 4*  
**Religious Identity and the Propensity for Group Violence:  
A Hierarchy of Underlying Factors**



**Key:**

**Religio-psychological contextualization of dispute:** role of religious leadership, cultural religiosity, dispute over religious sites and territory; manipulation or selective use of religious text

**Psychological factors:** communication, media, perceptions, collective history, historical grievance, pseudospeciation, insecurity, mistrust and suspicion

**Socio-economic and political factors:** rank disequilibrium, political participation, economic factors

**Demographic:** relative strength of groups, ability to consolidate and mobilize

**Alliances:** sources of support and funding: providing fuel and vigor

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