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Religious actors as epistemic communities in conflict transformation: the cases of South Africa and Northern Ireland

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Abstract. With the increasing influence of theocrats and other religious actors on policymakers and masses, recognising the agency of the clergy is crucial. This article uses the 'epistemic communities' framework to place the religious 'agents' in contemporary politics and it shows how hermeneutics can be treated as a form of 'episteme'. Until recently, this framework has been used to explain how scientific communities affect policymaking. Using the cases of South Africa and Northern Ireland, this article claims that religious actors, especially with their shared set of normative and principled beliefs as well as shared norms of validity, also meet the requirements of the epistemic community category. The employment of this established IR framework in theorising religious politics has the potential to shed light not only on peacebuilding and mediation, but also violent movements and terrorist organisations that use religion as justification.

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The role of religion and religious actors in conflict transformation, as an area of academic investigation, is relatively new to the study of Comparative Politics and International Relations (IR). It may be argued that faith-related issues have always been under the lens of political theorists but even a cursory glance at the prominent IR journals shows that this has not been the case, at least not until recently.[1] Given

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[1] David Carment and Patrick James, 'The International Politics of Ethnic Conflict: New Perspectives on Theory and Policy', *Global Society*, 11:2 (1997), pp. 205–32; Daniel Philpott 'The Religious Roots of Modern International Relations', *World Politics*, 52 (2000), pp. 206–45; Scott Thomas, 'Taking Religious and Cultural Pluralism Seriously: The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Society', *Millennium*, 29:3 (2000), pp. 815–84; Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Brian Walker, 'Religion and politics: The Case of Northern Ireland', *Peace and Conflict Studies*, 14:2 (2007), pp. 74–92; Eva Bellin, 'Faith in Politics: New Trends in the Study of Religion and World Politics', *World Politics*, 60:2 (2008), pp. 315–47; Nukhet Sandal and Patrick James, 'Religion and International Relations Theory: Towards a Mutual Understanding', forthcoming in *European Journal of International Relations*.

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the absence of religion and clergy – broadly defined to include all faith leaders – in the mainstream IR and Political Theory of the Cold War years, it remains a challenge to find the appropriate tools and frameworks that would accommodate these phenomena in the 21st century. The religious dimension of the conflict settings like Israel/Palestine, Rwanda, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Bosnia and India/Pakistan requires policymakers and academics to devise ways that can identify the channels the clerics can play a constructive role.

This article is an attempt to meet such a challenge, and adapt one of the influential frameworks of agency to the study of religious actors in divided societies. Due to space restrictions, the article focuses on one religious tradition – Christianity – but this is not to say that the leaders of other religions are outside of the theoretical scope. The proposed framework of religious actors has a wider applicability to the other faith traditions than the ones which have been developed. For example, Jelen introduced a useful framework of clergy in a democratic political culture by using the cases of Roman Catholicism, mainline Protestantism and evangelical Protestantism in American politics.[2] His investigation and results, however, were not generalisable to divided societies or other traditions which do not have the same institutional structures as Christianity. Fawcett took an additional step by investigating the Presbyterian Church of Ireland and the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.[3] She concluded that the churches try to adapt to the existing political discourses in order not to be isolated. The Epistemic Communities framework proposed in this article has a wider extension than these theories of Christian institutions and clergy. I argue that the religious epistemic communities, who can be members of any religion, show a high level of agency, influencing the politics of the divided societies, rather than being just 'adaptors' to change as Fawcett proposed. The framework itself is not specific to certain churches or societies; it is generalisable yet it is parsimonious. Undoubtedly, the mechanisms elaborated in this article may not exactly fit to the traditions and institutional structures of all religions, but they constitute a useful blueprint for the explanation of the role of religious actors in a wider array of conflict settings.

By using the cases of the churches' role in the dismantlement of Apartheid in South Africa and the facilitating role of the faith leaders in the peace process that culminated in the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, I argue that the role of religious actors in today's political scene and conflict settings qualifies them as an 'epistemic community', primarily due to their high level of expertise, status in the society and shared norms of validity. The Epistemic Communities approach has mostly been used to explain the influence of scientists on the decision-makers in the Cold War era but it constitutes a useful framework to investigate the influence of the religious actors in conflict transformation. The two cases are selected because they are sufficiently similar in that they both came to a state of relative stability, became models in conflict-transformation in the international arena and the religious actors played a significant role in both cases, influencing the political decision-making leading to the conflict transformation. At the same time, they are sufficiently different in terms of their characteristics; the case of Apartheid

[2] Ted Jelen, *The Political World of the Clergy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993).
[3] Liz Fawcett, *Religion, Ethnicity and Social Change* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

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in South Africa is characterised as a racial conflict and the situation in Northern Ireland as an ethnic or class conflict.[4] In the South Africa case, we see the debates within the Protestant Churches and in the Northern Ireland case the Catholic Church is added to the equation. The two cases have already been subject to in-depth comparative investigations. In his comparison of the Calvinist theology in Northern Ireland and South Africa, Bruce argued that outside pressures and threat perceptions of the settlers led to the continuation and at times, amplification of a distinctive body of imagery for both the settler community and the native population.[5] In a similar vein, Akenson drew attention to the common behaviour patterns of what he called 'covenantal cultures' (people who see themselves as chosen in divine terms) of the Afrikaners and the Ulster-Scots along with the Israelis.[6]

Brewer states that in both South Africa and Northern Ireland cases, meaning of belonging to a group (including religious affiliation) was understood 'mostly in terms of its political and constitutional stance rather than its theology' although he also concedes that there are many – especially in Northern Ireland – for whom there is still theological meaning in the conflict.[7] Even the view that religion played the role of being a political and constitutional boundary marker implies that it was one of the key dimensions in the conflict. This does not mean that religious leaders 'solved' these conflicts or their involvement is the only explanation for conflict transformation. However, the roles these actors played in the process warrants an acknowledgement by the help of a systematical framework. The investigation of the role of religious actors in these two contexts has the potential to shed light on the conflict situations which have not come to a state of stability yet but contain enough space for faith leaders to play a role in the transformation of the violent settings.

Given that the status of religion has already been proposed as a model for the state's relation to science in the past and science has been defined as 'another system of beliefs to which [we] are committed',[8] taking the reverse step of adapting models of scientific agency to religious actors does not go against the philosophical underpinnings of Epistemic Communities approach. Especially given that a number of empirical studies have been published regarding the role of religion in conflict

[4] John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1995), pp. 354–55; David J. Smith and Gerald Chambers, *Inequality in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). The nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland is admittedly less clear-cut than in the South African case. For an in-depth treatment of the issue, see Pamela Clayton, 'Religion, Ethnicity and Colonialism as Explanations of the Conflict in Northern Ireland', in David Miller (ed.), *Rethinking Northern Ireland* (London: Longman, 1998), pp. 40–54; Colin Coulter, *Contemporary Northern Irish Society: An Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 1999). For the argument that the nature of the conflict was religious, see John Hickey, *Religion and the Northern Ireland Question* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984).

[5] Steve Bruce, *Conservative Protestant Politics* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 49–54.

[6] Donald H. Akenson, *God's Peoples: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel and Ulster* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[7] John D. Brewer, 'Peacemaking among Protestants and Catholics', in Mary Ann Cejka and Thomas Bamat (eds), *Artisans of Peace: Grassroots Peacemaking among Christian Communities* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), pp. 48–9.

[8] Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946); Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1958), p. 171.

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transformation and the activities of the faith leaders,[9] the scholars of International Relations and Political Science must start considering theoretical frameworks that can accommodate the relevant data. This consideration will also be a step towards developing transnational theories of order and change, extending beyond the conventional theories of war and peace.[10]

Epistemic communities as a framework

Episteme stands for 'knowledge' or 'science' in Greek. It is more theoretical knowledge in the form of agreed rules, standards and procedures rather than practical knowledge. The latter is conveyed by the word *techne*.[11] In the philosophy literature, any coherent body of special knowledge may qualify as *episteme* and that body does not need to be in the realm of science proper as we understand it today. Hermeneutics, 'designated as a body of knowledge that deals with understanding what is said in a text'[12] constitutes such a branch of special knowledge and possesses significant epistemic functions by itself. In addition, the importance accorded to a specific area at a specific time period defines the classification of knowledge as a relevant episteme and its permeation to practice. Adler notes that depending on the historical context, 'theories and policy proposals that previously did not make much sense to politicians may suddenly acquire a political meaning, thus becoming viable'.[13] It would not be an exaggeration to propose that, with the increasing role of religion in the political realm and the questioning of the secularisation-modernisation arguments, faith-related issues have become much more relevant to contemporary policymakers and the theological knowledge has come to be valued much more than it was in the beginning of the 20th century.

In the field of IR, an epistemic community is defined as 'a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area'.[14] Although Haas states that 'epistemic communities need not be made

[9] Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Douglas Johnston and Brian Cox, 'Faith-Based Diplomacy and Preventive Engagement', in Douglas Johnston (ed.), *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2003); David Tombs and Joseph Liechty (eds), *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Douglas Johnston, 'The Churches and Apartheid in South Africa', in Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson (eds), *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); David Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society: Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); David Little, *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[10] Ronen Palan, 'Transnational Theories of Order and Change: Heterodoxy in International Relation scholarship', *Review of International Studies*, 33 (2007), pp. 47–69.

[11] Julia Annas, 'Moral Knowledge as Practical Knowledge', in Evan Selinger and Robert Crease (eds), *The Philosophy of Expertise* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2006).

[12] Frederick A. Olafson, 'Hermeneutics: "Analytical" and "Dialectical"', *History and Theory*, 25:4 (1986), pp. 28–42, 28.

[13] Emanuel Adler, 'The Emergence of Cooperation: National Epistemic Communities and the International Evolution of the Idea of Nuclear Arms Control', *International Organization*, 46:1 (1992), pp. 101–45.

[14] Peter M. Haas, 'Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination', *International Organization*, 46:1 (1992), pp. 1–35.

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up of natural scientists: they can consist of social scientists of individuals from any discipline or profession who have a sufficiently strong claim to a body of knowledge that is valued by society',[15] the scholarly investigations that employed 'epistemic communities' framework mostly focused on the influence of the scientific elites on political decision-making. Examples include Mediterranean pollution control,[16] protection of stratospheric ozone,[17] nuclear arms control,[18] climate change[19] and AIDS control regimes.[20] The only exception is the relatively recent treatment of diplomatic corps as epistemic communities by Davis-Cross.[21]

According to Haas, professionals should share a minimum of four conditions to qualify as epistemic communities: A set of normative and principled beliefs, causal beliefs, norms of validity (that is, internally defined criteria for validating knowledge) and a common policy enterprise in the form of common practices associated with a set of problems to which the professional competence is directed. Haas acknowledges that the framework, in general, resembles Fleck's 'thought-collective' – a sociological group with a common style of thinking.[22] Religious actors, albeit different in a number of ways from scientific communities, share these preconditions. In terms of their normative and causal beliefs, not to mention their norms of validity, there is a remarkable level of agreement; this is perhaps not surprising, given that they all make reference to the same texts and usually by using widely accepted methods of interpretation. Respect for life, equality, a belief in a transcendent being and the need for a just economic system sensitive to the environment are among many values that most – if not all – religious actors maintain as part of their 'beliefs' which they advocate actively on national and transnational levels. Religious leaders often take part in 'building the normative dimension of a global polity', focusing on 'small, experimental approaches' to social and economic issues.[23]

One might argue that religious knowledge cannot be treated like scientific knowledge, which has been at the centre of the Epistemic Communities approach so far. As Scott Thomas notes in his discussion of the religious groups and epistemic communities, religious knowledge falls under the Weberian ethics-oriented 'value rationality' whereas procedural knowledge (such as scientific knowledge) is within the boundaries of goal-oriented 'formal rationality'.[24] As

[15] Ibid., p. 16.
[16] Peter M. Haas, 'Do Regimes Matter? Epistemic Communities and Mediterranean Pollution Control', *International Organization*, 43:3 (1989), pp. 377–403.
[17] Peter M. Haas, 'Banning Chlorofluorocarbons: Epistemic Community Efforts to Protect Stratospheric Ozone', *International Organization*, 46:1 (1992), pp. 187–224.
[18] Adler, *The Emergence of Cooperation*.
[19] Clair Gough and Simon Shackley, 'The Respectable Politics of Climate Change: The Epistemic Communities and NGOs', *International Affairs*, 77:2 (2002), pp. 329–46.
[20] Jeremy Youde, 'The Development of a Counter-Epistemic Community: AIDS, South Africa, and International Regimes', *International Relations*, 19:4 (2005), pp. 421–39.
[21] Mai'a Davis-Cross, *The European Diplomatic Corps: Diplomats and International Cooperation from Westphalia to Maastricht* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
[22] Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
[23] James Brassett and Richard Higgott, 'Building the Normative Dimensions of a Global Polity', *Review of International Studies*, 29 (2003), pp. 29–55.
[24] Scott Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 108–12; Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 25–6.

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Thomas argues, the debate regarding the knowledge types and their acceptability in the international arena still continues. From a thick constructivist perspective, what counts as 'episteme' at a specific time would be defined by consensus and the extent to which a body of knowledge would be regarded as authoritative. In that framework, what religious leaders preach and the communities forming around these teachings constitute 'islands of epistemic communities', because the audience of these teachings take this type of knowledge seriously, and regulate their public and private lives accordingly. For a significant number of people, religious knowledge has more relevance than scientific knowledge – actually, religious knowledge, at times, has the power to define the borders of science as we have seen with the debates surrounding stem cell research.

In a Foucaultian sense, religion has as much epistemic value as – if not more than – science proper. From that perspective, this article claims that the 'Postmodern' episode would constitute a fourth episteme, after the three epistemes defined in 'Order of Things': The 'Renaissance', the 'Classical' and the 'Modern'.[25] Foucault's epistemes can be defined as the set of time periods that are marked by specific discourses and worldviews. Unlike Kuhnian paradigms, these epistemes do not follow a linear progression but they may have similarities and differences. The 'Renaissance' was marked by the interpretation of 'signs' and the discovery of resemblances; that particular episteme had a very thin line between the science as we understand it today and divination. The 'Classical' episteme focused on identity, difference and measurement; there was an increased value on the man-made taxonomies and analyses with the advancement in technology. In the 'Modern' age, there was an implicit rejection of nature and divine as 'the cause'. Nothing but 'Man' is responsible for knowledge. The 'Modern' episteme, in terms of its premises and its confidence in scientific theories and application, coincides with the strongly secular and materialist political views of the twentieth century. As Foucault notes in various instances, the questions and discourses in each episteme might resemble or borrow from another episteme but they still maintain an internal coherence. With the end of the Cold War and the decline in the states' capacities to respond to emergencies, structural violence or the need of allegiance, there has been a decrease in the unquestioned belief in science and secular forms of governance. This shift led to the recognition of the actors, who could actually come up with 'answers' to the needs of the people. The post-modern episteme, therefore, will be the one that acknowledges the scientific advances but focuses on the human spirituality and how man can relate himself to the outside world without being alienated. The expert communities of that particular 'episteme', therefore, would have to include the faith leaders.

If we go back to the Weberian conception of knowledge, one can even argue that the interpretation of texts and the debates around these interpretations constitute a form of knowledge that is closer to 'formal rationality', which can be expressed in 'numerical and calculable terms'.[26] Obviously, textual interpretation, no matter how rigorously it is conducted, is far from such numerical preciseness.

[25] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: The Archaeology of Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd., 1970).
[26] Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 85.

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However, the fact that there are scholarly debates going on regarding the interpretation of the sacred texts renders the 'absoluteness' of religious precepts (which is a defining component of 'value rationality') open to question.

The key dimension that makes the stance of the religious actors different from the beliefs and values of a layperson is the employment of *exegesis* and *hermeneutics*, which are acquired during an intensive technical education based on common principles and precedents, at least within the framework of a specific religious tradition. Exegesis is the critical interpretation of an authoritative text like Holy Scriptures; hermeneutics refers to the *science* of formulating guidelines, laws and methods for interpreting a text's meaning.[27] This training on exegesis and on the science of hermeneutics is what makes a faith leader credible when it comes to various issues of life. While it is true that one might find 'conflicting' textual evidence and advocate different positions, in many cases it has been possible to have a technical discussion of the context and the message of a sacred text. The existence of conferences, conventions and peer-reviewed journals in the field of theology consolidates the argument that there is a structured expert community that furthers criticisable and refutable knowledge in text analysis, interpretation and application, which brings us closer to the realm of 'formal rationality' in terms of methods and applications.[28] It is true that different religions and even denominations have different curricula when it comes to educating their religious leaders, but this only proves that there are multiple epistemic communities in an issue area, and not one.

Furthermore, what the epistemic communities are seeking and 'marketing' is not expected to be the 'truth', but systematised new perspectives which have the capacity to influence the politics of the time. The theories put forward by the epistemic communities need not be falsifiable; what matters is the formation of new norms and understandings which were informed by domestically developed theoretical expectations that were created by the experts of a specific field. Epistemic communities need to convince key players that the adoption of the proposed framework or ideas would be in the players' best interests. In the end, the key is not 'inventing new concepts but raising them to new heights of public awareness'.[29]

Faith leaders as an epistemic community

In August 2000, more than 1000 representatives of transnational and indigenous religious traditions gathered at the UN for a Millennium Summit of World Religious and Spiritual Leaders, thereby acknowledging the influential role of faith leaders in world politics. What is surprising is not the size or the significance of the

[27] Stanley E. Porter and Kent D. Clarke, 'What is Exegesis? An Analysis of Various Definitions', in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament* (Boston, MA: Brill Publishers, 1997).

[28] Examples include: *The Journal of Theological Studies* (Oxford Journals), *Journal of the Academy of Religion*, *Scottish Journal of Theology* (Cambridge University Press), *Doctrine and Life* (Dominican Publications), *First Things*, *Theology Today* (Princeton Theological Seminary), *Journal of Biblical Studies*.

[29] Adler, *The Emergence of Cooperation*, p. 124.

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gathering but the length of time it has taken to officially recognise their direct (and indirect) influence on politics.

One's religious perspective determines his/her view of the others[30] and religion is a powerful tool for legitimacy, providing a cultural framework that cannot be easily counter-balanced by a reference to any other element of identity.[31] However, citizens generally defer to the authority of experts both in circumstances involving technical dimensions and in 'all sorts of common decisions'.[32] Thus, religious actors become 'heralds', 'advocates', 'observers', 'educators' and 'institution builders' in the political scene in addition to being citizens, public leaders and activists.[33] In short, faith leaders, for the most part, have 'a well-established and pervasive influence in the community, a reputation as a force for change based on a respected set of values, unique leverage for reconciling conflicting parties, including an ability to rehumanize relationships and the capability to mobilize community, national and international support for peace process'.[34] Their professional training, prestige and reputation for expertise – a common trait of epistemic community members in general – in an area such as religion, that is so highly valued by society and consequently by elite decision-makers provide faith leaders with access to the political system and legitimise or authorise the politicians' activities.

Beyond the elite level, the religious congregations also have been shown to be a hub for the formation of political views which cannot be simplified as the aggregation of the members of the group.[35] In terms of conflict transformation, Lederach states that such mid-level and grassroots groupings and consequently the leadership, which can be provided by the clerics, are much more effective than elite-level transformation attempts.[36] This grassroots leadership distinguishes the faith leaders from traditional scientific epistemic communities, who do not usually have direct access to the public. The capability and in a way, obligation of the faith leaders to translate complicated textual interpretations to the everyday language and daily practice adds to the effectiveness of their message when it comes to the higher echelons in policymaking. The message and expectations that are locally created are conveyed to policymakers in the form of public announcements or individual meetings. The members of the political elite follow the strategies

[30] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (NY: Basic Books, 1973); Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, 'Of Churches, Sects, and Cults: Preliminary Concepts for a Theory of Religious Movements', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 18 (1979), pp. 117–33.

[31] Clifford Geertz, 'Centers, Kings and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power', in Joseph Ben-David and Terry N. Clark (eds), *Culture and Its Creators* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1977), p. 267; Nikos Kokoslakis, 'Legitimation, Power and Religion in Modern Society', *Sociological Analysis*, 46:4 (1985), pp. 367–76, 371.

[32] Douglas N. Walton, *Appeal to Expert Opinion: Arguments from Authority* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p. 24.

[33] David Little and Scott Appleby, 'A Moment of Opportunity?', in Harold Coward and Gordon S. Smith (eds), *Religion and Peacebuilding* (NY: SUNY Press, 2004); Timothy A. Byrnes *Catholic Bishops in American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Allen D. Hertzke, *Representing God in Washington: The Role of Religious Lobbies in the American Polity* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1988).

[34] Johnston and Cox, *Faith-based Diplomacy*, p. 14.

[35] Christopher P. Gilbert, *The Impact of Churches on Political Behavior: An Empirical Study* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993); Ted Jelen, 'Political Christianity: A Contextual Analysis', *American Journal of Political Science*, 36 (1992), pp. 692–714.

[36] John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 1997), p. 50.

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recommended by local experts (in our case, faith leaders) when it best suits their political prospects, promoting the 'knowledge' at their disposal to other actors in international settings.

Religious leaders, like other epistemic communities, have their shared normative and principled beliefs. Among these beliefs are a conviction of the equality and dignity of all human beings; upholding the sacredness of the individual person and his/her conscience; defending the value of the human community; arguing the might is not right, and that human power is neither self-sufficient nor absolute; espousing compassion, unselfishness; arguing that the force of inner truthfulness and the spirit are more powerful than hate, enmity and self interest and standing with the poor and the oppressed against the rich and the oppressors.[37] The strongest disagreements among the religious leaders do not stem from the rejection of any of these principles, but from certain 'exceptions' such as the admissibility of harming another in self-defence, which could (or not) be allowed under certain circumstances.

Although many religions share a number of core principles, their specific rituals or practices might drastically differ. By itself, this is not an obstacle to the achievement of common ends. These traditions, embodied as groups or states, may form purposive associations, defined as relationships among those who cooperate for the purpose of securing certain shared beliefs, values and interests, who adapt certain practices as a means to that end, and who regard such practices as worthy of respect only to the extent that they are useful instruments of the common purpose.[38] An observant Protestant, for example, might have more in common with an observant Catholic, than a Protestant who does not live up to the tenets of his/her religion.[39]

The claim of this article is that the process by which faith communities, including the religious leaders and the theologians, influence political decision-making in divided societies can be investigated by employing these traditional epistemic communities variables. The cases of Northern Ireland and South Africa explored in this article show that epistemic communities of religion made an impact on conflict transformation and policy change by forming a network that changed exclusive public theologies to inclusive ones that would assist a major political transformation. For the purposes of this article, public theology can be defined as the reflection and implications of a religion in the activities that take place in the common space, including political and social life.[40] It is not necessarily what is literally stated in the relevant scriptures; it includes human interpretation of what is relevant and to what extent particular religious premises can be experienced in the public arena.

[37] Kyoto Conference Proceedings (1973).

[38] Terry Nardin, *Law, Morality, and the Relations of States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[39] Although this phenomenon is not investigated in this article, it is plausible to state that there are 'religious communities' which define their identities primarily against 'non-believers' as opposed to believers in other traditions. This kind of 'othering' might make cross-traditional understanding easier, but has also the potential to cause conflicts between the Westphalian state and the religious segments of societies.

[40] See Nukhet A. Sandal, 'Clash of Public Theologies? Rethinking the Concept of Religion in Politics', forthcoming in *Alternatives*.

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The article argues that the transition from exclusive to inclusive public theologies in both cases was made possible by the religious epistemic communities, and this transition significantly contributed to the atmosphere that led to stabilising political arrangements, the abolition of Apartheid and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement respectively. Epistemic Communities are 'a vehicle for the development of insightful theoretical premises about the creation of collective interpretation and choice' and is 'methodologically pluralistic'.[41] Given the character and the formation process of public theologies as well as the voluntary nature of the religious affiliations and practice, faith-related debates and processes call for such a vehicle.

Towards a theology of racial equality: the case of South Africa

Apartheid, literally meaning 'separateness' in the Afrikaans language, refers to the philosophy and the legal structure of racial segregation enforced mainly between 1948 and 1990 in South Africa. During the first years of Apartheid, a number of explicitly racist laws were enacted to ensure white dominance over the black population. The Population Registration Act of 1950 classified individuals into 'white', 'colored' or 'African'; the Group Areas Act of 1950, recommended by a Dutch Reformed missionary conference, created separate areas for different racial groups.[42] The intermarriage of Europeans and Non-Europeans was prohibited by a separate act in 1949.

The segregationist policies were, if not directly caused by, inspired and consolidated by the policies of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), which was the country's established church and had a prior record of vigorously pursuing segregationist policies. In 1857, for example, it was a synod of DRC that had introduced separate services along racial lines and this policy had been represented as 'the will of God' by using various textual references from the Bible pointing to the differences among people.[43] In 1942, the Federal Mission Council was formed by a number of DRC members to implement policies of segregation in public areas.[44] Almost all these racist policies were legitimated by references to the sacred texts and stories, thereby making their 'marketing' to the public much easier than secular ideologies. The tower of Babel story (Genesis 11:1–9) became a 'cardinal tenet of Apartheid theology'[45] – it was normal for people to be treated differently because they *were* different and the difference in treatment was the divine will. Apartheid quickly became the prevalent mode of life in South Africa, unquestioned by the majority of domestic institutions.

The type of theology created by the mainstream religious actors helped shaping the public attitude of the Afrikaners. Given that 90 per cent of the Afrikaan

[41] Emanuel Adler and Peter Haas, 'Conclusion: Epistemic Communities, World Order and the Creation of a Reflective Research Program', *International Organization*, 46:1 (1992), pp. 367–90, 368.
[42] John W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 32.
[43] Willie Esterhuyse, *Apartheid Must Die* (Cape Town: Tafelberg Publishers, 1981), pp. 34–5.
[44] Colleen Ryan, *Beyers Naude: Pilgrimage of Faith* (Claremont, S. Africa: David Philip Publishers, 1990), p. 34.
[45] See Johnston, *The Churches and Apartheid.*

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speakers had a church affiliation and 70 per cent were affiliated to DRC in the 1980s,[46] the population and the politicians were, at the very least, encouraged by the theological justification to perpetuate this institutional cycle of overt racism.

In response to the racist policies of the South African government, 'black theology', as an alternative public theology to the dominant segregationist one, and represented mainly by figures like Bishop Manas Buthelezi, Desmond Tutu, Alan Boesak, Barney Pityana and Zephania Kameeta, gained ground among the oppressed people of South Africa, by reframing Apartheid and redefining the interests of the people of South Africa. Black theology is a version of liberation theology[47] with references to Brazilian educator and author, Paulo Freire. It emphasises the need for inclusion of the poor and the marginalised to the society as well as the centrality of justice in the Gospel. Unlike DRC and Afrikaner Nationalism, black theology did not attach itself to any brand of nationalism. It defended self-awareness and equality, making it a form of inclusive public theology and easier for the international actors to support it.[48] The Dutch Reformed Mission Church under Allan Boesak, who, with the support of Afrikaner religious leaders like Beyers Naude, challenged the common wisdom of the time by referring to the same sources as their opponents, but from a radically different, inclusive angle which was more acceptable to the world community of experts – religious leaders and theologians in our case – in that specific area. In 1963, the Afrikaner cleric Beyers Naude who did not agree with the exclusive local theology of DRC, founded the Christian Institute of Southern Africa, an ecumenical organisation working for interracial dialogue.[49]

The creation of such inclusive and exclusive theologies in the public realm is an important facet of 'the ambivalence of the sacred'.[50] Epistemic communities of religious actors do not always produce and spread inclusive and peaceful interpretations. However, unlike inclusive public theologies, which receive considerable support from the fellow members of the expert communities from outside, exclusive/violent public theologies that focus on narrower segments of laity receive limited official support from the international community of faith leaders, so they have a weaker epistemic validity. Therefore, whereas there are a number of exclusive/violent and local public theologies some of which have worldwide impact, they tend to remain relatively isolated. More inclusive public theologies might not have the same immediate popularity in local settings due to the absence of a primordial 'other' category but they enjoy a gradually built support mechanism that facilitates the transmission of their message to political leaders and the subsequent operationalisation of that message.

[46] Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen, 'Christianity's Impact on Race Relations in South Africa', in Martin Prozesky (ed.), *Christianity Amidst Apartheid* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

[47] Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987); Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

[48] Allan Boesak, *The Politics of Hope or The Politics of Delusion*, The Ashley Kriel Memorial Lecture, 30 July 2008; J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Westminster: John Knox, 2005).

[49] Despite the employment of theology and religious credentials in the process, the counter-Apartheid epistemic community in South Africa cannot be equated with the profession of priesthood. The religious epistemic communities in general may include academics, religion based NGOs and even educated members of congregations who participate actively in the creation of public theologies.

[50] Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

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Although the DRC policies and its theology contributed significantly to the racist structure of Apartheid, it is crucial to recognise the oppositional religious voices and the early roots of an inclusive public theology from the very beginning. In theoretical terms, the approach to Apartheid and the treatment of different races, therefore, can be seen as the 'units of variation' in the epistemic communities jargon and one can distinguish an ongoing theological debate, even during the Apartheid period. In 1949, for example, Rosettenville ecumenical conference, the English-speaking member churches opposed Apartheid on a declaratory level. In 1960, the World Council of Churches (WCC), which is the broadest umbrella organisation for the ecumenical movement, sponsored the first conference that protested Apartheid. The members came up with 17 resolutions emphasising the biblical passages on equality and human rights, thus challenging the truth claims of the churches promoting separation. Not surprisingly, DRC, in an attempt to separate itself from this inclusive line of interpretation, withdrew its membership from WCC.

Eight years later, the South African Council of Churches (SACC), the national ecumenical coordinator of the inter-church communication, issued the 'Message to the People of South Africa', signed by 600 ministers and 27 churches. This statement was regarded as the strongest religious denunciation of Apartheid that had ever been issued.[51] In the same year, at its Fourth Assembly, WCC initiated the *Program to Combat Racism* (PCR), which translated the condemnations into practical action. Under the PCR initiative, WCC started a special grant programme to combat racism, from which racially oppressed groups and organisations representing these groups were going to be funded. The fund was supplied not only by voluntary contributions from churches but also from local ecumenical and support groups all over the world.

The most serious epistemic challenge to the political system and the dominant theology supporting Apartheid came in the early 1980s. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), which has a membership of 214 churches representing 75 million Christians, made the following statement, again backed by numerous scriptural references: 'Apartheid is a sin, and [. . .] the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the Gospel and, in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy'.[52] Framing Apartheid as a 'sin' and 'theological heresy' challenged the mainstream South African churches either to take a stronger stand and come up with a counter-framing or to step down and accept this alternative formulation. The same year, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, which had a membership of black and white South Africans and was a parallel church to DRC, came up with the Belhar Confession, in which it joined WARC, declaring Apartheid a 'heresy'. This chain of framing showed that the international membership structure of the Reformed Churches affected the local politics and public theologies, which, in turn, helped transform the attitude towards racist ideologies. As we can witness in this case, international epistemic communities of religion has the capacity to influence the local ones by coming up

[51] South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: 1960–1970* (2004), p. 679.

[52] Statement quoted in John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds), *Apartheid is a Heresy* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983).

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with alternative interpretations of the very same religious sources. However, it is usually the latter which can challenge and change the local political practices.

In 1985, South African President P. W. Botha declared a state of emergency, which would be a justification for detention without trial and other extreme measures during a time of growing dissent. The tensions under these extraordinary circumstances gave way to an important document of protest, *Kairos*, drafted by 153 black South African church leaders and theologians. The *Kairos* document, with its ambitious claim that the state theology and the church theology were in collusion and therefore people should actively resist, became the cornerstone of the ensuing civil disobedience doctrine. Embodying this strategy, Desmond Tutu was named Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town and he kept championing the movement as the leader of SACC. SACC made it possible for the individual churches in South Africa to come against the established segregationist policies under a united front, without drawing attention to individual parishioners who were not ready to come under close scrutiny.

Tutu's active diplomacy raised the issue to a higher level of awareness, drawing other theologians' and politicians' attention to the domestic disturbances in South Africa. The World Council of Churches issued the Harare Declaration in December 1985. The declaration went beyond a simple condemnation by inviting all members to put immediate sanctions against South Africa. The protests were not confined to the religious sphere; even the US President, Ronald Reagan, under the pressure of changing norms of the international system, signed an order imposing financial sanctions against South Africa.[53] Obviously not all political protests and condemnations can be tied to the Harare Declaration. However, it is reasonable to state that the declaration along with the theological epistemic consensus on an international level, made it difficult for the political leaders to justify silence.

DRC, after coming under the pressure of the other religious actors as well as political ones, joined the religious epistemic community condemning racial segregation and changed its 'public theology' from exclusive to inclusive. 'Church and Society', the document issued by DRC in 1986, acknowledged that despite the good intentions of the Church, supporting Apartheid was a 'mistake':[54]

> The Dutch Reformed Church is convinced that the application of Apartheid as a political and social system by which human dignity is adversely affected, and whereby one particular group is detrimentally suppressed by another, cannot be accepted on Christian-ethical grounds because it contravenes the very essence of neighbourly love and righteousness and inevitably the human dignity of all involved.

As a result of the international political and religious pressure and the U-turn in the public theology of DRC, the domestic political outlook started to change. The general public became more attentive to the voices of moderation which won a theological debate. Political change followed the change in public theology. In September 1989, Frederik Willem de Klerk, the leader of the National Party whose motto was 'Fairness, Firmness, Peace' came to power. As soon as he came to

[53] Audie Klotz, 'Norms Reconstituting Interests: Global Racial Equality and US Sanctions Against South Africa', *International Organization*, 49:3 (1995), pp. 451–78.

[54] Quoted in Johann Kinghorn, 'On the theology of Church and Society in the DRC', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 70 (1990), pp. 21–36, 22.

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power, de Klerk ordered the release of prominent political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela, lifted the state of emergency that was declared in 1985 and repealed all Apartheid laws.

The relevance of and the frequent references to the South African experience in other divided societies[55] show how the attitudes and the institutions partly shaped by peaceful public theologies can enter other conflict settings like Northern Ireland. The South Africa example, in the context of Northern Ireland, suggests that 'oppositional groups might obtain more from peace processes than their governmental antagonists had anticipated'.[56] In fact, the African National Congress played an advisory role in the Irish peace process and at one point, President Nelson Mandela chaired discussions in South Africa between Republican and Loyalist leaders of Northern Ireland.[57] Furthermore, a year before the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, thousands of Presbyterian pastors, along with prominent South African faith leaders, gathered in Belfast, to make a public recommitment to peacemaking between Protestants and Catholics – many of these leaders were actively involved in reconciliation projects in one way or the other.[58] Although the extent of the influence of such connections on the Good Friday Agreement is debatable, the South African experience diffused to the Northern Irish religio-political scene by virtue of these public initiatives and communications.

The South African experience also shows how individual faith leaders, by attending international meetings, connecting the transnational to the local and voicing their concerns can start the process of theological innovation. This case also demonstrates that there are indeed shared norms of validity which force the religious leaders representing exclusive public theologies to either come up with an equally valid political argumentation or to adopt the theology which meets the interpretative criteria.

It is not surprising that the local churches (in this case, the Dutch Reformed Church), usually the loci of the dominant public theology, are not always the instigators of change and innovation. When investigating the mechanisms of influence of the epistemic communities of faith, it is therefore important to recognise that although given legitimacy by their institutional position, religious leaders, especially during the incipient stages, can behave independently of the institutional centre and even challenge the existing policies of the institution. Those religious leaders can use alternative institutional bases, such as SACC and the Christian Institute of Southern Africa, which provide them with a safe platform to further theological discussions on sensitive issues. However, unless the religious institution at the core, like DRC in the South African case, recognises the legitimacy of this challenge and changes its public theology, a non-violent political transition from 'divided' to 'united' is very unlikely, if not altogether impossible.

[55] Rachel Monaghan, 'Community Based Justice in Northern Ireland and South Africa', *International Community Justice Review*, 18:1 (2008), pp. 83–105; Mark Amstutz, *The Healing of Nations: The Promise and Limits of Political Forgiveness* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*.

[56] Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (London: Macmillan, 2006), pp. 410–11.

[57] See Tom Hayden, 'Northern Ireland, South Africa in Secret Peace Talks', *The Nation* (28 September 2007).

[58] Timothy Morgan and Mary Cagney, 'Northern Ireland: For God or Ulster?', *Christianity Today* (5 October 1997).

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Theologies of interdenominational reconciliation: the case of Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, two of the major traditions of Christianity view themselves as 'opposing religions' rather than variations of a single tradition.[59] The Protestant-Catholic dichotomy has been accepted as the equivalent of an ethnic divide.[60] The division goes back to the early 17th century Ulster plantations, during which Protestant colonists from Scotland and England were given ownership of Ulster and control over the local Gaelic and Catholic population. The Protestant population has traditionally wanted to keep the union with Britain whereas the Gaelic population has striven for autonomy. This dichotomy became especially problematic and securitised starting in the late 1960s, with high levels of violence continuing until the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

The Troubles Period, as it is called by some circles, began with the civil rights marches of the Catholics, which were countered by the heavy-handed tactics of the mainly Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary. The Irish Republican Army (IRA), which had the stated aim of defending the Catholic minority, became active again after a period of internal division of opinion in regards to the effectiveness of violence.[61] As a result of the inner conflicts over the tactics to be pursued, the more militant 'Provisional' IRA (PIRA) later broke away from the 'Official' IRA. Like the Official IRA, PIRA supported civil rights, the defence of the Catholic community and the unification of Ireland. Its distinguishing feature was that its members were prepared to go for unification in defiance of Britain and would use force to achieve their goals.[62] As a response to the rising violence, loyalist paramilitaries also organised their own structures under the umbrellas of the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defence Association.

Beyond representing the markers of ethnic identity, the churches were not active participants in the conflict, unlike in the South African case. In 1970, leaders of the four main Churches in Northern Ireland (Presbyterian, Methodist, Church of Ireland, and Roman Catholic) came up with a joint statement stating that religion was not a cause or component of the conflict,[63] rather than taking a strong stand against or in favour of a deeper interaction with the 'other' community. A possible reason for this detachment was hesitation over becoming involved in political conflict, not to mention the responsibility such an involvement would place on the churches.

The majority of the clergy and the local churches were initially unwilling to engage in interdenominational and ecumenical activities. The pastors, due to reasons of credibility and reputation and in the absence of active institutional support from the higher authorities, did not want to lose their parishioners in a religiously *competitive* environment.[64] In other words, the religious leaders were

[59] Máiréad N. Craith, *Culture and Identity Politics in Northern Ireland* (NY: Palgrave, 2003), p. 120.
[60] See John D. Brewer, 'Sectarianism and Racism, and Their Parallels and Differences', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 15:3 (1992), pp. 352–64.
[61] J. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army: The IRA* (Edison, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), p. 340.
[62] English, *Irish Freedom*, pp. 368–82.
[63] Oliver Rafferty, *Catholicism in Ulster 1603–1983: An Interpretative History* (London: Hurst Publications, 1994), p. 270.
[64] Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Rachel McCleary and Robert Barro, 'Religion and Economy', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 20:2 (2006), pp. 49–72;

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initially hesitant to come up with an inclusive public theology that could potentially compromise the coherence of their respective traditions. Segregated education and the encouragement of endogamy further enabled the absence of contact between the members of the two Christian traditions.[65] However, active parties to the conflict attacked this neutral stand, claiming that the religious leaders must play a part in realising the political ambitions of 'their people'. Consequently, the churches became an unwilling party in the conflict, even before they themselves recognised it.

The active involvement of Rev. Ian Paisley, the leader of the Free Presbyterian Church, in politics by establishing the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in 1971, complicated the picture by blurring the line between religion and politics even further. Paisley set up his own media outlet, the *Protestant Telegraph*, which became known for its strong anti-Catholic stance. He also published a number of books and pamphlets on religion and politics to further his exclusive theology, denouncing the Catholic Church and the Pope. He managed to blend the 'vertical' and 'agentic' theologies of evangelical Protestantism[66] with the broader questions of the conflict in Northern Ireland. By virtue of its reference to and interpretation of the Scripture, Paisley can be seen as leading a counter-epistemic community, which favoured an exclusive portrayal of the Protestant identity. Similar to the South Africa case, there was not only one theology or one religious epistemic community around the conflict in Northern Ireland. The systematic production of knowledge in terms of interpretation of the sacred texts is not confined to the members favouring an inclusive theology. However, although by virtue of his interpretation and his direct political outlet he influenced the Northern Irish politics to a significant extent, the recognition and the mechanisms of this knowledge production is not as clear as the faith leaders of the four main churches. The fact that Paisley had his own political party, and his limited influence on the decisions of other politicians, raised doubts about his groups' qualification as an epistemic community. Regardless, the Free Presbyterians constituted an important challenge for the pro-reconciliation epistemic community of faith leaders in Northern Ireland.

With the mainstream churches struggling to remain aloof, DUP carrying the Protestant fundamentalist banner and the remaining political parties' rejection of the possible religious causes of the conflict, the contribution of the religion to a positive conflict transformation was made almost impossible, at least for a long while. Finally, in 1976, with the increasing levels of deadly violence, 'Violence in Ireland', a report of self-criticism of the churches for their implicit role in the increasing bitterness, was published by the Irish Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church Joint Group on Social Questions. The signs of an inclusive theology in Northern Ireland came as a response not only to increasing levels of violence but also to Paisley's exclusive theology. As indicated in Brewer's typology of grassroots peacemaking, ecumenical activity – including church-to-church, clergy-to-clergy groups, ecumenical organisations, public events and joint declarations of belief and commitment – is regarded as an important dimension of

Laurence Iannaccone, 'Voodoo Economics? Reviewing the Rational Choice Approach to Religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34:1 (1995), pp. 76–89.

[65] John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

[66] Jelen, *The Political World of the Clergy*.

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the cross-community peacemaking. Brewer counts churches and religious groups as actors also in mediation, cross-community activities, self-identified peace initiatives, anti-sectarianism and in initiatives dealing with the problems of post-violence.[67] The range of activities religious leaders took part in was much wider than the South African case, where debates mostly took place on an official level and with significant international ramifications.

The churches remained cautious in terms of lending full support to the religious leaders who took part in ambitious initiatives, such as direct interaction with the 'other'. The inclusive public theology was therefore more driven by the like-minded faith leaders than the institutions. However, the conflict period witnessed an introspection in all mainstream Churches as part of an epistemic transformation. For example, the Protestant churches felt a need to revise their long held doctrines after the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1962) under Pope John XXIII affirmed that an individual can be saved regardless of his or her religious status. Given that 'theological Protestantism and anti-Catholicism can lay claim to a longer unbroken historical pedigree in Ulster than any other still-existent ideological rival',[68] it was especially challenging for the Protestant faith leaders to eradicate hostilities without compromising their own religious identity. Nevertheless, the Church of Ireland (1986) under General Synod encouraged increased community and personal relationships between members of all Christian traditions. In a similar vein, the 1987 Methodist Conference officially concluded with invitations to joint prayers and study, and unity in Christ.

The boldest attempt at doctrinal revision came from the Presbyterian Church in the 1988 General Assembly. The Assembly challenged the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) which regarded the Pope as 'the Antichrist, the man of Sin and the son of damnation'. Delegates decided that this interpretation was not manifestly evident in the Scripture. John Dunlop, a former Moderator of the Irish Presbyterian Church, in a later speech, recognised the importance of the Second Vatican Council on later ecumenical relations (1993):

> Since God cannot be privatised to only one of our two communities, or to the European Community of which our two countries are members, the challenge is to listen and speak across the frontiers and not to become the private chaplains of only one community. This has become easier since the end of Vatican II when the people in the churches are frequently now in frank discussion with one another.

The theological discussions stated above, which were held on a highly technical level, satisfied an important prerequisite of transition to a peaceful and inclusive theology, in a way similar to the Kairos document and the subsequent revision of the Apartheid doctrine by DRC in the South Africa case. The changes and the declarations made continued to be debated, but even the mere existence of these debates proved that the denominational lines did not definitively create exclusive identities. The changing nature of the institutional interpretations of the 'other' constitutes further evidence to the epistemologically evolving character of the religious communities.

[67] John D. Brewer, *C. Wright Mills and the Ending of Violence* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 75.

[68] Duncan Morrow, 'Suffering for righteousness sake? Fundamentalist Protestantism and Ulster Politics', in Peter Shirlow and Mark McGovern (eds), *Who are "the people"?: Unionism, Protestantism and Loyalism in Northern Ireland* (London: Pluto Press), pp. 55–71, 55.

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Despite the relatively late acknowledgement of the Churches' roles and responsibilities in the conflict, individual efforts, which later led the Churches to reconsider their position, had started as early as 1974. For example, the famous Feakle Talks, held between Protestant church representatives and IRA, helped to bring about an IRA ceasefire. These early efforts continued later. In 1987, Fr. Alex Reid and Fr. Gerry Reynolds facilitated a truce between the Irish National Liberation Army and the Irish People's Liberation Organization. Rev. Roy Magee, a prominent Presbyterian minister, was influential in the process of the Combined Loyalist Military Command ceasefire, and later in the unilateral ceasefire by main loyalist paramilitary organisations in 1994. These individual efforts and many similar others by religious leaders, embodied a change – even if symbolically – of a non-inclusive public theology.

It was another Presbyterian Minister, Ray Davey, who founded Corrymeela Centre for Reconciliation in 1965, which provided the safe space for the Protestants and the Catholics to engage in dialogue and focused on the Christ's forgiveness of his enemies as a model.[69] As soon as it was established, Corrymeela became a platform for producing and spreading peaceful and inclusive public theology backed by textual evidence from the Scripture.[70] Similar reconciliation groups, like Cornerstone Community in West Belfast, Christian Renewal Center and the Columba House, were established to transform the attitudes and perceptions of the people. Very much like Beyers Naude's anti-apartheid Christian Institute of Southern Africa, these centres provided the inclusive discourse with institutional bases and facilitated the epistemic discussions of scripture among the members of pro-peace religious community.

In terms of mediation and provision of safe space, the individual contributions made by clergy to the conflict transformation set examples that are to be followed by the faith leaders in other religious conflicts.[71] The churches, despite remaining silent in the beginning of the conflict and sticking to non-inclusivist – if not completely exclusivist – pastoral duties, played a key role in mediation by focusing on the inclusion of all parties to a final agreement. As Power argues, from 1980s onwards, the churches shifted from what was mostly a theological discussion to addressing 'the issues of identity and communal relations from a Christian perspective'.[72] For example, The Fitzroy-Clonard Fellowship (between the Fitzroy Presbyterian Church and Clonard Catholic Monastery), which started as an inter-church Bible study group in 1981, did not shy away from encouraging the members to recognise the 'other' as a fellow Christian, to visit him in his hospital bed and to participate in the 'other''s weddings and funerals.[73] The Catholic Church provided a safe space for the dialogue between Sinn Féin and Social Democratic Labour Party, both having nationalist constituencies, in the early stages of the peace process.[74]

[69] Alf McCreary, *In War and Peace: The Story of Corrymeela* (Belfast: The Brehan Press Ltd., 2007).
[70] David Stevens, *The Place Called Reconciliation: Texts to Explore* (Belfast: The Corrymeela Press, 2008).
[71] Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*.
[72] Maria Power, *From Ecumenism to Community Relations: Inter-Church Relationships in Northern Ireland 1980–2005* (Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2007), pp. 198–9.
[73] Ronald A. Wells, *Friendship Towards Peace: The Journey of Ken Newell and Gerry Reynolds* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2005).
[74] Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London: Allan Lane, 2002).

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It was primarily the individual faith leaders who constituted the pro-interdenominational reconciliation epistemic community. The Feakle talks mentioned above, for example, proved that the Protestant clergy were respected and trusted enough that the Irish Republican leadership were willing to meet with them. The statements by the clerics in favour of inclusion of all parties to a political arrangement, the renunciation of violence and ambitious Catholic-Protestant encounters (with both paramilitaries and politicians) facilitated by the clergy on both sides gradually changed the political atmosphere to which the extreme factions that had been rejecting the legitimacy of the other would sit together and have a joint voice on the future of Northern Ireland. Although Power argues that 'a new form of interaction between the churches in local areas began to occur because of political events rather than in spite of them', she also maintains that ecumenical relations that were conducted among individual religious leaders contributed to the change, and the change was caused by the growing realisation of 'biblical imperative for Christian reconciliation'.[75] In other words, the Churches waited for the positive changes in the political climate to take a public stance, but an epistemic community of religious leaders, who put forward the biblical imperative for reconciliation and worked in spite of the lack of institutional support, contributed to the change in political discourse and the introduction of ceasefires and political initiatives.

Similar to the South African case, the religious figures in Northern Ireland who contributed to the creation of this inclusivist theology and political perspective, knew each other well; they met regularly, made public appearances and shared the expectations that set them apart from those experts who defended the perpetuation of the exclusivist public theologies. As mentioned above, individually and to a lesser extent, institutionally, they formed an epistemic community which produced new interpretations and knowledge structures in their field. These new interpretations contributed to changing political perspectives. Although one can see the influence of an international community of religious leaders (such as WCC) in the South Africa case, the ambitious theological steps and initiatives were taken by local faith leaders in Northern Ireland, which partly translated to the institutional adaptations later.

Ian Paisley and other senior figures of DUP had an official meeting with senior Catholic clergy at Stormont in 2006, led by Archbishop Sean Brady. This encounter would have been unimaginable only a decade before.[76] An even more dramatic change came with the subsequent transformation of DUP policies. DUP started sharing power with Sinn Féin starting in May 2007. Ganiel states that the public discourses of the traditional evangelical activists, including DUP members, shifted towards 'moral' issues in recent years, such as homosexuality and abortion, when these activists – once supporting exclusive theologies – noticed that the Calvinist ideology of church and state was not applicable to the context of Northern Ireland.[77] The mainstream Churches and the initiatives of the individual faith leaders played a significant role in conveying this message both implicitly and

[75] Power, *From Ecumenism*, pp. 101, 200.
[76] McCreary, *In War and Peace*, p. 241.
[77] Gladys Ganiel, 'Ulster Says Maybe: The Restructuring of Evangelical Politics in Northern Ireland', *Irish Political Studies*, 21:2 (2006), pp. 137–55.

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explicitly to the creators of exclusive public theologies, creating a 'competition' by providing and embodying an alternative, inclusive and peaceful public theology.

The change in the official theologies of the mainstream churches, the rise of an alternative Christian civil society that supports ecumenical relations and the individual attempts of the religious leaders to bring together the parties that were not accessible before, rendered the political atmosphere more conducive to a stabilising political arrangement. The signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, with its clauses regarding the release of the political prisoners, the establishment of a power-sharing executive and the process of decommissioning, marked the beginning of a new period in Northern Ireland that continued with the power-sharing of DUP and Sinn Féin, two parties that had been at the opposite extremes of the political scale. The agreement was welcomed by the majority of the Northern Ireland electorate. With the end of the decade's long conflict, Northern Ireland established itself as an exemplary case for other divided societies. For example, in 2007, the Sunni and Shi'a leaders of Iraq started a potential peace process drawing on the experience of political and religious leaders from Northern Ireland and South Africa.[78]

Conclusion

How faith leaders can affect policies and what kind of roles they play in conflict resolution are and will remain important questions in the years to come. Given the centrality of religion in individuals' lives, the direct involvement of the clergy in politics and the legitimacy religious actors bestow upon the political leaders, it is crucial for scholars to devise frameworks that can account for the mechanisms behind the political cycles in conflict transformation and also the reasons for differences among various traditions, denominations and even individuals.

There are several advantages of the Epistemic Communities approach to the study of religious actors. It increases the sensitivity to local and cultural factors as well as identity construction and perpetuation, leading to a greater understanding of the evolution of a new international political order. In addition, it draws critical attention to the impact of sacred texts, practices and interpretation on national and international practices, most notably to the effect of theological interpretations on conflict resolution.

In terms of the institutional structure of the Christian churches, the theological considerations of faith leaders and the role of religion in individuals' lives, the Epistemic Communities approach as proposed here, differs from the one that has been employed to account for the scientists' influence on politics. Despite the differences, however, it is one of the most suitable perspectives since it recognises both national and international dimensions of the influence of the religious networks as well as the importance of a shared knowledge and technical aspects of the public theology. The epistemic communities in both cases consisted of experts in theology who met regularly, shared theoretical and practical ideas and were confident in their capability to use their theological knowledge to change the understandings that created the conflict.

[78] Tom Hayden, 'Northern Ireland'.

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The cases briefly investigated in this article show that changes in the dominant public theologies of the mainstream religious institutions contribute to the establishment of stabilising political arrangements. In South Africa, DRC, which was initially one of the key supporters of the Apartheid regime, later changed its standing completely and recognised the validity of an inclusive public theology based on racial equality. This became possible only after decades – long interaction among international religious platforms and other local religious institutions. In Northern Ireland, four main churches initially did not want to get involved in an intensifying conflict and they were even accused of perpetuating the division between the Protestant and Catholic communities. However, similar to the South African case, the ambitious initiatives of the individual religious leaders were accompanied by a later change in the institutional perspectives. The 1980s witnessed an introspection of the institutional perspectives of the churches and an increased level of ecumenical activities in Northern Ireland, which later reflected its inclusive character in political arrangements. In both cases, religious actors played the role of epistemic communities by producing new and systematised theological perspectives that influenced the politics of conflict.

The next step for scholars of International Relations interested in theorising the processes of conflict and the involvement of religious actors in politics, is to look at the cases which involve faith leaders from different traditions, comparing the epistemological approaches and the levels of activism. For example, do faith leaders in Islam, which is a religious tradition that has radically different hierarchical structures from Christianity, play similar roles in their societies, say in Iraq, Iran or India? Can individual religious leaders come up with innovative interpretations of a text, challenge dominant, violent and local theologies, and get support from the international community of Islamic scholars, similar to the way we have seen in the South African and Northern Irish cases? The same question is worth asking for other faith traditions, like Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism. It is crucial to analyse the details of the mechanism by which expert communities of different religions affect policymakers under varying conditions. This article looked at intra-church (South Africa) and interdenominational (Northern Ireland) issues in Christianity. In a similar vein, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether the leaders of two different religious traditions, like Islam and Judaism as practised by Palestinians and Israelis, can make up one epistemic community and influence policymakers in the area of conflict transformation.

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