Introduction
Since the early 1990s, there is a growing debate on the rise of religious fundamentalism and militancy. Global opinion surveys, like the Pew Global Attitudes Project, have indicated recently that religion is regarded more and more as an important aspect in international relations. South Asia seems to offer a perfect laboratory to evaluate the complex connections between religion, state and conflict. The region offers a broad variety of western political institutions and indigenous religious traditions that have entered into multiple relationships. This makes it possible to evaluate the impact of religion not only on the national level but on the international level as well.

At first sight, the constellations in South Asia seem to confirm Samuel Huntington's assumptions on the 'clash of civilisations'. The violent separation of British-India on the basis of religion, the rise of communal riots of militant Hindu groups against Muslims and Christians in India, the increase of sectarian violence among Islamic groups as well as the raids against Christians in Pakistan, and the attacks of militant Islamic groups in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) seem to confirm the permanent confrontation between religious communities. The list could be complemented with
further examples from the militant agitation of Sikhs in India and radical Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka. Besides the increasing activities of militant religious groups, there is also a growing importance of religious parties in the region. This is underlined by the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India that became the single strongest party and headed a coalition government after 1998, the electoral success of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in Pakistan in 2002, the new strength of the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) in Bangladesh as well as the electoral success of the Buddhist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) in Sri Lanka in the 2004 election.

The first misunderstanding of this kind of argument is that Huntington’s concept of civilisation aimed at the international not at the national level. His classification of the globe along civilisational lines created an international system consisting out of seven or eight major blocs depending on the number of civilisations. It has often been mentioned that such an analysis was not valid for the international level and did not offer new insights for domestic developments.

Separating the national and international levels, therefore, reveals a more differentiated picture for the analysis. On the national level, the challenges of the national question and the process of nation-building have always been a major source of conflict. But looking at the close linkages of religious ideas and cultural traditions, it is astonishing to see that religion has not dominated domestic political controversies as expected. Therefore, the argument can be made that religion was not the main line of conflict but had to cope with other forms of linguistic, regional, ethnic and class identities that often turned out to be more appealing. Internationally, the bilateral relations in the subcontinent offer a similar picture. For most of the time, the foreign policies of the respective governments were
shaped by political, security and economic objectives rather than by religious considerations.

In order to underline the argument, the paper will analyse the complex relationship between religion, state and conflict in South Asia on the national and the international level. On the domestic level, the different strategies of using religion in the process of nation-building will be compared to answer the question whether religion has increased legitimacy and stability of political regimes or not. On the international level, the focus will be on the impact of religion on the foreign policies mainly between India and Pakistan. Religions in the subcontinent mostly have fluid boundaries and long traditions of peaceful interaction and synthesis among each other. Because of the lack of comparable empirical data, the paper focuses on the institutional impact and the political consequences of religion not on the individual understanding of religious belief systems. This makes it possible to regard religion as a political factor if there are constitutional provisions or if political parties pursue a religious agenda.

The Domestic Level: Nation-building, Legitimacy, Mobilisation

On the national level, at least two functions of religion can be differentiated. First, religion was regarded as one of the main common cultural denominators to form the basis for a nation out of the variety of ethnic and linguistic communities. Therefore, religion was regarded both by democratic and military leaders as a source of legitimacy. Second, religion and the recourse to religious symbols and slogans have often been used by political parties to mobilise their supporters. With the help of these functions, nation-building and legitimacy, on the one hand, and political mobilisation, on the other hand, the impact of religion in the region can be analysed.
Nation-building and Legitimacy

The main question is: how far religion could be used successfully as the basis for nation-building and whether such regimes have a better legitimacy and are more stable than other systems? If the inclusion of religion in the constitution is taken as an indicator for religious nation-building, it is interesting to see that all major countries in the region except for India have followed this strategy. It is also noteworthy that religion was not automatically used from the beginning but entered political arena only at a later stage.

One of the most prominent examples is Sri Lanka. The constitution of 1972 that gave Buddhism a foremost place and introduced the concept of a unitary state hardened the claim of nation-building along religious lines. The persistent opposition and hard-headedness of Buddhist nationalist groups prevented federal solutions between the main Sinhalese parties and the Tamil minority and contributed to the failure of the democratic consensus during the 1970s. This paved the way for separatist groups like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that started their armed struggle in the mid 1970s. The Sri Lankan approach of religious nation-building can, therefore, be regarded as a failure that separated rather than united the country.

Founded on the basis of religion, Pakistan made different experiences in the process of nation-building. Islam was not sufficient to bridge the gap between the two parts of the country. Besides, the long debates on the future role of Islam, there was no religious oriented strategy by the military after the coup in 1958. Pakistan is an interesting example because the common bond of religion was not able to overcome the ethnic and linguistic differences between the Eastern and Western part of the country, which highlights the limits of religious nation-building. In Pakistan, religion became a major political issue only in the 1970s with the concept of "Islamic socialism" propagated by
Prime Minister Z. A. Bhutto. President Zia ul Haq promoted Islamisation after the coup in 1977, especially within the armed forces and the educational sector. But even within Pakistan, rival claims of ethnic identities challenged the state with the armed rebellion in Baluchistan in the 1970s and Sindh in the 1990s. After the events of 9/11 President Musharraf undertook various steps to promote again the vision of a moderate enlightened Muslim state, going back to the ideas of Jinnah. But the increasing sectarian violence between militant Sunni and Shia groups illustrate at the same time the sharp differences among parts of the Muslims about the future religious orientation of the state.

In contrast to Pakistan, constellations in Bangladesh were different. The first constitution of Bangladesh had a secular character and religion was only introduced under the military regimes in 1977 and 1988. Because of the country's unique historical development and its double independence first in 1947, on the basis of religion and in 1971, on the basis of ethnicity, the competing concepts of nation-building were not linked to different ethnic groups. Armed resistance against religious nation-building remained limited to small non-Muslim tribal groups in the Chittagong Hill Tract Area who feared the domination of their homelands by predominantly Muslim settlers. The debate about Bengali or Bangladeshi nationalism and the role of religion remained within the party system and the competition between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). In recent years, parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami that entered the government in 2001 have intensified again the domestic controversies about the future role of Islam both in politics and society.

Hinduism, the main religion of Nepal since the unification of the country in 1768, entered the modern political system only with the constitution of 1962. During the democratic revolution of 1990, there was a strong support for a secular constitution. Because of the insistence
of the monarchy, Hinduism kept its prominent position in the new constitution. This created resentment and opposition that was mainly articulated by the communist parties and the non-Hindu religious communities.\(^5\)

Despite its 80 percent Hindu majority, India remained a secular state. Nevertheless, religion found entry in the constitution by securing a number of privileges in the field of personal laws and education for smaller religious communities. In contrast to her neighbours, the majority religion hardly played a role in the process of nation-building in India. The one party dominant system of the Congress party and the leadership of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty prevented for a long time the resurgence of Hinduism as a political force. That religion could play an important role in India as well became obvious with the rise of the BJP in the 1980s. Representing the political wing of Hindu nationalism the concept of Hindutva included a clear strategy of religious nation-building. The Hindu Rashtra followed the classical approach of 19th century nation-building and aimed at the homogenisation of the nation by accommodating and discriminating the minorities, emphasising religious symbols like the protection of the cow and the confrontation over the temple/mosque complex in Ayodhya, streamlining national history by rewriting the text books and demonstrating national strength with the nuclear tests of 1998.

**Political Mobilisation**

Like in many other countries, religious reform movements and welfare organisations addressed social needs and filled the vacuum of inadequate state infrastructures in the field of education and public welfare. But despite these activities and the strong linkages between religious and cultural traditions, religion did not have a monopoly when it came to political mobilisation. Looking at the strength of religious parties compared to ethnic,
linguistic, regional, class and secular parties, it is interesting to note that religion seemed to be a rather weak instrument for mobilising the masses. This phenomenon can be found in all major states.

Although the religious antagonism between Hindus and Muslims has shaped the formation of both India and Pakistan, religious parties played hardly any role in domestic politics in the beginning. In India, the Congress party under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru promoted a secular state but did not neglect the interests of the religious minorities. Religion, therefore, became a major factor in the Indian party system only in the 1980s. From two seats in the 1984 election, the BJP was able to become a rival for the Congress Party and evolved into one of the most important political forces in the 1990s. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that the BJP never represented more than 30 percent of the electorate, i.e. 70 percent of the Indian voters, the great majority being Hindus, rejected the religious approach of the BJP. Despite its defeat in the parliamentary elections of 2004, the BJP will certainly remain the main competitor for the Congress. The challenge for the BJP is: how far the party will turn again to religious agitation in order to mobilise their voters. Hindu-nationalist groups like the RSS have put forward this demand which was rejected by secular allies like the Telugu Desam Party. Moreover, political analysts have pointed to the difficulties of the BJP to expand their voter base beyond 30 percent because of the socio-economic profile of its voters.

Another interesting indication for the weakness of religion in mobilising the Indian electorate is the absence of a Muslim party in India. Excepting small Muslim parties from Kerala, there is no party to represent the interests of the Indian Muslims that form the biggest religious minority with 13 percent of the population, representing more than 140 million people. This is even more interesting because Hindu-nationalist groups had aimed against the Muslims in
recent years and Muslims were mostly affected by communal riots.

As mentioned before, the importance of religious parties in the neighbouring countries was even weaker. In Pakistan, Islamic parties could only attract around four to five percent of the voters until 1997. In the elections of 2002, the main Islamic parties formed the MMA that won 11 percent of the votes and 53 seats in the National Assembly. At the same time, the MMA became a partner in the coalition government in Baluchistan and formed the state government in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). But this electoral success could be attributed to the special regional and international environment after the attacks of 9/11 with the war against terrorism in Afghanistan as well as by the support of the Musharraf government. It remains to be seen how far the religious parties can consolidate their electoral strength in the next elections or whether the alliance will fall apart again.

In 1956, the leftist MEP coalition under the leadership of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won the general election with the slogan "Sinhala Only" only with the massive support of Buddhist monks. This election has often been described as a watershed in the political development of the country. The entry of Buddhist nationalism has prevented a federal solution between the Singhalese majority and the Sri Lanka Tamil minority. The two major Singhalese parties have support among various sections of the Buddhist sangha. The ideological change of the JVP from a leftist extremist to a Buddhist nationalist party gave religious ideas a broader parliamentary platform. This was further increased with the JHU, a party of Buddhist monks that won nine seats in the last election in April 2004. Because of the fierce party competition, the religious oriented parties like the JVP or the JHU are now the kingmakers of the new government. The political constellations are further complicated by small parties like
the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) that represents the Muslim minority and was the kingmaker of the government in the 1990s.

It is astonishing to see at least from the election results that religious parties in Bangladesh were more successful in elections than in Pakistan. They were able to achieve constantly between eight and twelve percent of the votes depending on their electoral alliances in the various elections after 1991. Because of the close competition between the AL and the BNP, smaller parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) gained more political influence by providing coalition support. Nevertheless, their political impact should not be mistaken as political support base because despite its 17 seats, the JI could only reach 4.3 percent of the votes in the 2001 election.

Looking at the mere results it is not without irony that in the only secular country, India, religious oriented parties like the BJP achieved the biggest success whereas in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka the impact of religious parties is rather low. Besides this anomaly, it is first, important to note that religion alone does not seem to be a good instrument for mobilising the masses but has a bigger impact when is linked with other issues like nationalism as was the case in India and Sri Lanka. Secondly, the low impact of religion can probably also be explained by its internal weaknesses and the lack of orthodoxy. Although religious belief systems claim to be a homogenous entity, South Asia has always been famous for its rich traditions of religious syncretism. Even in countries like Pakistan, the variety of religious parties and sectarian groups illustrates the heterogeneity of religious traditions that weakens their electoral power. Finally, in terms of electoral politics, competing concepts like ethnicity, class, and regional identity seem to attract more voters than religion. Despite the pervasiveness and ubiquity of religious traditions in the subcontinent, the voters do not seem to
believe that religion will offer viable political solutions for their needs.

**Religion on the National Level**

When comparing the countries of South Asia, it is obvious that the introduction of religion into politics, be it as a strategy in the process of nation building and legitimacy or as political mobilisation for partisan reasons, was only partly successful. In both cases, religion had to cope with alternative forms of nationalism, mobilisation and legitimacy be they ethnic, linguistic, regional, class oriented or secular.

Democratic as well as authoritarian rulers have always used the recourse to religion and religious symbols to increase the legitimacy of their regimes. If Easton's definition of diffuse and specific forms of legitimacy is used, there is hardly any difference in the achievements by religious oriented states compared to secular states. Of course, religion could yield enormous political benefits for partisan reasons, for instance for the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the BJP in India. Leaders like Z. A. Bhutto or Zia ul Haq promoted Islam in Pakistan to broaden their legitimacy, thereby using specific forms of support. But if voter turnout of religious parties is taken as an indicator for diffuse forms of religious legitimacy, the correlation is not very significant. Needless to say, religious oriented regimes in the subcontinent did not have a significant better record of development compared to secular regimes.

Unfortunately, the attempts for religious legitimacy or using religion as the main pillar in the process of nation-building often became counter-productive. In Sri Lanka, this led to a further escalation of the conflict, in India the debates between supporters and opponents of the secular state were accompanied by an increase of communal clashes. It may be understandable that in the revaluation of the majority religion in a multi-religious state creates
resentment, opposition or even violent resistance. But even countries like Pakistan with one dominant religion were not free from religious opposition that is articulated by militant sectarian groups that question the legitimacy of the state.

Political mobilisation and the instrumentalisation of religious ideas proved to be dangerous at least in two ways. Firstly, this kind of instrumentalisation opened a Pandora's Box that could hardly be controlled. Secondly, this strategy could backfire on political leaders themselves. In 1958, Prime Minister Bandaranaike was killed by a Buddhist monk; in 1984 Indira Gandhi was assassinated by Sikhs. The attacks on President Musharraf in December 2003 in which members of the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) were involved indicated again that radical groups have turned against their previous supporters within the armed forces. It is, therefore, a sad irony that religion that aimed at common norms of understanding often had the unintended consequence of increasing the level of conflicts and violence rather than diminishing it.

This assessment also indicates that the people of South Asia value their cultural and religious traditions on the one hand, but seem to be sceptical about the role and importance of religion in public life on the other hand. Of course, there is a religious oriented electorate that can be assessed between five to twenty five percent in the countries of the region. Therefore, religious parties will have their place in the political system and will represent an important segment of the people. However, the fact which should not be overlooked is that religion is only one form of individual and collective identity that has to compete with other forms as well. These figures also indicate that the vast majority of the people in South Asia prefer to practice religion in their private sphere rather than using it for political reasons.
The International Level: Religion and Foreign Policy in South Asia

The state system of South Asia could be easily conceptualised along the lines of Huntington's argument with India as the Hindu core state, and religious states like Islamic Pakistan and Bangladesh, and Buddhist Sri Lanka in the neighbourhood. But such a conception overlooks two facts, first, India has always been a secular state and second, despite religious provisions in the constitution, foreign policies in the neighbouring countries were not necessarily driven by religious consideration. A closer look at the bilateral relations reveals that religion often played a subordinate role in contrast to political, economic, and security reasons that shaped foreign policy.

There were several instances when religious conflicts on the domestic level had an impact on bilateral relations. One was the Indian intervention in Sri Lanka after 1987 that triggered off the violent resistance of the JVP in the southern part of the Island that was strongly influenced by Buddhist nationalist ideas. Another and probably the most prominent instance was the destruction of the Mosque in Ayodhya in December 1992 that was followed by protests, demonstrations and riots against Indian institutions in Pakistan and Bangladesh. In both incidents, religious motivated conflicts had a real foreign policy impact because two SAARC summits had to be postponed. A totally new phenomenon was the ransacking of the Jama Mosque in Kathmandu in retaliation of the killing of 12 Nepali guest workers in Iraq by terrorist Islamic groups in September 2004. Nevertheless, when looking on the whole on the bilateral relations in the region, it seems fair to say that religion did not play the dominant role in the foreign policy as could be predicted from the religious foundation of South Asian countries.
India: Hindutva and Foreign Policy

The period of India's hegemonic approach towards the region until 1990, that is often referred to as South Asia or Indira Doctrine, was not guided by religious motives but by hard power interests of national security. Indira Gandhi may have turned to Hinduism in the early 1980s on the domestic front, but religious motives could hardly be traced as driving force in her foreign policy. The BJP is regarded as the representative party of Hindu-nationalism, but it is difficult to evaluate how far religion has played a similar importance in the party's foreign policy. Of course, the nuclear tests of May 1998 were intended to demonstrate a new Hindu national self-consciousness. Many BJP politicians have also promoted a Christian-Jewish-Hindu axis by a closer co-operation between the United States, Israel and India to counter the threat of militant Islamic fundamentalism. The three countries increased their military co-operation but religious deliberations hardly played a role in the BJP's approach towards the neighbouring countries in the region. Although India's relations with Pakistan remained tense and were overarched by the issue of terrorism, it went to the credit of BJP Prime Minister Vajpayee to initiate a new rapprochement with his proposals in April 2003. The bilateral relations with the other neighbours were mainly guided by the promotion of economic collaboration or by trans-national terrorist challenges rather than religious deliberations.

Pakistan: Islam and Transnational Groups

In contrast to India, Pakistan has a different relationship between foreign policy and religion. Although Pakistan's foreign policy could be described as India centric, not to say Kashmir centric, religion did not always play a dominant role. During the first military dictatorship, religion only played a limited role compared to President Zia-ul Haq's endeavours for Islamisation between 1977 and
1988. The same can be applied for foreign policy. Besides being a member of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC), Pakistan's approach towards Kashmir lacked a religious element in the beginning. The 'Operation Gibraltar' aimed in 1965 to spark off an armed rebellion against India turned out to be a failure. During much of the 1970s and 1980s, religion also did not play an important role. It was only after the protests of the Muslim United Front (MUF) in Jammu and Kashmir that followed the rigged assembly election of 1987 that religion became a stronger force. The back door recruitment of former Mujahedin fighters from Afghanistan to Jammu and Kashmir supported by Pakistani agencies brought religion back to the fore. Today, militant organisations like Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) openly propagate that their ideal vision of Pakistan will only be completed when the Muslim majority states in India including Hyderabad and Junagadh will be integrated.

Compared to this, the official foreign policy of Pakistan has mostly kept a neutral stance on the question of religion. After 9/11, the Pakistan government seemed to become more critical about the support of religious groups in neighbouring countries. Pakistan's support of the Taliban created international criticism and the repercussions of the "Talibanisation" were felt long before 9/11 in Pakistan. Because of the growing concerns of the West against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the development of an "Islamic bomb", a term used by former Prime Minister Z. A. Bhutto, Pakistani authorities have always tried to avoid any connotation between religion and the nuclear weapon.

After 9/11, President Musharraf banned various militant groups, restricted the support for the Kashmir struggle to political and moral motives, criticised human rights violations of Indian security forces and promulgated the right of self-determination of the Kashmiris. Because of the obvious division of labour between the official
declarations of the foreign policy establishment in Islamabad that avoided any reference to religion and militant Islamic groups whose activities could hardly be explained without the support of parts of official agencies the balance between religion and foreign policy in Pakistan is mixed. Pakistan authorities have supported transnational militant groups both in Afghanistan and Kashmir that promoted religious ideals whereas the official foreign policy was kept to the standards of international politics.

Conclusion: Towards a New Synthesis?

Looking at the different levels, it is astonishing to see that the relationship between religions, states and conflict is more complex than expected. First, religion is more a domestic rather than an international problem. Domestically, it is interesting to see not only the potential of religious mobilisation but also its limitations. Religious traditions are important for the people but this does not necessarily mean that they are political issues at the same time. A closer look reveals the competition with other forms of identities. The higher acceptance of ethnic and linguistic ideas is expressed in the low voter turnout for religious parties which illustrate the limitations of religion vis-à-vis other forms of identity. At the same time, this implies that the majority of the people of South Asia seem to follow, independent from their respective faith, a practical approach towards religion where the individual and collective practices have a higher importance compared to its political mobilisation. The inclusion of religious parties in the parliamentary systems also opens the way for a successful political contest between democratic parties, on the one hand, and ideas of religious or ethnic militancy on the other hand. Except for militant Islamic groups like the LeT, which challenge the existing state system, most religious parties accept the territorial integrity of their states even if they are in opposition to their governments.
Second, on the international level, many analysts often seem to fall into what can be called the ‘Huntington trap’. Reducing Indo-Pakistan relations or the foreign policies of both India and Pakistan to religious factors is a gross oversimplification. Again, in most cases religion was not successful in shaping the foreign policy but could selectively be used as a political tool in bilateral relations. In most cases, considerations of national security not religion dominated foreign policy.

The brief comparison on religion, states, and conflict in South Asia shows that the main challenges can be found on the domestic rather than on the international level. This implies that it is not only necessary to have a dialogue between the major world religions. At the same time, it seems to be more pressing to open the dialogue within the main communities in order to condemn all forms of militant agitation against other religious groups. Because of the long and remarkable tradition of religion synthesis in the region, the chances for such an endeavour are probably better in South Asia than in many other regions. The main task ahead is to revive this tradition within the constraints of democracy, state- and nation-building.

Endnotes


9. See 'Muslim majority states in India are part of Pakistan, says Lashkar-e-Toiba', in: Daily Times, August 11, 2004.