

Can't We All Just Get Along?

Cohesion and Conflict in Religion

1. How does religion help create social cohesion?
2. How is cohesion related to conflict?
3. What are the functions of conflict for cohesion?
4. Why do people of different faiths sometimes get along, and sometimes not?

Sicily. If you have heard of it, it's most likely in conjunction with La Cosa Nostra, more commonly known as the Mafia. But of course, Sicily is much more. An island state of Italy that is situated at the mainland's southern tip, Sicily is in many ways a world unto its own.

Almost all of its approximately 5.5 million citizens are Catholic, and Catholicism is steeped into the culture and daily life of Sicilians. It has dominated life on this island for nearly 1000 years. Religion is of vital importance here. This does not mean that everyone regularly attends Mass. Not everyone does. But Catholicism does permeate almost every aspect of society, including day-to-day activities, art and architecture, the way that people relate to one another, town celebrations, and pronouncements by heads of state. Nearly every town, no matter how small, has at least one Catholic church, and usually the town is organized around its main or original church. Holidays are more appropriately labeled Holy Days, as they typically center on celebrations of patron saints or other religious festivities. As one observer of Sicilian culture wrote, "Almost all public places are adorned with crucifixes upon their walls, and most Sicilian homes contain pictures of saints, statues, and other relics. Each town and city has its own patron saint, and the feast days are marked by gaudy processions through the streets with marching bands and displays of fireworks" (Wikipedia 2008).

The Catholic religion in Sicily serves important social cohesion functions. Part of being Sicilian is being Catholic. It shapes Sicilians' life experiences, gives them meaning and purpose, influences family life, provides the contours of the yearly calendar, and provides norms, values, and key rituals that help solidify people's sense of belonging in their communities and in the company of a higher power.

But what about those Mafiosi who are supposed to have such influence on the island? (One of the authors was told by a Sicilian professor who specializes in studying the Mafia that as of 2010, over 80% of the businesses in Sicily pay "protection" money to the Mafia.) Are they Catholic?

In name, almost always. But in practice? Well, it is true that they often attend Mass, respect religious traditions, and contribute money to support religious festivals and churches. They show respect for priests, and part of their code is never to disturb or kill a priest, for they view themselves as men of honor and consider things related to God to be of a higher order than even the Mafia. To some extent, religion and culture have merged in Sicily, and some of the ideas of the Mafia are part of the practice of Sicilian Catholicism.

And what do the people of Sicily who are not part of the Mafia (the large majority of Sicilians) think of the Mafia? Many Sicilians either tolerate or outwardly support Mafia members—often out of fear, sometimes out of respect for the order and other advantages that they bring. When questioned by outsiders, Sicilians frequently deny that any such organization exists.

But Father Giuseppe Puglisi (pronounced "Pool-yec-zee") was different. Though he was a native of Sicily, he did not respect the Mafia. In fact, he thought they were decidedly anti-Christian. Like most Sicilians, he was born to working-class parents and grew up working class. He entered seminary at the young age of sixteen and then served in a country Sicilian parish that was affected by a bloody vendetta.

He had seen the violence and fear that the Mafia wrought upon Sicilians. He had also noticed how they infiltrated so many aspects of Sicilian life, including, in his view, the very understanding and practices of Catholicism. Although the Mafia members were baptized in the Catholic Church and were practicing members in good standing, in Father Puglisi's eyes they were decidedly pagan, a holdover from pre-Christian times.

Father Puglisi felt that it was his Christian duty to God and his flock to resist the Mafia. The Mafia fenced stolen goods, sold drugs, engaged in extensive extortion, controlled the construction and other industries, and heavily influenced politics. (Just two years before this chapter was written, the governor of Sicily was indicted for himself being a Mafioso.) But even worse, according to Father Puglisi, the Mafia eroded civic and social life in Sicily and compromised the authentic practice of Catholicism. After centuries of experience with the Mafia, Sicilians had become cynical about political effectiveness and trustworthiness and had come to misunderstand aspects of their faith. In fact, they had become apathetic. Those who tried to change things only suffered at the hands of the Mafia's "men of honor."

When Father Puglisi was assigned as the parish priest in one of the poor sections of Sicily's largest city, Palermo, he decided that enough was enough, and he worked to effect change. He was outspoken about the evils of the Mafia. He taught his parishioners to resist their ways and to overcome apathy. He focused mostly on the children, wanting them to have a new and better Sicily. He taught them to take hold of their faith and use it to resist the Mafia by refusing to collaborate with them, buy their fenced goods, admire

them, take or sell their drugs, or participate in traditional religious celebrations that were largely paid for by the local Mafia members. He encouraged them to see the Mafia for who they really were and to engage in alternative, more authentic Catholic practices, such as the Stations of the Cross. Father Puglisi refused the money and gifts that the Mafia offered him—even those from members of his own parish. He decried their practices from the pulpit, and he worked tirelessly to support the people of his parish in resisting the Mafia.

For these reasons, Father Puglisi was revered, loved, and respected by many people. He was brave, bold, and fully Sicilian, in the best sense. He was a role model. On his 56th birthday he spent the day, not sleeping, eating treats, or opening presents, but rather doing his daily round of pastoral duties—visiting families in his parish, conducting two weddings, and hosting a conference with parents who were having their babies baptized. That evening, he returned home and stepped out of his car, only to be confronted by a man with a gun equipped with a silencer.

When Father Puglisi saw the man, he simply said, “I was expecting you.” The man then violated the code of honor, put the gun to Father Puglisi’s head, and shot the beloved priest to death.

Four years later the killer was arrested. He was a low-level *Mafioso* and a practicing Catholic who had been baptized in the parish where Father Puglisi ministered. The man had been ordered to “take out” the priest by Mafia bosses, who were also practicing Catholics baptized in the local parishes.

During this time, there had been a particularly violent period of Mafia activity that included the murders of high-ranking officials, deadly bomb explosions, blown-up bridges, and bloodstained streets. But the murder of a priest caused a huge outcry. Massive crowds followed his funeral procession. The Pope came to Sicily and spoke about Father Puglisi, calling him a witness to true Christianity. Later, Father Puglisi was recognized as a martyr for the faith. And Sicilians united themselves even more around their Catholic faith, a faith now increasingly defined as one that was different from the one practiced by the Mafia members. (The story of Father Puglisi was taken largely from Cunningham, 2002).

We tell the story to introduce the topics of this chapter—social cohesion and social conflict, and their intimately related nature. Sicily, like many places, is a land of contrasts. It is more thoroughly infused by one religion than are most modern societies, and Catholicism produces a strong social cohesion among Sicilians. It serves to bring people together and infuse their lives with order and meaning at the individual and family level, at the parish level, at the community level, and at the nation level.

But in a somewhat unique way, this religious conformity and resulting social cohesion is threatened by the continued presence of fellow Catholics—the Mafia—who have defined an alternative way of understanding and practicing Catholicism. Some people might consider them to be misguided, offenders of the faith, or even heretics. Conversely, the Mafia would view the behavior of more traditional Catholics as acceptable, so long as they did not interfere with Mafia activities. When they do interfere, they then are misguided, offenders, or heretics.

Thus, in the midst of centuries-old social cohesion exists centuries-old internal religious conflict. Non-Mafia members respond to the conflict by calling the Mafia Christian heretics, attempting to excommunicate them, and uniting around the faith and especially around religious leaders. Mafia members respond by attempting to buy favors, trying to

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compromise and change the faith, and using terror and murder. These differing responses heighten social cohesion on both sides. Conflict has the effect of actually strengthening the boundaries and group identity of conflicting parties.

Such is the way of social and religious life. Cohesion and conflict, as Meredith McGuire (1997) notes, are two sides of the same coin. They need and feed on each other.

Some people use the fact that religion can lead to conflict as evidence that religions are false. This conclusion is premised on the assumption that conflict is negative. But it need not be. For example, in the case of Father Puglisi and the Mafia, he could have chosen peace (give in to the Mafia's version of the faith) over justice, but he viewed justice—and the subsequent need for conflict—as a higher religious goal than the avoidance of conflict. This chapter will explore these ideas further.

GETTING PERSONAL

Have you ever had disagreements or even arguments over religion or spirituality with others, perhaps with family members, friends, or even people you don't know well? If so, what have the disagreements been about? Stop and think about these disagreements for a moment and then summarize them in the accompanying box that follows. If you have never had any disagreements over religion or spirituality, you can write "none."

BOX 4.1

Disagreements over Religion or Spirituality

If you have had disagreements over religion or spirituality, do you see any themes to those disagreements? If you have never had disagreements over religion, why do you think you have not, and why do you think others do have such disagreements?

Our interactions with other people are characterized by agreement and disagreement, cohesion and conflict. Sometimes you get along with your best friend, and sometimes you don't, perhaps occasionally to the degree that you stop talking to each other for a while, or even stop being best friends. One of the issues on which you might disagree with friends is religion. In the contemporary United States, we mostly *don't* talk about religion in public. Certain topics are considered to be too volatile to be discussed in polite company—religion, politics, race, and the like. But among close friends, such social taboos can be loosened, and you may, one late night in the dorm, get into a discussion of religious views. You might be surprised to learn the "crazy stuff" that other people believe. Perhaps your discussion will turn more into heated debate, with some people questioning and others defending certain religious views. Or perhaps you'll mostly agree with one another and instead talk about the "crazy views" of others who are not in the room.

In subsequent sections, we explore why people sometimes have disagreements over religion, while at other times they seem perfectly able to coexist. As part of this discussion, we consider whether religious conflict is only about religion.

RELIGION AND SOCIAL COHESION

In many societies, including that of the United States, religion is considered to be a private affair, a set of convictions that an individual holds or rejects by choice. But one of the first sociologists, Emile Durkheim, demonstrated that, to a great extent, religion is a social affair. He analyzed what he considered to be the most primitive of religions—totemism—and then broadened his theory to apply to all religions. Durkheim concluded that whatever else religion is, it is *the worship of the group*. By this phrase, he meant that religion contributes to the cohesion of the group and expresses its unity through shared norms and values, rituals enacting these norms and values, and consequences for heresy (such as ex-communication or even death). Rituals incorporate members into the group by reminding them of the meaning and obligations of being part of the group.

Thus, according to Durkheim, religion is symbolically and literally the worship of the group, because people experience the group to be a power above and beyond the individual. Religious beliefs are collective representations, that is, group-held beliefs expressing something vital about the group itself and reaffirming the group's shared meanings and core beliefs. Participation in religious worship can dissolve boundaries between people and unify them if only for a brief time during which their entire focus is beyond themselves, on a unified object of devotion.

It is vital for you to grasp what Durkheim is saying here, so we will consider an extended example. Think of your favorite musical group of all time (perhaps it is Outkast, Los Lonely Boys, Coldplay, or . . .). We will use U2, but in the discussion that follows you should substitute your favorite.

You love to listen to the music of U2. As you often say, it's less satisfying to listen to other music since you discovered U2, because, although other music is good, U2 is so superior that they are almost otherworldly; their music is beyond the capabilities of mere mortals. (We exaggerate, of course, but this is what we often do with friends to make a point!) For years, you have listened to their CDs. You have memorized the words to dozens of their songs. You are struck by how deep their songs are, by how much meaning they pack into a four-minute song. You are enamored of the passion in Bono's voice, and mesmerized by the Edge's magic on the guitar.

Then you hear news that is almost too good to be true. U2 is going to do a 10-city U.S. tour, and one of those cities is yours. You call your close friends, who are your close friends in part because they also love U2, and you tell them the news. After shouts of joy, you all agree that no matter what it takes, you are going to the concert. Tickets go on sale in three days, and you use the time until then to plot your strategy for getting the money that you will need and for getting online to order the tickets as soon as they are available. At 12:01 A.M. on Thursday night, with your friends by your side, you are online requesting four tickets (one each for you and your three friends). You are successful, and though the tickets cost you \$200 apiece, you have no doubt that it will be more than worth it. You got great seats, and it is going to be a grand experience to see U2 live!

The two-month wait for the big day is the longest two months in the history of humanity. (OK, so we exaggerate a bit again.) Days go by slowly, weeks drag on. But you

are driven by the anticipation of the big night. You and your friends make plans for how you will get to the arena, what time you will leave, who is driving, and what you will wear.

Finally the big day arrives. You don't sleep much the night before because you are too excited. The hours of the big day go by in a blur. You go to class, but your professor sounds like one of the adults in a Charlie Brown TV special. You can't wait to get back home and get dressed for the big show. And finally that time comes. You rush home, planning out exactly what you will do to be ready by 4 P.M., when your friends are due to arrive.

And arrive they do. In fact, since they are as excited as you, they actually are all at your place by 3:50 P.M. You all are smiling broadly, feeling a bit jumpy, and raring to go. You pack into the car, and head off to the restaurant. The food is good, the company even better. You laugh together, talking about what you will do if Bono happens to call you up on stage.

You are all glad when you have finished eating and can finally head to the arena. You have to pay \$20 to park, but you don't even care. This is THE CONCERT, and mere money is not going to get in the way of your enjoyment. After parking, you walk the five blocks to the arena. Clearly, about ten thousand other fans wanted to get there early as well, because the parking lots are already overflowing, and you share the walk to the arena with the many thousands of other people going to the same place.

The presence of all of these other U2 fans only increases your excitement. All the fans with their U2 shirts and banners, some even sporting Bono glasses, really get you pumped. Into the arena you all flow, and wow, you see it, the stage where U2 will be tonight, after the warm-up band. Oh warm-up bands, why do they bother, you came to see U2!

The wait for the show to start is excruciating. You are so excited that you are beside yourself. The arena is loaded with the anticipation of the 18,000 people who are packed into it. Finally, a local radio DJ comes out on stage and says "Hello [your city name here]!" The arena erupts, for all of you know that this signifies the start of the show. After the DJ makes some introductory comments, he announces the warm-up band and they are greeted with ear-splitting applause. They play seven songs. They are good, real good. You enjoy their music, but to be honest, you can't wait until they are done. Bring on U2!

The warm-up band finishes. You are told that there will be a 20-minute intermission, and the house lights come up. Ugh, so close yet so far. You wait, and wait, and wait. Finally, the house lights flicker. A cheer rises up. Then the house lights go down; it is completely dark. The cheers grow louder, deeper, as if from the people's souls. From the darkness, a light show begins on stage, pulsating like your heart.

And then, after all the waiting, all the anticipation, and all the planning, there before your eyes appear the members of U2. They rise up in unison from under the stage, the Edge playing an opening riff to a familiar song on his amazing guitar, the other three waving at you, yes, you could swear, they are waving at you. The arena is beyond loud. Thunder is shaking the place. You are screaming as loud as you can but you cannot even hear yourself. You don't care, this is unbelievable.

As the first song begins, the moment and all the anticipation catch up with you. You feel short of breath and weak in the knees, almost as if you are going to faint. Fortunately you do not, and the music is in full force. There they are in front of you, so close you can almost touch them. Bono is singing now in that passionate voice. That voice and that music, it is driving right down to your core. You have never quite felt this way before. The

experience is almost mystical. After the first two songs, Bono finally talks, greeting all of you, telling you that they all intend to have an amazing time together. This is not just a concert, he says. We are here to change the world, and you are the world changers. Yes, yes, yes.

The concert is like a dream. You are so focused on the band, on the music, on the message, and on the sea of humanity all celebrating together. Bono later gives an impassioned talk about overcoming poverty. He says that you are part of the generation that will solve one of the world's greatest problems; he asks everyone who has a cell phone to hold it up, illuminated. Knowing that this moment was coming, all 18,000 people are ready. In unison, they wave their lighted cell phones, swaying gently together, back and forth. Bono is up on stage doing the same. Then U2 begins to sing one of their all-time classics, while all the people in the audience continue to sway with lighted cell phones held high. This moment is so amazing, your heart feels too big. Life's problems, at least for this moment in time, don't matter. You feel alive, wholly and completely. You feel an attachment to the other people in the arena that you cannot explain. This night is one that you will never forget.

What happened to you at this concert is what Durkheim says happens in religious worship. Even though at a concert you are with thousands of people you don't know, during that time you can feel as one, your individuality melted away as you surrender to the power of the group, all eyes and hearts fixed on the same object of devotion. If such social cohesion can happen at a concert, imagine the power that a religion can generate when it brings together people who may indeed know one another, when there are clear objects of devotion, when people gather to acknowledge and celebrate what they believe and who they are. The next time the Pope or the Dalai Lama takes a trip, watch the massive crowds, the throngs of humanity pressing to get a glimpse of him. It will make the U2 concert seem like mere child's play.

A few years ago we interviewed several hundred Americans about their religious faith. We sat in their homes and asked them many questions, including, toward the end of the interview, "What if you were to just give up your faith, just chuck it and live without it?" People were dismayed by the question. They either could not imagine such a thing, or if they could, they thought it would make them despondent. One woman literally started crying at the thought. Why, we asked them, is the idea of living without faith so hard to imagine? The answer was that, to these people, their faiths were not just something they believed or did. Rather, religion was who they were (both their individual and social identity), it gave them purpose and meaning, and it united them with fellow believers. To "just chuck their faith" was like throwing away their lives.

So we see the power of religion for social cohesion. But this view assumes that, as in Sicily, nearly everyone in a community is of the same faith. In reality, large modern societies are highly diverse and include all types of religions and spiritualities, as well as believers, agnostics, and atheists. Take the United States, for example. Sure, there are lots of Christians, though they are divided among Roman Catholics, members of the Greek Orthodox church, and Protestants. But there are also followers of all the other world faiths. What is more, so many alternative spiritualist faiths—Rastafarianism, EST, the use of crystals—exist in the country that it is difficult even for scholars who are studying such phenomena full time to keep up. And about 1 in 10 Americans claims to be agnostic or atheist or simply not to care about religion.

How can a nation be united amidst such diversity? Enter what scholars call Civil Religion. If you have never heard the term before, you might think that it means "polite

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religion." You are not that far off: Although the term *civil* refers to the public sphere of a nation, the religion that is developed for that level must be polite, as we will see.

Scholars define Civil Religion as "any set of beliefs and rituals, related to the past, present, and/or future of a people ('nation'), which are understood in some transcendental fashion" (Hammond 1976, 171). Civil Religion, like any religion, stirs a sense of awe and sentiment within its followers. All presidents refer to a generic God. (We don't know to what God they are referring specifically, but it is to a being or force spelled with a capital letter.) This God is thought to have special concern for the United States and is repeatedly asked to bless the nation. It is expected that God will want to do this, for the nation is thought to embody all that this God desires for humans: democracy, individual freedom and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and economic gain.

Civil Religion in the United States has its objects of devotion, such as the flag (never let it touch the ground, never fly it upside down, put it at half-mast when tragedy strikes, fold it with military care if you are taking it down), the national anthem (put your hand on your heart, remove your hat, and focus on the flag while singing it), and the Constitution (revere this document as the Holy Book of Civil Religion, the final arbiter of Right and Wrong). It has its ordained theologians or religious scholars who decipher what the Holy Book is meant to say: judges, especially the Supreme Court. (They are almost supreme beings—the most learned among us of the Civil Religion; they are appointed for life, wear religious-like robes, are rarely seen except when they are hearing cases, and sit at the Civil Religion's version of the judgment seat.) The ultimate leader of Civil Religion is the elected president, who is charged with bringing us together under the power of this religion. The ultimate leader is both a prophet—challenging people to dream bigger and be better—and a priest—supporting people in times of trouble, encouraging them that God is on their side and will impart blessings as long as they stay true to the Civil Religion.

To see Civil Religion as it is enacted by its ultimate leader, the president, read the words of Barack Obama excerpted from his November 4, 2008, presidential election acceptance speech:

"[W]e have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of Red States and Blue States, we are—and always will be—the United States of America. It's the answer that led [people] . . . to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day. . . . [You proved that] a government of the people, by the people and for the people has not perished from this Earth. . . . [Yet] even as we celebrate tonight, we know the challenges that tomorrow will bring are the greatest of our lifetime. . . . The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even one term, but America, I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you—we as a people will get there. . . . [We need] a new spirit of service, a new spirit of sacrifice. So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism, of service, of responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other . . . In this country, we rise or fall as one nation, as one people. . . . the true strength of our nation comes from . . . the enduring power of our ideals—democracy, liberty, opportunity and unyielding hope. . . . Our union can be perfected. . . . This is our chance to answer that call. This is our moment. . . . [We] reaffirm that fundamental truth—that out of

many, we are one. . . . [We] respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes We Can. . . . God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America." (Barack Obama. November 4, 2008. Presidential Election Acceptance Speech. Chicago, IL.)

Notice that in his acceptance speech, President-elect Obama, like all presidents before him, speaks in lofty terms and frequently refers to ideals. He especially emphasizes that, although we are diverse, we are one people, united under the principles in which we all believe (the Civil Religion values). Empowered by our unity, we share a can-do spirit. Yes, we will face tough times (the prophetic voice), but we will emerge victorious because we are unified and we stand for what is good, true, and right (the priestly voice). And may America's God bless us, God's people and God's nation, as we go forth toward Nirvana ("Our union can be perfected").

Thus, religion serves a powerful social cohesion function. When almost everyone belongs to the same religion, as in Sicily, religion is a social glue that is infused in the totality of life. When there is religious diversity within a nation, the nation often creates a new religion that we have called Civil Religion to broadly incorporate all persons, regardless of their faith tradition.

If we think of religion—even Civil Religion—as a cultural resource that we selectively use and appropriate, then we see how it can also lead to conflict with others who have a different interpretation of the same faith, a different faith, or no faith at all. Just as important, the more socially cohesive a religious group is, the more vigorously that group will defend its beliefs, practices, and ways of life against threats. Religious conflict, then, can arise out of religious cohesion. We now turn to the topic of this conflict.

RELIGION AND SOCIAL CONFLICT

In his book *Religion and Social Conflict*, Robert Lee (1964, 3) opens with a now-classic statement: "The society without conflict is a dead society. Hence the most peaceful place in the world, in terms of the absence of conflict, is a graveyard."

Outside a graveyard, humans have conflict, including religious conflict. It is our task as sociologists to better understand where, when, and why conflict occurs, and we seek to do that briefly in this section. But before we do, take a moment to identify three religious conflicts that you know of (not the personal disagreements you identified early in the chapter, but religious conflicts involving groups of people). If you cannot think of any off the top of your head, search the Internet, using keywords such as "religious conflict." Write three conflicts in the accompanying box.

BOX 4.2

Religious Conflicts

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To help us understand these conflicts, let's draw on a core tool of sociologists, the sociological imagination (Mills 1959). The sociological imagination distinguishes between personal troubles (my friend and I had a disagreement over religion) and social problems (people from religious group A and religious group B often kill each other). Personal troubles involve a few isolated individuals and probably can be explained simply by the personalities of the people involved, but when whole groups clash, looking at the characteristics of individuals will not explain the conflict.

The sociological imagination understands that all individuals are embedded within groups, which are embedded in larger societies, which are themselves embedded in a specific time in history. The Hatfields and McCoys feuded not just because of what was occurring between them at the time, but because it had been their long history to do so. Part of the identity of each of these clans was to dislike the other. If either group stopped the feud, it would have risked a complete loss of identity.

As you review the three religious conflicts that you identified, can you use the sociological imagination to explain why the conflicts occur? That is, explain the conflicts without resorting to explanations involving the characteristics of individuals. What do you come up with?

Let us first classify the types of religious conflict and then examine why each may occur:

1. Conflict between religious groups (between, say, Buddhists and Zoroastrians)
2. Conflict within a religious group (Catholicism in Sicily, for example)
3. Conflict between a religious group and the larger society. (Mormons once believed that it is permissible for a man to marry more than one woman, but the larger society did not.)
4. Conflict between religious group and a nonreligious group or sector. (Fundamentalist Christians object to the teaching of evolution in public schools, while public schools attempt to avoid religious particularism)

If you examine the three specific religious conflicts that you wrote down, they should fit into at least one of the preceding four categories. (If they don't, you have come up with a new category of conflict!)

To consider why religious conflict occurs, let's first think about why conflict in general occurs. On the surface, it seems simple: People and groups conflict because they disagree. Fair enough. But why do they disagree? Because they don't see eye to eye, you might say, or because they have different perspectives, or because one group is trampling on another group. OK, we grant you that. But we really aren't getting very far here. It is sort of like telling someone you are from Cokato, Minnesota. "Where is that?" the person will ask, to which you reply, "Six miles east of Dassel." "Where is Dassel?" to which you reply, "Six miles west of Cokato." All true, but not that helpful.

Let's go back to our original explanation for conflict: "People and groups disagree." But we know for sure that not all disagreements lead to conflict. We may disagree with another person's religion, or with all religion, but that does not mean that we necessarily engage in conflict with those who follow other religions. Religious conflict, then, can be better defined as *groups or individuals acting against resistors, in an attempt either to preserve or to change religious beliefs, rituals, or ways of being*. (See, for example, Marty 1964 and Weber 1947.) Notice that according to this definition, action is required, and that "it takes at least two to tango." If the other group simply gives in, there is no conflict. Also, one set of actors is seeking a goal that is in opposition to the goal of another set of actors, and they care enough to engage in conflict.

There are two additional aspects of religious conflict. The first aspect, noted earlier, is that the social cohesion of religion on one side of the coin implies social conflict on the other side of the coin. Connected to, and elaborating on, this "two-sides-of-the-same-coin" concept is that conflict has several functions for social and religious life. At least as far back as the early 1900s, scholars have noted that conflict can have positive aspects. But it was Lewis Coser's 1956 book, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, that developed this idea fully. According to his work—and subsequently supported by hundreds of studies—conflict between groups serves several positive functions:

1. **Clarifies boundaries.** A Hindu fully understands what it means to be Hindu only by knowing what a Hindu is not (the boundaries). This understanding is best achieved through conflict with non-Hindus, because it forces Hindus to clearly define who is in the group and who is not.
2. **Solidifies identity.** Conflict helps to firm and deepen group identity. If groups are going to be challenged or to challenge another group, they will continue to do so only insofar as they understand who they are in relation to other groups. Thus, if Hindus are conflicting with Sikhs, not only are the boundaries between the two religious groups sharpened, but both groups come to see their individual and group identities as being intimately tied, respectively, to being Hindu and being Sikh.
3. **Increases social cohesion.** We have come full circle, or in keeping with our metaphor, we have turned the coin again. Cohesion fuels conflict, and conflict fuels cohesion. You may fight with your sibling and berate each other mercilessly, but let some outsider attack your sibling, and bam: You rise to your sibling's defense. External conflict increases internal cohesion.
4. **Strengthens ideological solidarity and participation.** This is a fancy way of saying that conflict with outside groups also means that the members of a religious group come to think more alike. External conflict leads them to gain a greater clarity about what they believe and value, and again, these values become clear markers of being a member of the group. Another important benefit of conflict for a group is that it increases participation as people rise to the defense of their group.
5. **Augments resource mobilization.** Groups in conflict can do more than groups that are not in conflict. They get more donations of money or goods, members devote more time to the group, and members are more willing to sacrifice for the good of the group and to overcome the enemy.

In terms of social cohesion within religious groups, then, it is in a group's best interest to conflict with outside groups, though that is not nice to say in polite company. Accordingly, it is unfortunate, but asking people to love the whole world and all that is in it just doesn't work very well for building group strength. Of course, it could work if the world was engaged in conflict with aliens from another planet or some other type of outsider group.

Perhaps these benefits of conflict are why if we wish to maintain social cohesion and group strength, we can never be without conflict of some sort. As Emile Durkheim wrote in a famous example, imagine an isolated monastery full of completely devoted monks who are solidly committed to their faith, each following the hundreds of rules set forth by the abbot, each fully devoted to their object of worship. What seems to outsiders like the slightest deviation—hair a half-inch too long, praying for 3 hours and 58 minutes instead of the expected 4 hours, wearing a garment that is light brown instead of medium

brown—would be met with great moral outrage and considered to be a clear violation of the group's way of life. And if some monks decided not to correct their moral violation, but instead began to claim that it is OK to wear light-brown garments, internal conflict would result. If it continued long enough with no clear resolution (neither side gives in nor is able to impose its will on the other group), the groups would split into two monasteries. In short, if there is no conflict from without, conflict from within will arise. (Think of those Catholics in Sicily who tolerate the Mafia version of the religion and those who oppose them.)

Internal religious conflict can arise over any number of issues: acceptable musical styles, traditional versus modern worship, clergy/laity battles, male versus female rights and behaviors, generational differences, the number of parking spaces that are available, whether men must grow beards to worship properly, or how short women's skirts may be. The list goes on, but you get the point.

If conflict has so many positive functions and is almost inevitable, why don't we see even more religious conflict, especially violent religious conflict? Here are a few reasons. First, as Robert Wuthnow (2005) finds in his book on the challenges of religious diversity, people actually know very little about religions other than their own. They know that religion X is different from their own religion Y, but they don't really know much detail beyond that. Insofar as they do not know details, they do not feel threatened, and their religious understandings are not challenged. To put it bluntly, often there is no religious conflict because people don't much care what others are doing or believing. They are busy enough dealing with the conflicts within their own group.

Religious conflict *does* happen when one religious group's way of life impinges upon by another group, be it religious or not. But full-scale violence is usually avoided because there are typically other avenues for dealing with the conflict and because the continued existence of the conflict actually benefits the group. (See the five positive functions of conflict listed previously.)

Sociologically, there is another reason that extreme levels of conflict between religious groups are limited. In most societies, social diversity is a reality. People occupy multiple roles, move in several spheres (religious, work, neighborhood, school, etc.), and maintain social relationships across several groups. Suppose that a religious group is in conflict with public schools, claiming that the schools teach secular humanism and are anti-God. A number of public-school teachers are probably members of the religious group. It will be hard for these members to engage in an extreme level of conflict both with their employer and their peers. They will seek to moderate the conflict.

Hence, the more groups are cross-cut with the same members, typically the less likely it is that severe conflict will occur (Blau and Schwartz 1984, McGuire 1997). The biggest trouble—conflict that results in bloodshed—tends to occur when there are concentrations of roles. When members of religious group A all tend to be lower class, to share the same ethnicity, and to live on the west side, while members of religious group B tend to be upper class, to share a different ethnicity than members of religious group A, and to live on the east side of town, there may be tremendous religious conflicts. In fact, any sort of conflict between groups can be at the same time a religious conflict, a class conflict, an ethnic conflict, and a regional conflict. Because religion may be a sacred marker that accentuates and stands for all the divisions between groups (Hanf 1994, 202) many conflicts labeled as religious conflicts may not really be about religion.

To learn more about such occurrences, research the Internet and read about the conflict that existed among Bosnians, Croats, and Serbs (or the conflicts in Rwanda or the Sudan). The ostensibly religious conflict among the Bosnians, Croats, and Serbs led to the deaths of thousands, the slaughter of families, and the disruption of life for many years. But were differences in religion really the basis of the conflict? You might also investigate the hundreds-of-years-long conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. The conflict is much more than a religious conflict.

CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

Can't we all just get along? No, we cannot, and yes, we can. The irony is that both statements are true. Religious groups need social cohesion to survive and thrive, but strongly cohesive groups often conflict with other groups. And the conflict actually has positive effects for the internal cohesion of the group.

Civil Religion is the attempt on the part of diverse nations to create a religion that overarches the particular views of the religious *and* the nonreligious people in the country. Such a religion is necessary, it seems, to take individuals beyond mere loyalty to the specific groups to which they belong and to create cohesion and commitment to the nation. But the Civil Religion that strengthens internal national unity becomes, at the same time, a basis for conflict with other nations. Whether we talk about it explicitly or not, America's Civil Religion distinguishes the United States, setting us up as different from other nations in our relationship to a sacred order. Our Civil Religion establishes group boundaries and feeds conflicts with those viewed as outsiders, including other nations.

Some religious groups, admirably, attempt to be nonexclusive and open to all, lowering their boundaries, regardless of their religious beliefs. This doesn't work so well, because it makes it difficult to have clear boundaries, clear identities, and strong membership commitment, unless, of course, the group is in conflict with other groups, such as religious groups, which think that the first group's approach is heresy or not religion at all. In such a case, being "open and accepting" becomes an identity, boundaries are drawn to delineate the group from the intolerant groups, and membership commitment rises in defense of their views.

But when the boundaries are drawn, this open and accepting group is no longer open and accepting of all people; just other people who share its views. Such is the irony of social and religious life. In later chapters we will use some of this knowledge to understand fundamentalist movements and even religious violence. It will become clearer how the tension between religious cohesion and religious conflict plays out: Yes, we can all get along, and no, we cannot.

SUGGESTED READING

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