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# INTRADENOMINATIONAL RELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND THE NEED FOR SELF-ASSERTION

**Dragoş Boicu**\*

*'Lucian Blaga' University of Sibiu, 'Andrei Şaguna' Faculty of Theology, Victoriei Blvd. no.10,  
55002, Sibiu, Romania*

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyses the extent to which it can be defined the intradenominational conflict as a special form of religious violence. The first part explores the definitions and the situations which can be described as religious violence. The second part of the study focuses on the tension between 'orthodoxy' and 'heterodoxy' as the main source of the intradenominational conflict and the arbitrary character of what can be defined as Orthodoxy. Finally we tried to see some past and current examples of this kind of tension and their violent potential.

*Keywords:* religion, violence, religious conflict, schism, divisions

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## **1. Introduction**

Religion usually aims to calm violence and to prevent its outburst [1], but even so it is constantly dominated by conflict and contradiction, constantly fighting against an invisible enemy, seen either as a demonic force or as absolute evil, generally defined as the absence of good. Christianity has embraced the Pauline vision of this unseen war fought "not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places"; it also accepted the existence of a the proper arsenal ("all the weapons of God") that the Christian must use so "that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm" (Ephesians 6.12-13).

The idea of an antagonism between good and evil can be found in all the mythologies and religions of the world, and the practicing believer is required to engage in this war, which shifts from the inner struggle to a more exterior fight. This means that religion can lead to violence because it nurtures strong emotions and it "links cognitive definitions of ultimate reality with structures of feeling and obligation. In so doing it can authorize, legitimate, enable, and even require violent action in the face of urgent threats, profanations of sacred symbols, and extreme otherhood." [2, p. 10]

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\*E-mail: dragos.boicu@ulbsibiu.ro

That is why we are not surprised when the spiritual momentum has often been diverted to provide “a potent collection of moral, ideological, and organizational resources that can, in certain contexts, inform, legitimate, or sustain violent conflict, just as they can inform, legitimate, or sustain the most admirable forms of moral and political engagement” [2, p. 10]. Ultimately the violent conflict appears to be based on the fragmentation and hyper-competitiveness of religious communities.

The recent conflict between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church on the issue of granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church proves once again that “structural incentives for heteronomy, provocation, and outbidding in the religious field can align with structural incentives for heteronomy in the political field” [2, p. 10]. This determines a reaction to the emphasis on the ethno-religious element. So, the resistance to expansionist aspirations, neo-imperial ideology, competition and political conflicts receives a religious nuance and signification.

The temptation to devalue the existing order in the name of a spiritual principle, which may or may not conceal a political intention, has always been an important component of religious processes, causing either the violent rejection of the elements incompatible with their own truth or the accommodation of the missionary instruments to include and adapt those elements in the new teaching.

Given the importance that religious conflict has always had in determining, building and destroying any civilization, we would expect to be able to define this notion accurately, but unexpected implications and interferences with innumerable factors prevent us from listing a set of characteristics that adequately outline that concept to respond to all the situations that it can describe.

## **2. Explorations**

In order to better understand the nature of the religious conflict, we will first address the manifestations and mechanisms that give us a description of the possible origins of the dispute in the spiritual life and its outward appearance in an aggressive manner.

Any religion as an ensemble of ideas, feelings and actions shared by a group; as a form of social consciousness characterized by faith in a divinity, in a supernatural being, it provides those who embrace it with an object to worship, a behavioural code, a frame of reference for the relationship with their own socio-religious group and the Universe. But ultimately, through faith it offers a certainty, grounded on the remnants of a primordial Revelation, fragments of the truth that are considered as the Absolute Truth itself. Nevertheless, the quality of this truth and any relation to it determine an infinite palette of tensions that also manifest themselves according to the attributes of the member of that religion.

In most cases, one gets simply too comfortable within a fragmentary doctrine, and this partial understanding of the truth inevitably leads to the idolatry of a piece of the revealed truth. Thus, it comes to the “sin of those for whom ‘faith’ is the suspension of interrogation, of search, of spiritual awakening. They possess the truth, they have eternal life insured, they no longer need to search for ‘a way’. They can fall asleep in the comfort of self-righteousness. They understand, and they know, they are in possession of a cache of certainty that can turn any attempt, any inner crisis, any insomnia into a waste of time.” [3]

To some extent these observations are valid for all of us. This superficial certainty calls for concentration around our own ‘spiritual’ and mental comfort zone where nothing challenges us or disturbs our inner peace with dilemmas or existential questions. And according to this truncated reality we build our religious identity.

Therefore, any disturbance or challenge is considered to be an innovation and is automatically perceived as heterodox, because it threatens the fragment of truth to which we have wrongly assigned an absolute value by ignoring the relative, conditioned nature, limited by the other aspects or attributes of the Truth, which in the Christian conception is Christ Himself.

### **3. Attempts to define the conflict**

As we have already said, if we try to define a conflict, we will have to face more difficulties, because it must be seen from the perspective of each party involved, with a special reference to the particularities of the event. If we still search for the definition of the religious conflict in general, as an inherent phenomenon of civilization, then it can be described as the opposition between orthodoxy – more or less justly claimed – and the heterodoxy attributed to the ‘others’. (The term ‘orthodox’ hasn’t in this context a confessional nuance, but it indicates instead the position claimed by the members of a religious group.) As we approach the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we see this kind of conflict as a defining constant of our culture. The geopolitical framework is also shaped by a growing number of terrorist incidents that are apparently religiously motivated, or, rather, they are motivated by the defence of a certain religious position [4].

The phenomenon to be analysed against the backdrop of the religious conflict is the outlining of intolerance and its escalation, i.e. the embracing of extremism or radicalization. From a terminological point of view, we can say that these concepts have been formulated relatively recently, starting with the Enlightenment, but the religious conflicts have been played out in the same pattern throughout history and can be traced back to immemorial times, being inseparable from the existence of religion, because “religion has a tremendous potential for violence” [5, p. 79]. But, according to Mark Juergensmeyer, although religion is not faultless, it does not automatically lead to violence. The latter arises only from the merging of a certain set of circumstances – political, social and ideological – when religion joins the violent manifestations of social

aspirations, personal pride, and various movements determined by political change [6].

These violent manifestations appear and are repeated regardless of age, cultural space or religions involved. We could say that there is a set of universal parameters, and their identification (with every particularity) invites us to highlight a paradigm or at least some defining elements that help us to somehow grasp the characteristics of a turbulent religious movement and the stakes of its constitution.

By its very nature, the religious conflict is intersectional [7] and covers a very broad spectrum of hostile or aggressive attitudes, ranging from a disregard towards otherness to an increased susceptibility, resembling more the intolerance, the hostile discourse, the hate speech, acts of violence and even killings in the name of faith.

The motivation of such violence is often complex, leading to the conclusion that violent religious conflicts in Late Antiquity were rarely strictly religious. In fact, Wendy Mayer, in her attempt to systematize the main causes of the religious conflict, identifies political, social, economic or psychological portents, and considers that this very complex phenomenon involves a combination of several disputed aspects: power, personality, place, space, group identity [8]. In her opinion, the religious conflict erupts when the following conditions are met: “(1) two or more collective agents are involved, and the agents derive, for example, from separate religions, separate factions within the same religion, from within the same faction in the same religion, and/or secular authority; (2) a domain – e. g., ideology/morality, power, personality, space/place, group identity – is contested, singly or in combination; (3) there are enabling conditions – e. g., political, social, economic, cultural and psychological; and (4) religion is involved (the degree to which it is involved is deemed irrelevant)” [8, p. 5].

Anselm Rink and Kunaal Sharma also summarize a series of explanations of the religious conflict structured at macro, meso and micro levels. Thus, at a macro or socio-political level, people who are marginalized politically or economically are believed to be predisposed to religious conflict [9]. Similarly, at a meso-level that focuses on religiosity, religious conversion and exposure to ‘radical networks’, people with a high level of religiosity and neophytes are more likely to engage in a religious conflict and even to become extremists. No less important is the microlevel, reserved for the psychological factors that determine the religious radicalization, where the two authors state that persons who have lived a tragedy in their private life or witnessed acts of violence also manifest a predilection for the religious conflict [9].

I insist on these latter factors because they contribute the most to self-victimizing attitudes, and, simultaneously, to claiming a superior moral position that will become the basis for justifying deviant behaviours. But paradoxically, instead of the victim-specific passivity, these religious dissidents embrace aggressiveness as a form of expressing their disagreement.

Regardless of whether we choose to see in this situation a demonic deception – according to the teaching of Eastern Christian spirituality – or just a typical case of delusion, a subtype of the Messiah complex, the conflict’s catalyser is the allegedly belonging to a group of ‘God’s chosen people’. Their mission is to restore the ‘old’ religious prescriptions (an argument of authority), and they are the only ones able to interpret the original message and to fulfil the divine commandments even if these actions bring them into conflict with civil laws or secular authorities [A. Orav, *European Parliamentary Research Service*, PE 551.342 (2015), p. 3]. This does not automatically mean that we have to subject the protagonists of religious conflicts to psychiatric examinations to detect the pathological elements, but simply that we cannot neglect the personal stakes and interests of those involved. Consequently, they are especially driven by the desire to get noticed, claiming an exceptional status to validate their own perception of the role they attribute to themselves within the wider religious plan. The main concern is to consolidate this role and mostly the need to affirm the special mission or divine mandate can only be made by contrast, which is crystallized in open opposition to a particular moral or teaching practice, deconstructing and mocking the rival dogma.

Therefore, if we cannot challenge the existence of religious conflict, no matter how we try to define it, the dissidents’ motivation must be examined more rigorously to observe the degree of belief or the sincerity with which they claim to have received a mandate to carry out their ‘holy mission’. Often there can be identified mundane objectives, such as the need for attention or the manifestation of dissatisfaction with the lack of recognition for their merits – they expect to become the new unanimously recognized leaders as a reward for their efforts.

When viewed as the product of several factors and embodied by the actions of some people claiming to have a sacred mission of defending and preaching the divine truth, we can more easily emphasize the same universal peculiarity of the religious conflict that can be perceived on an inter-religious, interdenominational, but also intra-confessional (intrad denominational) level. At this last level there must be included all those segregationist and isolationist groups (which claim administrative reasons), as well as the more rigorous movements within a denomination.

We emphasize this because the stereotype is still maintained that extremism and intolerance are attributes of monotheistic religions. Many researchers remain tributaries to David Hume’s statement that “the intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the unity of God is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists (tolerance)” [10].

Obviously, when we try to apply such modern definitions to the realities of Antiquity, we must do so with discernment and caution, because if we are honest, we notice the anachronism through which we allow our own cultural bias to influence our understanding of ancient society [11]. Such bias will alter in an unacceptable way the perception of historical realities, distorting the message and the purpose of the events. Therefore, the use of the terms such as

‘intolerance’, ‘extremism’, or ‘radicalization’ must be nuanced and adapted to the specificities of each age. Another modern concept that regards the militant aspect of a spiritual movement is ‘fundamentalism’; it proves to be very useful in describing the religious conflict because it better reflects the absolutisation of a minute element of spiritual truth.

The great difficulty in defining these terms comes from the importance of the context that allows us to determine precisely the elements perceived as extremism, radicalization or fundamentalism, as any of these notions may mean something different for each person who uses them.

What all these concepts have in common is the manifestation of what we conventionally call religious ‘intolerance’. But this attitude should not be seen as diametrically opposed to tolerance, because tolerance itself has a negative connotation that refers to indifference or condescending indulgence, the expression of which is an incomplete acknowledgment and rather forced by circumstances (such as the inability to abolish the otherness). So ‘tolerance’ does not mean understanding the differences and even less recognizing any equality between the ‘standard’ religion and the tolerated versions.

The conflict is based, as I have already stated, on the assertion of one religion’s superiority over any other spiritual alternative. Besides this we can add the claim of divine mandate to liquidate any opposition or diversity. And we can largely accept this situation on an inter-religious level (e.g. the conflicts between Christians and Muslims seen by both sides as holy wars, whether they are called crusades or jihads) or interdenominational (such as Saint Bartholomew’s Night – August 23/24 1572 and the Thirty Years’ War – 1618-1648, although the political component was dominant, but the pretexts were religious).

In both conflict situations (i.e. interreligious or interdenominational) a competition is understood, and “violence, indeed, is seen as the deliberate attempt by one religion to remove religious competitors from the public sphere and gain dominance” [12]. The competition in other fields, such as politics, often finds expression in religion, as Saint Gregory of Nazianzus emphasized in his autobiographical work *De Vita Sua*: “Souls were the pretext, the real cause was the love of dominion, for I hesitate to say that the riches and taxes were those that shook poisonously the entire world” [13, p. 305].

On the other hand, the rivalry between religious groups can have important political consequences. Thus, the religious competition and, implicitly, the conflict as such become a political issue rather than a theological one, and the most important values of the dominant religion are addressed from the point of view of exercising power, such as protecting it from the actions of other rival beliefs [14].

#### **4. The conflict’s stake on intradenominational level**

However, at the intradenominational level, the dynamics and motivation of the conflict are determined not by the superiority of a spiritual principle that

serves as ideological support, but by the claims of a person's superiority. Thus, behind the doctrinal, moral or canonical disputes, there is a conflict of authority, often doubled by one of jurisdiction as the manifested extension of the influence of those involved in the dispute. Regardless of the reasons invoked by a more particular or dissident group, what is noted every time is the ultimate temptation of ecclesiocracy highlighted by Andrei Cornea, namely: "The fundamental obsession of all 'ecclesiae' is unity and totality. Every 'ecclesia' aspires to become the only Ecclesia, to unify the whole of humanity and to crystallize, on its own, all consciousness. Actually, the more an 'ecclesia' is more domineering and with more obvious universal ambitions, the more it will stir resistance and cause counter-ecclesiae to emerge. The result: there are many 'ecclesiae', all driven by ambitions of absolute inner unity and absolute outer domination, which leads to schism within." [15]

This observation indirectly reflects the fact that the religious alternative engaged in the intradenominational conflict arises precisely against the backdrop of tolerance (understood as *oikonomia*). Initially, tolerance will hail otherness or diversity of opinion, but after consolidating its own position the dissident group will eventually denounce unilaterally the 'differences' opening a conflict in the form of a schism. Paradoxically, the dissident group resorts to intolerant manifestations that can cover the whole range already described, from defamation to physical violence or murder.

If the initiators of these movements are most likely aware of the purely administrative nature of the split, this does not prevent them from radicalizing their supporters by hiding their own agendas and worldly preoccupations behind moral and dogmatic issues, the gravity of which they exaggerate and degenerate, transforming them into key teachings, or life or death matters. That is why the 'schismatic' groups most often end up naturally being considered 'heretical' as a result of the alteration of the dogmatic content, which originally represented the common basis of the 'combatant' factions.

A result of physical violence, as a form in which the conflict is manifested between various groups that all contend for a monopoly on 'orthodoxy', is the emergence of a special category among the conflict's parameters: the confessors of faith and the martyrs. The symbolic value and impact of martyrdom differs according to each culture, but what is found in off-shoot factions is the phenomenon currently called 'radicalization', which means that the martyrdom is the absolute triumph of a radical way of life.

A fine observer of the Romanian society, but also of the universal processes that he filters through his vast multicultural experience, Andrei Pleșu describes the specific behaviour of such radicalized Christians who instead of "aspiring *towards* the requirements of the ideal of a good Christian, on the contrary, settle and act *against* those imperatives. This is often the case, especially in the circles of rigorous militants, whose 'conversion' seems to have radicalized them. They were anxious, unsure, questioning, and suddenly became authoritarian, asphyxiated by sharp, ruthless certainties, ready to wield the sword of judgment until the 'adversary' was suppressed, be he an atheist, 'not holy'

enough, politically inadequate or simply unlikable. I meet too often with Christians who are raving, wrapped in dogmatic sufficiency, against those who do not approve their opinion or do not recognize their justification. [...] They are always right and impudently enjoying their conviction that they are right, that they ‘have God’ on their side [...]. You feel that, if they had the opportunity, they would not hesitate to apply some ‘godly’ physical corrections, to say nothing of excommunication. You cannot believe that you sometimes deal with so many hateful ‘Christians’, ready to lie, to slander, to cuss, to mock you. [...] Others, dissatisfied with the opacity of the world vis-à-vis their talents, poisoned by the thought that they are not appreciated at their true value, filled with resentment, become grave, prisoners of all sorts of conspiracies, champions of grumbling, perpetually remembering evil, quarrelsome, annoyed by everyone, relentless.” [16]

This passage captures a series of attitudes specific to a form of zealotry that can arise within any religion; fanaticism is always foretold by the monopolisation of the truth, by the privatisation of the faith, by someone claiming the role of sole intercessor between man and divinity and exclusively assuming a mission of preaching their own truth by means that have nothing to do with any form of respect for the human dignity of the potential proselytes.

In this intradenominational spectrum, we can include conflicts between Orthodox national Churches on jurisdiction, schisms, and all seemingly harmless religious associations that develop a liturgical program separated from that of the mother community, but also youth groups (ASCOR i.e. Association of Orthodox Christian Students from Romania, ATOR i.e. Romanian Orthodox Youth Association, OTS i.e. Youth Organization of Sibiu, etc.) which incite their members with a general sense of superiority, which they manifest covertly or overtly in their social groups.

Sofian Boghiu warned the members of such an association about the ‘traps of a false belief’, that calls for polarization and eventually generates a conflict between members of the same Church. Among the riskiest attitudes, Sofian Boghiu lists the following:

- *pietism* or sentimentalism that focuses on the ‘surrogates of Orthodoxy’ and cultivates its own order, akin to superstition;
- *intellectualism* that causes a fade-out of spiritual life and leads to isolation from the communion with Christ;
- and *criticism* as the manifestation of an alleged superiority and real ignorance alike [17].

Tudor Popescu, a former president of ASCOR, also provides an important testimony of “deviant trends in Christian teaching (pietism, zealotry, intellectualism, misunderstood ecumenism)” [17, p. 94] that he encountered during his work at the helm of the association. His conclusions point to the crystallisation of a form of elitism which, in fact, is claimed by any ‘ecclesia’, and the symptoms in the religious life of these communities prone to conflict are extremely varied, including: “self-important stubbornness, the pretence of ‘authentic’ living, the counterfeit communion, the spirit of contradiction, the

obsession of details, the confusion of values and levels (i.e. incorrectly framing a problem), the unnatural spirituality due to the abuse of spiritual terms or advices, the formalism of ecclesiastical gestures, nonsense and lack of consistency, well-concealed dishonesty, spiritual instability (making us easily manipulated by those who do not live in the Orthodox spirit), missionary activism – or passivity – without discernment, superficiality, contradictory and twisted style (of addressing an issue) and superstition of any nuance, self-sufficient ignorance combined with a positive self-perception, the misunderstanding of how love should be interwoven with the firmness and the impossibility of seeing a problem in its entirety” [17, p. 94-95; see also 18 and 19].

All these manifestations betray a self-sufficiency that desensitizes the believer of any religion, alters their moral reference points, and attaches him to an alternative axiology. Therefore, the real causes of the religious conflict are of ethical nature and are related to the pathology of the moral conscience. This involves hypocrisy, insensibility, infantilism and moral instability [20]. Their effect is the counterfeiting and/or fragmentation of the Revealed Truth.

Once this bias towards what is strange or foreign is created, the religious dissident embarks on the path to radicalization because he or she refuses to accept and to learn anything outside the narrow circle in which their conscience is held captive. Being radicalized means addressing problems or confrontation with a brutal rejection that crowns the simplistic understanding of the fragments of information the dissident thinks he possesses.

Paradoxically, possessed by the certainty of his own values, stuck on the path (ὁ ὁδός, Acts 9.2, 18.25-26, 22.4) of faith and limited to an arbitrary interpretation of the sacred texts, the dissident becomes a fundamentalist, and misses no opportunity to prove his narrowness in addressing more nuanced topics, placing himself definitely in one of the extremes. In the end, all the religious dissidents act contrary to the principles that they display and promote.

Thus, the search for tranquillity, the embrace of a ‘spiritual’ program, the hesychast preoccupations, the Philocalic readings, the initiation into the Prayer of the heart, and the promotion of philanthropic actions that originally animate the communities that claim to live in a genuine Christian spirit are the elements that, over time, come to reflect how far these groups have strayed from the initial structure. Likewise, the same elements are invoked as a pretext for triggering the intradenominational conflict. Among the members of the religious associations mentioned above (after interviewing almost 300 persons) there is the predisposition to break from the mother church (mater ecclesia) in the name of a ‘superior’ spiritual life. This is a direct consequence of the double-standard practiced by the dissidents, who adopt – in the name of inner peace – a conflict with the unanimously acknowledged and established authority, challenging its legitimacy to lead the ecclesia, denouncing its vision and methods, accusing it of deviating from the revealed truth, announcing reform and the returning to the original religious ideal.

The way in which the transition is made from a project of personal spiritual renewal to the beginning of a crusade designed to purify the entire institutional edifice is extremely subtle. This fundamental change requires an interdisciplinary research to observe particularly the sociological and psychological aspects that mark this kind of evolution.

The claimed autonomy does not solve the problem and therefore, most of the time, following the separation from a religious group, the dissidents will go through a succession of fragmentations in search of an identity that meets the requirements of each of the more important leaders. A most prominent example for posterity is the Donatist group (IV<sup>th</sup>-V<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E.), which, following the schism, evolved according to the differences of opinion among the main leaders of this group, which caused successive fragmentations resulting in six factions: Rogatists – the most moderate, Urbanists, Claudianists, Primianists, Maximianists, and the cruel Circumcellions.

## **5. Conclusions**

Therefore, in the inter-religious and interdenominational conflict there is almost always a combination of political, economic, social, and cultural factors that find expression in a religious form. Ultimately it is a competition and an assertion of the superiority of their own position. But, when we consider the intradenominational conflict, we are witnessing the purest form of subjectivism, and its manifestations are related to the pathology of moral conscience. Fundamentalism and radicalization have nothing to do with religion, they only use the spiritual element to justify a profound need for attention and affirmation. On the road of self-discovery, which demands an ontological need to find meaning and to fill a void of consciousness in search for reference points, one chooses the easiest solution. Staying in the comfort zone, which means embracing self-sufficiency and self-limitation to the few fragments of truth one has, the dissident creates idols in his own image and likeness.

The ethical nature and the social stakes of such a behaviour manifested in the religious plan by activism, intransigence and intolerance must be further observed from an interdisciplinary but also pluri-religious perspective. Such an investigation could confirm or deny the existence of a typology or a paradigm of any insinuation of a conflict which has only a personal stake, and its religious significance is used strictly as a pretext for justifying the atrocities committed in one's own eyes. For "the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God" (John 16.2).

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