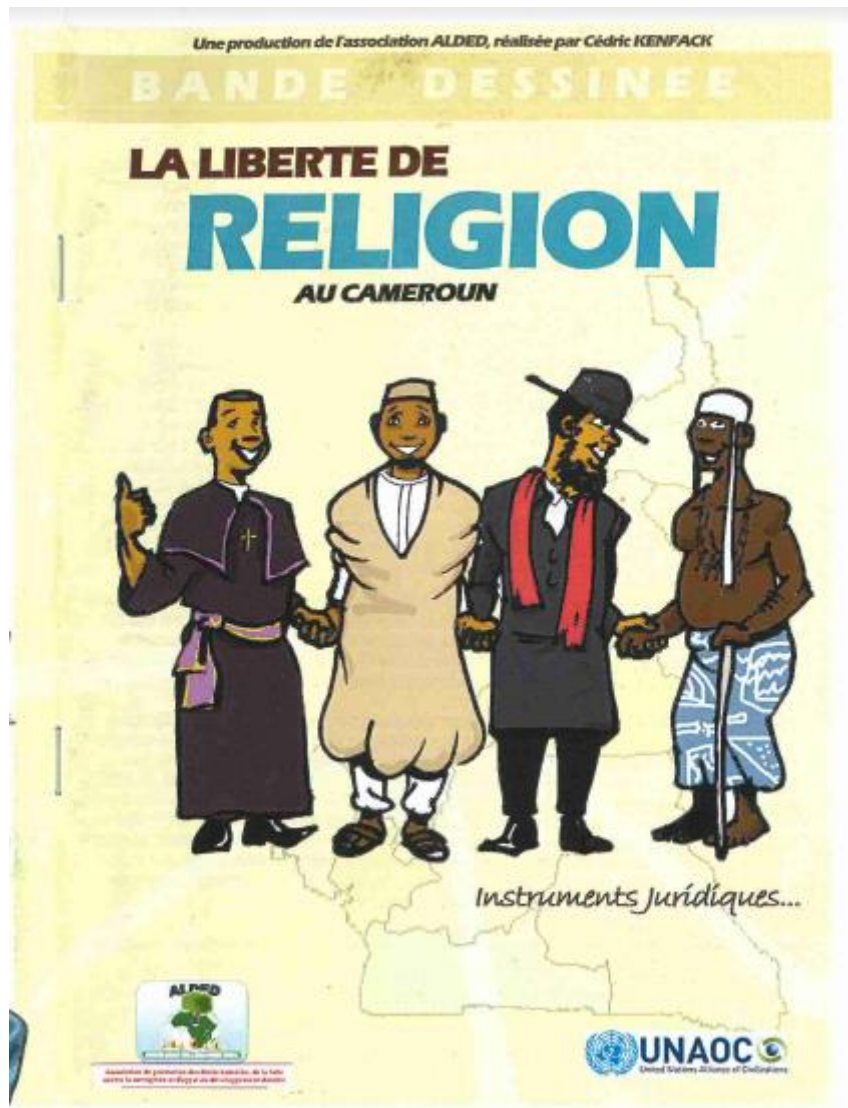


# Friends or foes? Understanding the relationship between religion and conflict across different levels of politics and society

*A case study of local NGO staff perceptions on religion and conflict in Cameroon*



*Imme Widdershoven*

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**rijksuniversiteit  
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Picture on front page: Cover of an educational comic on religious freedom in Cameroon. ALDED, 2015

Imme Widdershoven

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Supervisors: dr. Erin Wilson and dr. Joram Tarusarira

University of Groningen

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis relates the dominant global discourse on the link between religion and conflict to the perceptions of local NGO staff on the role of religion in Cameroon's society. By doing so, the thesis answers the research question of how the relationship between religion and conflict is understood across different levels of politics and society in the early 21st century. The dominant discourse is shaped largely by non-religious actors who uphold a post-secular world view. Influenced by the events of the past two decades, policy attention is increasingly spent on policing religious communities that are expected to be at risk of adopting radical views. The underlying assumption is that radicalisation may lead to (violent) conflict. In the understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict by local NGO staff in Cameroon, the focus lies on how religion mostly promotes peace and tolerance. Cameroon's diverse religious landscape and history of peaceful coexistence offer structures that contain possible tensions between religious groups. Conflicts relating to issues of religion are explained against a specific contextual backdrop of political instability and socioeconomic hardship. The thesis argues that both ways of understanding the relationship between religion and conflict are shaped by the specific context in which the perception is constructed. It shows the risks of adopting global ideas in a local context, as policy can be ineffective or even contribute to a problem if context-specific dynamics are not taken into account.

## **KEY WORDS**

Religion, conflict, radicalisation, CVE, Cameroon, international relations, conflict prevention

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACADIR Association Camerounaise pour le Dialogue Interreligieux

ACIC Association Culturelle islamique du Cameroun

CEPCA Conseils des Églises Protestantes du Cameroun

CPDP Cameroon People's Democratic Party

CVE Countering Violent Extremism

DMJ Dynamique Mondiale des Jeunes

ICG International Crisis Group

JIC Jeunesse Islamique du Cameroun

LOYOC Local Youth Corner Cameroon

MENA Middle East and North Africa

NGO Non-governmental organisation

RFL Réseau Foi et Liberations

SEP Ecumenical Service for Peace

UN United Nations

(...) Deleted text from interview transcript to increase clarity

[ ] Text between block brackets is added or altered from the original transcript to increase clarity

( ) Text between rounded brackets is added to explain where or what the respondent is referring to

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Problem statement

This thesis captures the relation between religion and conflict as perceived at different levels of politics and society in the 21st century. It compares the dominant global discourse about this relation with the perceptions of local NGO staff in Cameroon. The central argumentation of this thesis is that the understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict is dependent on the specific context against which this understanding is constructed.

My interest in this topic was sparked by a report released by the International Crisis Group (ICG, an organisation that investigates emerging points of conflict) in September 2015. The report was titled "*Cameroon: the threat of religious radicalism*" and sketches a situation of deteriorating relations between the many religious groups present in Cameroon. It describes how religious groups that are considered to hold 'radical' views have increased their presence and influence in Cameroon. In addition, the report expresses concern about the fragmentation of the religious landscape, i.e. the fragmentation of the three main religious categories in the country (Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam) into a greater variety of religious strands within these categories. The report argues that this fragmentation invokes competition within these three mainline categories over social, political and economic power (International Crisis Group 2015; Knoope and Chauzal 2016).

The ICG report explains itself as an early warning sign. It provides policy recommendations aimed to reduce inter- and intrareligious tensions to both government and religious organisations as the two main actors in conflict prevention around issues of religion. The ICG report advises to work towards a behavioural and attitudinal change in communities at risk of radicalisation. It emphasizes the need for conflict prevention programs that focus on interreligious dialogue and improving awareness of radicalisation. According to the report, Cameroonian youth, especially Muslim youth, are most at risk of radicalisation.

The conclusions of the ICG report regarding the situation in Cameroon are in line with many documents written in the light of global developments since the events of 9/11, as increasing academic and policy attention is being paid to the relation between religion and conflict<sup>1</sup>. These studies have first been aimed at the MENA region (Middle-East and North-Africa), but increasingly cover East- and West-Africa as well, as radical religious groups such as AQIM in Mali, Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region are gaining ground (Haynes 2009; Knoope and Chauzal 2016; Turner 2009). Recent reports on radicalisation in Africa aim to identify the potential hotbeds for religious conflict (Knoope and Chauzal 2016; Lincoln 2003; Turner 2009). Youth, as one of the groups considered to be most vulnerable to this instability, are seen as key actors in the dynamics of (religious) conflict (Abbink and van Kessel 2001; Christiansen et al. 2006; Groenink 2016; Resnick et al. 2015; Richards 1995; Turner 2009; Vigh 2010). The assumption behind these reports is that religion is likely to be instrumentalised to project the anger engendered by the social, economic and political strain a country is experiencing. Studies in this field shape the dominant global discourse on the relationship between religion and conflict.

Triggered by the conclusions of the ICG report, I contacted people from Cameroon in preparation for the field research connected to this thesis. Among these people were local NGO staff working in the field of conflict prevention. Interestingly none of them, including the NGO staff, recognised the tensions in relation to religion that were expressed in the report. Instead, they emphasized Cameroon's diversity and the peace-

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<sup>1</sup>See for example Berger 2011; Carlson 2011; Cavanaugh 2009; Eller 2010; Emerson and Hartman 2006; Esmail 2011; Gopin 1997; Gopin 2000; Haynes 2009; Herbert 2013; Hurd 2015; Juergensmeyer 2003; Kippenberg 2010; Knoope and Chauzal 2016; Lincoln 2003; O'Dowd and McKnight 2013; Posman 2001; Scott Appleby 2000; Scott Appleby et al. 2015; Svensson 2013; Toft 2007.



ful coexistence between people from different backgrounds. In these introductory interviews, the conclusions drawn by the ICG were dismissed as badly informed and superficial. Nevertheless, since 2017 local NGOs in the capital Yaoundé increasingly organised conflict prevention projects that specifically address interreligious dialogue and focus on religious communities.

This inconsistency between how people perceived the situation in Cameroon and what problems were addressed locally caught my attention. Why would religion become an issue of conflict in a country with a long history of peace between the many religious groups? And why do local NGOs engage with the issue of religion in the way they do? This thesis is based on the assumption that local NGOs working on conflict prevention may be (partly) influenced by globally dominant ideas regarding the relation between religion and conflict. These ideas, however, may not be accurate when applied to a specific local situation. This thesis compares the globally dominant ideas regarding the relationship between religion and conflict with the understanding of this relationship by local NGO staff in Cameroon. By doing so, this study reflects on how the relation between religion and conflict is understood across different levels of politics and society.

The topic of this thesis is placed within the theoretical debate on the relation between religion and conflict. Many studies have focused on religious radicalisation and polarisation within and between religious groups and aim to present a check list theory for when and where "religious" conflict will arise. With this thesis, I problematise this one-size-fits-all assumption by stressing the broad range of factors that influence whether a potentially instable situation moves into or out of conflict. I will do so by testing globally dominant ideas on the relation between religion and conflict that influence policy on a local level against the perceptions of local NGO staff on the relation between religion and conflict in Cameroon. The research is therefore a qualitative study, based on the following central research question:

How is the relationship between religion and conflict understood across different levels of politics and society in the early 21st century?

The subquestions that will successively be discussed in the next chapters are:

1. What are the globally dominant assumptions regarding the relation between religion and conflict?
2. What methods were used by the researcher in gathering data on the local perceptions of NGO staff on the relation between religion and conflict in Cameroon?
3. How do local NGOs in Cameroon engage with issues of religion and conflict?
4. How do local NGO staff in Cameroon understand the relation between religion and conflict in the country?
5. What are the similarities and differences between globally dominant assumptions and local perceptions on the relation between religion and conflict?

These subquestions will be answered in the next chapters. This introduction first sketches the basic context of Cameroon. It then explains the relevance of this thesis. Chapter two captures the theoretical discussion that lies at the basis of this research. The theoretical framework outlines the dominant scholarly and policy ideas on the relation between religion and conflict. By doing so, it presents an understanding of religion and conflict on the level of international policy. Chapter three describes the methods used to conduct the field research. It reflects on the development of the research questions, the reliability of the data collected and the role and position of the researcher. Chapter four outlines the characteristics of the local NGOs that took part in this research, thereby explaining how these NGOs officially engage with issues of religion and conflict prevention. Chapter five presents the case study central in this research by highlighting the main results of the field research. It outlines how local NGO staff understand religion and goes into the local NGO staff perceptions of the relation between religion and conflict in the society of Cameroon. Chapter six compares the the case study results with the theoretical discussion central in chapter two. This chapter also discusses the

possible implications of the interplay of the different ways of understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict on the local situation. By answering these five subquestions in the next chapters, an answer to the central research question can be given in the final chapter of this thesis. In addition, the conclusion offers recommendations for further research.

## 1.2 A changing religious landscape in Yaoundé, Cameroon

The contemporary situation in Cameroon is shaped by its history and specific characteristics. This section describes the context of Cameroon against which issues of religion and conflict play a role. By doing so, the section provides the background information needed to understand the case study of this research.

The section starts with a brief sketch of how the society of Cameroon is constructed. It gives an insight in how local dynamics are influenced by global developments, and how historical events still shape the contemporary social, political and economic dynamics in the country. The next subsection delves deeper into the dynamics of Cameroon's religious landscape. It gives a short overview of the history of the spread of different religious groups in Cameroon and outlines recent developments in Cameroon's religious landscape. The final section argues why Cameroon is an interesting case to examine in relation to current day interest in religious issues in the policy domain.

### 1.2.1 Cameroon: a brief sketch

Cameroon is situated right at the spot where the south coast of the continent Africa makes a corner, between the regions generally referred to as West and Equatorial Africa. The country consists of ten provinces, of which two are English speaking and are eight French speaking, due to a difference in colonial history. The Cameroonian capital Yaoundé is situated in the Center region and is predominantly French speaking, as is the government situated in the capital. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Cameroon is nicknamed *le petit Afrique*, or Africa in miniature, because of its striking diversity in various domains such as geography, ethnicity, religion and economy. The diverse landscapes of Cameroon have historically caused a great variety of different livelihoods (Fonchingong 2005; Ngeve and Orock 2012).

Paul Biya, the 85-year old president of Cameroon, has been in power since 1982. The next national elections in Cameroon have been scheduled for 2018. The country underwent drastic changes under his lead in the 1990s, among which a constitutional change. These changes were driven partly by international organisations such as IMF and the World Bank, like in many other African countries in that period (Gilbert and Reynolds 2012). After an economic crisis in the 1990s, poverty rates and income inequality dropped at the end of that decade. However, in recent years the poverty rates in Cameroon have gradually increased again.

One of Cameroon's problems is the increasing youth bulge (Abdoumalik 2005; Ortiz and Cummins 2012). Especially the high youth unemployment rates cause discontent. Access to (good quality) higher education is difficult, partly because of the high school fees of private universities. Nonetheless, good education still does not guarantee a place in the job market. The unemployment rates are currently so high that even young men who hold a PhD degree are working as motor taxi drivers in Yaoundé. Due to this unemployment, many youths look for jobs in the informal sector. In addition, international migration is induced by the disappointing socio-economic circumstances (Abdoumalik 2005; Dynamique Mondiale des Jeunes 2015, 2016; Nyamnjoh and Page 2002). The age gap between the young population and the ruling elite provides extra reason for resentment of youth towards the government.

Cameroon's colonial history still strongly influences society today. Cameroon was first colonized by Germany from 1884 onwards. After the first world war, the country was unequally divided among British and French rule. After Cameroon gained independence in 1960, the country soon reunified as a federation in October 1961 (Fonchingong 2005). Since the reunification, the perceived marginalization of the anglophone provinces, which form a minority in Cameroon, has been an issue of concern. The anglophone people have

frequently organised protests to point out the central government's responsibility to treat all regions equally. On October 1<sup>st</sup> 2017 several people died by police force in its response to peaceful demonstrations in the anglophone capitals Buea and Bamenda. These demonstrations were part of a long line of demonstrations since October 2016, when the 'francophonisation' of the legal and education systems in the anglophone regions gave rise to another series of anglophone protests (Amnesty International 2017; Freudenthal 2018). An increasing number of anglophone people is currently in favour of the separation of anglophone and francophone Cameroonian provinces, and support the foundation of a new independent nation under the name of Ambazonia (Fonchingong 2005). After almost two years of demonstrations and military interventions, the anglophone conflict has been picked up by global media.

In addition to the country's internal problems, security in Cameroon is challenged by outside influences. Since 2014, the jihadist militant organisation Boko Haram has carried out numerous attacks in Cameroon, especially in the two most northern provinces. As the next section will explain in more detail, the presence of Boko Haram in Cameroon has led to tensions between religious groups. In addition, conflicts in the surrounding countries influence the local situation. Primarily in the East of Cameroon, 320,000 people from the Central African Republic, Nigeria and Chad have sought refuge. This situation, too, brings up tensions in society as the number of refugees keeps growing and destabilizes the local balance (CIA 2018).

In conclusion, Cameroon is a country characterized by political instability and socioeconomic hardship. Economic opportunities are low and there is a large age gap between the aging political elite and the relatively young population. As a result, people look for opportunities outside the regular options. In addition, several crises inside and outside of the country cause insecurity in Cameroon. This context of instability forms the basis of Cameroonians' discontent with the current situation in the country.

### 1.2.2 Cameroon's religious landscape

As mentioned before, Cameroon is a country with a high diversity. This diversity is present in its religious landscape as well. According to the most recent estimations of the CIA world factbook, Cameroon's population holds 25 million people. The most recent available census of religion (2005) estimates 69.2% of the population is Christian, 20.9% Muslim, 5.6% animist, 1% other religions, and 3.2% has no religious affiliation. Of Christians, approximately 55.5% is Roman Catholic, 38% Protestant, and 6.5% has other Christian denominations. Aspects of animist beliefs are present in the belief systems of Christians, Muslims and those of other faiths (CIA 2018).

Religion in Cameroon is strongly related to tribe and region. Most Christians live in the southern and western parts of the country. The anglophone provinces, bordering Nigeria, are predominantly Protestant. Also the specifics of religious belief and practice differ per region; Muslims from the north of the country, many of whom belong to the Fulani ethnic group, practice their religion differently from Muslims from the West Region, who belong to the Bamoun ethnic group (CIA 2018).

Since 2005, the percentages may have changed significantly. As the results of my field research suggest, religious mobility, or the movement of people between religious groups, is high in Cameroon. In addition, the increased connection with the rest of the world via the internet and social media influences the religious landscape of Cameroon strongly. These dynamics will be discussed in more detail in chapter five.

One of the most visible changes in the religious landscape of Cameroon has been the emergence of Revival churches. This development is frequently explained against a backdrop of sociocultural instability and fundamental disagreements between the state and the established religious institutions. Especially since the economic crisis in Cameroon in the 1990s, the number of Revival churches has increased quickly (Akoko 2002). Despite government requirements, most of these churches are unregistered. This situation is tolerated by the government as long as the churches promote president Biya's reign. The Revival churches are especially attractive to women and youth, two groups in Cameroonian society that are considered most vulnerable. One of the main reasons for this attraction is therefore understood to be the Revival churches' promises of

material and immaterial gain. In so-called 'prosperity gospel', the idea is preached that 'good' followers of the church - those people who pray frequently and contribute financially - will receive happiness and worldly success as a sign of God's blessing (Akoko 2002, 2007; Hunt 2000; Lado 2009; Riis and Woodhead 2010).

The presence of the militant group Boko Haram in the North of Cameroon has led to an increased stigmatisation of Muslims in the country. Boko Haram identifies as an Islamic organisation and recruits among Cameroonian citizens. As a result, Muslims were viewed with more suspicion. In 2015, the fear of suicide bomb attacks led to the ban of Islamic full-face veils in public places in the Far North region (*BBC News* 2015). Since 2014, both government and civil society have spent much effort to minimize the destructive effects of Boko Haram (Dynamique Mondiale des Jeunes 2015; International Crisis Group 2015, 2016; Ndi Tanto 2016).

In short, there are myriad religious groups present in Cameroon, each with their own characteristics. Chapter five gives an overview of how local NGO staff understand the complexity of Cameroon's religious landscape. This overview adds to the general characteristics as outlined above because it allows for a description of people's personal experience with the religious landscape rather than a mere interpretation of numbers.

### 1.2.3 Conclusion

Cameroon is an interesting case to add to the ongoing discussion on the relation between religion and conflict because of its specific characteristics. Cameroon's context of political instability, socioeconomic hardship and a diverse and changing religious landscape provides an interesting backdrop against which to examine existing assumptions around the relation between religion and conflict.

## 1.3 Relevance

This thesis brings local and international perspectives on the relation between religion and conflict together. The case of Cameroon tests globally dominant assumptions on the relation between religion and conflict against a local context in which certain characteristics central in these assumptions are present. These characteristics include, among others, changing relations between religious groups; the emergence of more radical religious strands; a high number of unemployed youth; strong power inequalities within the country; and a difficult socioeconomic situation for many of Cameroon's citizens. The global dominance of these assumptions shapes policy all over the world, for example through international organisations promoting or developing projects based on these assumptions in different countries. In addition, international funding is made available for local projects that tackle the assumed problems that follow from the dominant discourse on religion and conflict. The relevance of this study therefore lies in its reflection of the dominant discourse as the study tests its assumptions against a specific context. It shows the risks of adopting global ideas in a local context without this reflection, as policy can be ineffective or even contribute to a problem if context-specific dynamics are not taken into account. Simultaneously, by pinpointing these risks, this study adds to the discussion on conflict prevention in relation to religion, thereby providing a case study that can serve as an example for policy makers. In short: the case study adds to a better understanding of the complex set of contextual dynamics and contrasting discourses that shape NGO discourse and programming in relation to issues of religion. The study illustrates how social theories on the role of religion in the public domain apply to a specific context. It outlines the important issues to take into account when developing policy to make this better suited to a specific context.

## 2 DOMINANT GLOBAL ASSUMPTIONS ON RELIGION AND CONFLICT

As explained in the introduction to this thesis, scholarly interest in the link between religion and conflict has increased as a direct consequence of the September 11 attacks in 2001 (Carlson 2011; Gopin 1997; Svensson 2013). The question that will be answered in this chapter is "what are globally dominant assumptions regarding the relation between religion and conflict?". The chapter answers this question from the perspectives of scholarship and policy, two domains of great influence to any global discourse. . In order to answer this research question, the two main concepts, 'religion' and 'conflict' are defined. In addition, this chapter addresses the link between youth and conflict as one of the elements of the dominant discourse on religion and conflict. The third section explores how the assumptions on religion and conflict are translated to concrete policy approaches, among which radicalisation theory and Countering Violent Extremism. It concludes by summarizing the main assumptions that shape ideas about the relation between religion and conflict, thereby answering the chapter's research question.

### 2.1 Understanding religion

Defining the concept of 'religion' is almost impossible. Individual's understanding of religion is dependent on context and its meaning changes as the context does. Religion is a social construct, highly related to other social domains such as culture and ethnicity. For this reason, what counts as 'religion' is equally hard to decide. This issue is also known as the 'membership problem' (Carlson 2011). Religion can therefore be understood more easily as a category, comprising different themes and topics, such as spirituality, community identity and the supernatural, as well as sets of practices and rituals. Religion can also be explained as a social identifier, providing feelings of collectivity that may lay at the basis of conflict as different (religious) groups have rival interests and competition may arise, as section 2.2 will argue (Esmail 2011; Lincoln 2003). For the understanding of religion in this thesis it is important to explain how religion is understood by those who hold and reinforce the globally dominant assumptions regarding the relation between religion and conflict as will be discussed in this chapter.

#### 2.1.1 The renewed attention to religion

The dominant discourse around religion and its role in the public sphere is shaped mainly by Western, secular actors (Hurd 2015). Secularism, a process which indicates the gradual loss of power of and interest in religion and religious institutions, went hand in hand with the development of the modern nation-state. It served the purpose of uniting conflicting religious groups and providing a political ideology that does not involve religious convictions. The idea of secularism first emerged in Europe in response to wars supposedly between religious groups (Asad 2003). Still, the functional purpose of secularity in policy making is to take a neutral stance in religious matters so as to prevent an unequal division of power and influence between different religious and nonreligious groups (Ager and Ager 2011). Simultaneously, the intended absence of hierarchy between religious groups serves to create an understanding of the homogeneity of a population. Religious identities are transcended by national identity as a primary identification marker. In this way, all members of a population may feel equally involved in matters of the state.

Historically, scholars have argued that secularism and modernity are interconnected processes. Modernity, characterised by rationalisation, would in time encompass the globe and the influence of 'irrational' religion in the public domain would therefore decrease accordingly (Beyer 2007). This idea is known as 'secularisation theory'. However, since the last two decades, scholars have realized that the world did not develop as expected. Religion continued to play a large, albeit changed, role in many societies (Berger 1999). Where some religious institutions have lost power, others fill their voids or create new political spaces in which they exercise influence. Additionally, religious beliefs and practices have continued to take up a prominent role in the lives of individuals (Habermas 2008; Mahmood 2006). Followers of the secularization theory have had to admit they were wrong.

This persistent presence of religion both in the private and public sphere has led to an increased attention for religion on policy agendas. Policy makers now feel the need to engage religious actors in the process of policy making, as policy tools as well as policy subjects. However, the contemporary understanding of religion in the public sphere is often simplified. To engage with religion in the policy domain, ideas have developed about what religion is, where it can be found and how it can be policed. Related to these ideas are assumptions on which people belong to religious communities, and which people can represent these specific communities. As such, religion is interpreted as a distinctive and manageable domain of society. As such, the distinction between the religious and the secular is central in policy making involving religious issues (Hurd 2015).

However, as explained above, the concept 'religion' is a complex social construct with permeable boundaries. Defining what 'religion' is, is not simple; nor is defining what is not 'religion'. Some authors have pinpointed to critical effects of specific interpretations. The distinction between religion and other categories of human activities such as culture and politics is often explained as an invention of the modern West, whereas in reality there can be no agreement on what can and cannot be defined as religion (Asad 2003; Cavanaugh 2009; Hurd 2015; Woodhead 2011). Defining the religious implies defining also that what is not religious. This is problematic. Therefore sometimes a functional definition of religious groups is adopted, defining religious groups as all groups that identify *themselves* primarily as religious (Carlson 2011). This definition is generally considered to be a helpful tool for policy makers in deciding which group should be in- and which groups excluded from policy focusing on religious groups. However, by placing emphasis on religion as a key identity marker, other identifications are shifted to the background. This does not necessarily align with individuals' and communities' personal identification. This dynamic has the reversed effect from secularity: where religious identities were first not considered in policy so as to maintain neutrality, people subject to policy are now stimulated to identify first with their religious community. In addition, the focus on religious identification invites denominationalisation and the formulation of new boundaries, because individuals and groups are more specific in defining the group they belong to as they do not want to be classified under one general heading, such as 'Catholics' (Eriksen 2002; Hurd 2015). In this way, divisions between groups are primarily addressed in religious terms and boundaries along religious lines are implicitly strengthened. These effects might be the opposite of what policy makers engaging with religion want to achieve (Hurd 2015).

The presumed neutrality of secularism has been challenged by many. In countries that are secular on paper, the general understanding of what separates the religious from the secular differs. In addition, different ideas exist about what type and degree of religion is deemed 'acceptable' in public affairs. In many countries, the room for religious practice and ideas in public space is bound to rules. The hegemonic Western approach of religion leaves room only for certain religious groups, meeting specific criteria and conditions. Religion needs to be compatible with modern Western values such as democracy, liberalism and capitalism. Policy then serves to reform religion into those interpretations that are better fit to these dominant values (Mahmood 2006). The next subsection goes deeper into a specific framework of global policy makers that makes explicit which forms of religion are and are not allowed in contemporary societies: the 'two faces of faith'.

### 2.1.2 The 'two faces of faith' framework

As explained before, secular actors have played a large role in the shaping of the dominant discourse around the place of religion in the public domain. As a result, simplified ideas about what religion is are prevalent. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, a prominent scholar in religion and politics, argues in her book *Beyond Religious Freedom* that religion in policy is framed in two opposing ways: 'good' religion and 'bad' religion, or the 'two faces of faith'. 'Good' religion is religion that is performed and experienced in private; 'good' religion is also expected to provide a moral framework that promotes tolerance, peace and mutual understanding. Faith leaders of 'good' religion can consequently be engaged in policy programs that promote peace. 'Bad' religion, on the other hand, is part of the public sphere, creates divisions between groups and promotes violence.

Several concepts relating to religion are used both in popular and academic discourse to indicate a 'dangerous' reading or experience of religion that may lead to conflict: extremism, fundamentalism, and radicalisation. These concepts, while frequently central in policy documents, are often ill-defined and used interchangeably. However, they all indicate examples of 'bad faith': religious groups or ideas that promote conflict and violence instead of peace and tolerance. Bad religion is perceived to entail a set of theological ideas that shape extremist ideology driving people to violent acts. For this reason, policy makers aim to reach faith groups that are considered to fall into this category, as these groups are expected to contribute to conflict with religious dimensions (Carlson 2011; Hurd 2015). In the next section, the dominant ideas in the policy domain on the relationship between religion and conflict are explored further.

### 2.1.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, assumptions that are shared globally concerning the nature of religion are shaped mainly by secular actors. Central in these assumptions is a distinction between the religious and the secular. In reality, however, this distinction is difficult to make. Another dominant idea about religion is that religious has 'two faces': it can either promote peace or conflict. These ideas around religion are dominant in shaping global policy addressing religious issues.

## 2.2 Religion and conflict

In the paragraphs above, the general scholarship and policy ideas around the nature of 'religion' are outlined. This section explains how these ideas about religion relate to contemporary understanding of conflict, as the relation between religion and conflict has been put in the spotlights since the events of 9/11. The section contributes to answering the main research question by exploring the globally dominant assumptions that shape the understanding of the relation between religion and conflict on the level of global politics and international relations.

### 2.2.1 Defining conflict

Conflict can be defined as “the situation that arises when rival interests can no longer be contained by the structures and processes ordinarily competent to do so. As a result, after an indeterminate period of confusion and crisis, normal competition moves into phases that are more open, bitter, confrontational, costly, and, frequently, violent” (Lincoln 2003, 74, emphasis added). These rival interests refer to the interests of different groups or individuals within groups. Due to the increasing number of conflicts with religious dimensions over the past decades, religion has received extra attention as a denominator for competing groups. It is for this reason that religious identity and feelings of belonging and community are recurring themes in academic literature on religion and conflict, as will be further explained in the next subsection.

### 2.2.2 Argumentation for the link between religion and conflict

This subsection presents several arguments that prominent scholars in the field of religion and conflict present to explain religion as a possible trigger for conflict.

The first argument is that the idea of a higher cause or higher authority that demands a specific (violent) action justifies these actions for the individual or group that undertakes them, out of conviction for this higher cause (Eller 2010).

The second argument is that religion as an identity marker defines in-group and out-group members and becomes part of identity politics. Combined with the assumption that violent acts are easier done to out-group members, scholars argue that religion as a line of division between groups may promote the exchange

of violence between these groups. This dynamic is especially present when the in-group perceives itself as threatened; and also when the in-group adheres to a narrative of worth-less-ness of the out-group (Eller 2010; Esmail 2011).

In relation to this argument, the threatening of religious communities is considered to have increased with the global dominance of particular cultures and the rapid change of societies under the influence of globalisation (Eriksen 2002). Globalisation is a highly debated concept and its discussion is too broad to capture in this research. For practical reasons, the concept of globalisation refers in this study to the increased interaction between the local and the global, a process by which the subsequent local and global are influenced as a result (Beyer 2007). One of the concerns of globalisation is that it may lead to a global standardisation - of ideas and cultures, but also, for example, of policy and NGO practice (Eriksen 2014). Globalisation is associated with, or even replaces, the process of modernisation, which in turn is associated with the decreasing influence of religion in the public domain. Simultaneously, however, globalisation also accounts for the increased ease of global communication. As a result, 'extremist ideas' are feared to spread like a virus (Beyer 2013; Kundnani 2012).

The third argument links religious issues to conflict by stating that a strong narrative of religious superiority may lead to the conviction that the world should be organised according to the norms and values of a particular religious group. If the norms and values of different religious groups in a certain area are incompatible, religion may play a political role if religious groups engage in conflict so as to attempt to change the dominant norms and values in society to those that fit their religious convictions. In this way, religious conflict strengthens the boundaries between religious groups, as it does not allow for the coexistence of multiple sets of norms and values (Esmail 2011; Lincoln 2003; Svensson 2013).

These arguments all contribute to a contemporary understanding of the relation between religion and conflict. The arguments refer not only to specific ideas as part of a theological framework, but also to a context of groups and societies with a history and future. For this reason, changes in the relationships between religious groups are viewed as potential triggers for religious violence.

These dominant ideas regarding the relationship between religion and conflict shape the frames from which specific situations, such as Cameroon and the possible threat of religious conflict in the country, are viewed. However, the arguments do not explain why religion is perceived to be particularly apt to trigger conflict, in contrast to other identifiers such as ethnicity; nor is explained why there are plural societies in which different religious groups live together in peace. It cannot be denied that religion can play an important role in triggering conflict. Even so, to characterize religion as inherently violent does not take into account contextual factors that contribute to the instrumentalization of religion in competition over rivaling interests. In other words: violence is situational and not a logical and inevitable result of specific religious ideas and convictions. Beliefs are not activated independently of the situation and therefore there is no causal and compelling relationship between belief and action, ergo religion and violence. For this reason, in order to understand the relationship between religion and conflict, one should look at the conditions under which certain beliefs and practices become violent (Aly and Striegher 2012; Cavanaugh 2003; Kippenberg 2010; Kundnani 2012).

Second, while a society may contain different religious communities with each their own interests and views, this situation does not inevitably lead to conflict. The presence of multiple interest groups engaged in interaction, as is the case in Cameroon, can even reduce social tensions as cementing of interests prevents the development of conflict over one subordinate issue and hinders block formation. Especially in an environment in which multiple denominators for social groups are present, such as religion, but also ethnicity or social class, individuals can be members of different groups that pursue segmented and mutually contradicting interests. The subsequent complexity of reality reduces the chance of conflict to occur (Eriksen 2002; Jeong 2008). This dynamic is downplayed in the dominant discourse on religion and conflict that forms the basis of global policy. Religion is instead presented as a basis for identity politics, and power conflicts expected to follow logically from the existence of a broad and varied religious landscape.



Despite these academic critiques on the argumentation linking religion and conflict, the final section of this chapter will show how this argumentation is dominant in shaping contemporary global policy on conflict prevention.

### 2.2.3 Youth and conflict

“We know violent extremism flourishes when human rights are violated, aspirations for inclusion are ignored and too many people — especially the world’s young people with their hopes and dreams — lack prospects and meaning in their lives.” (Ban Ki Moon 2015)

This quotation from the former secretary-general of the UN presents one of the main assumptions in thinking about religion and conflict: that youth play a key role. It refers specifically to the attraction of violent extremism to youths who live their lives in an insecure environment. This section explains this assumption further.

The analytical category of youth is broad and ambivalent. The term 'youth' itself is a social construct and therefore holds different meanings in different contexts. In the Western world, the term 'youth' is associated with personal development, freedom and being carefree. It refers to a period in one’s life in which the foundation is developed for adult life and career. In societies such as that of Cameroon, however, youth are instead encountering hardship, having to work for their livelihood from a young age. Simultaneously, opportunities for consciously 'constructing' an adult life (e.g. by developing a career or starting a family) are more limited, and what is considered an 'adult life' in the West might therefore begin at a later age (Abbink and Kessel 2005; Boeck and Honwana 2005; Klein Klouwenberg and Butter 2011). Policy makers aiming to address all youths often prefer a broad definition of the term. The UNICEF African Youth Charter (2006), which is still a leading policy document on issues related to African youth, describes youth as anybody between the ages of 15 and 35. For practical reasons, these age-brackets are more commonly used for delimiting the category and will thus be used in this thesis as well (Abbink and Kessel 2005; Klein Klouwenberg and Butter 2011).

In many African countries, including Cameroon, the number of young people is growing rapidly while economic opportunities lack behind. This development is associated with a growing risk of conflict. Young people are considered to be most easily attracted to aggressive or even violent ideologies. Several reasons are given for the presumed link between youth and conflict: firstly, youth are considered to be less nuanced and more reckless than adults. They make their decisions quicker and are more inclined to use radical means to achieve their end. Second, youth are generally seen as one of the most vulnerable groups in (African) urban settings. Among other things, they are often subject to “marginalisation, uncertain social status, increasing unemployment and eroding educational opportunities” (Klein Klouwenberg and Butter 2011, 58). As a result, competition among youth is high, the functioning of common morality and ethics is low, and many youth obtain an income in the illegal sector (Boeck and Honwana 2005; Klein Klouwenberg and Butter 2011; Philipps 2014; Resnick et al. 2015). This marginalized situation may lead to discontent which in turn may lead to the participation in violent actions with the aim of (re)gaining control over their living situation.

In relation to the link between religion and conflict, young people are generally expected to be among the first people to adopt radical religious ideas that may justify the use of violence because of the reasons mentioned above. Globalisation and social media play a role here, too, as radical religious groups frequently spread their ideas and connect with their members via social media platforms. Young people are the main users of these platforms and are therefore easily reached by these groups. For these reasons, youth are often the first target group of policy makers, as will be exemplified in the next section.

#### 2.2.4 Conclusion

To summarize, this section outlined dominant assumptions on the link between religion and conflict. It explained how religious ideas are perceived to justify conflict through the idea that one is acting for a higher cause. Strong boundaries between religious groups are expected to cause conflict over interests and power, especially when one or more groups feel threatened. However, these arguments are critiqued for downplaying contextual factors. Youth are perceived to be the population group most at risk of being involved in conflict situations. The academic conclusions outlined in this section on the relation between religion and conflict shape global policy, as will be explained in the next section.

### 2.3 Religion and conflict in global policy

The dominant ideas outlined above about religion and the relation between religion and conflict lie at the basis of global policy in the field of conflict prevention. These ideas include the distinction between good and bad religion; the assumption that religion lies at the basis of conflict as the main identifier for individuals and groups; and the assumption that youth are most at risk of radicalisation. This section outlines how these global assumptions regarding the relationship between religion and conflict are translated to concrete policy approaches. Two specific examples will be discussed: radicalisation theory and Countering Violent Extremism. By doing so, this section shows how a specific understanding of the relation between religion and conflict shapes concrete policy making.

#### 2.3.1 Radicalisation theory

When applied to the context of the 21st century, the arguments explaining the link between religion and conflict lead to a discourse that dominates thinking about this relationship in global politics. In light of the events of 9/11 and its aftermath, ideas about religion and conflict have become strongly linked to the field of terrorism studies. The discourse on religion and conflict comes together in the contemporary understanding of the concept of *radicalisation*, specifically defined in this theory as '*a psychological or theological process by which Muslims move towards extremist views*' (Kundnani 2012, 1). As explained above, the concept of radicalisation, or radicalism, is often used synonymously with fundamentalism and violent extremism. In general, these concepts are frequently used in policy documents to indicate the belief in a set of ideologically motivated ideas that challenge the status quo set of norms and values that forms the foundation of secular Western society. The assumption underlying policy makers' attention for radicalism is that these radical ideas indicate a threat as the ideas may lead to violent actions. Especially Islam is seen as a religion that, more than others, opposes modern and democratic values and is therefore considered more threatening (Hurd 2015; Kundnani 2012).

Scholars in the field of terrorism studies have developed radicalisation models that claim to predict when, where and how individuals transform into terrorists as a result of a theological-psychological radicalisation process. These models form the basis for radicalisation theory. The academic conclusions are translated to a policy promoting the active surveillance of religious, in particular Islamic, communities in order to identify radicalising individuals and to stop radicalisation at the root. In other words: the root cause is seen within religious communities instead of outside. Not the context in which these communities are placed but their religion itself is considered to be important to counter radicalisation.

This summary of the hegemonic way of thinking about radicalisation links back to the arguments outlined above that lie at the basis of the dominant ideas regarding the relationship between religion and conflict. The radicalisation theory downplays political and other factors. Instead, it focuses on theological arguments used by proponents of these radical theories, condoning the use of violence to enforce a regime change to a system based on the radical's own norms and values that are shaped by a specific theology. The

notion that violence is justified in light of a higher cause, namely a holy war, is deemed central in an individual's path towards radicalisation (Kundnani 2012). This is in line with the first argument for the relation between religion and conflict as explained in subsection 2.2.2. In addition, the specific reference to this 'holy war' in terms of the Islamic concept of 'Jihad' exemplifies how radicalisation is strongly associated with Islam in the dominant global discourse. Also the emphasis on group dynamics and polarisation is repeated in the models. The reference to a 'wider youth culture of anger and aggression' again emphasizes the role of group identity and how a feeling of 'us' against 'them' can amplify antagonism.

In articles on radicalisation since 2004, the category of 'youth' receives much attention. Youth alienation and easy organisation of youth groups are explained as indicators for the development of radical ideas (Kundnani 2012). Because of their vulnerable economic position and risk of anger and dissatisfaction, youth are often targeted in counter radicalisation policy projects.

Popular accounts of radicalisation theory promote the surveillance of Muslim populations in order to eradicate extremist ideologies from the bottom. If specific religious beliefs are seen as an indicator for violence, policy can address these beliefs and try to eliminate them. This gives policy makers a reason to intrude in the private sphere of religion for the individual (Kundnani 2012). Soft policy measures are developed to promote peaceful ideologies as positive counterparts to extremist views. Existing community partnerships are engaged, and new partnerships formed, that interact with the (young) Muslims. People from different professions and groups, that are expected to interact with the group that is deemed most vulnerable for radicalisation - Muslim youth -, are officially engaged in order to identify individuals possibly on a path towards radicalisation.

### 2.3.2 Countering Violent Extremism

Countering (or Preventing) Violent Extremism is another particular policy approach that shapes policy addressing issues of religion and conflict. This approach is promoted by globally dominant organisations such as the UN. The CVE approach developed after the events of 9/11 and has gained ground ever since. The approach is based on a set of ideas around the development of violent extremism, a concept that, like radicalisation, lacks a proper definition, but generally refers to the performance of ideologically motivated violent acts to achieve ideological, religious, economic, social or political goals. One of the key assumptions underlying the CVE discourse is that religion is one of the main factors that shapes the ideological motivation of violent extremism (Modirzadeh 2016; Schmid 2014; United Nations 2015; United Nations Security Council n.d.). This is in line with the globally dominant assumptions on the relation between religion and conflict as outlined in the previous section.

Among other documents, the United Nations 2015 Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism<sup>2</sup> is influential in shaping CVE policy worldwide. The Plan of Action explains how, '*in recent years, terrorist groups such as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al-Qaida and Boko Haram have shaped our image of violent extremism and the debate on how to address this threat*' (United Nations 2015, 1). Through its reference to these three terrorist groups as being deeply influential in defining violent extremism, the UN introduction to the CVE discourse emphasizes religion, particularly Islam, as one of the factors that frequently lies at the basis of conflict. However, the same document also presents religion as a solution to violence, as can be illustrated by the following quotation:

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<sup>2</sup>The UN Plan of Action 2015 does not use the term CVE but PVE, which stands for 'preventing violent extremism'. However, since the terms are often used interchangeably, and a definition of either term, let alone a description of what may distinguish the two, does not exist, I group the two terms together and opt to use the more commonly used term 'CVE' in this thesis.

'Distortion and misuse of religion are utilized to divide nations, cultures and people, undermining our humanity. Faith and community leaders are critical in mentoring vulnerable followers so as to enable them to reject violent ideologies and in providing opportunities for intra- and interfaith dialogue and discussion as a means of promoting tolerance, understanding and reconciliation between communities.' (United Nations 2015, 9)

This citation exemplifies the distinction between the 'two faces of faith' as explained in section 2.1.3. 'Bad' religion, on the one hand, is used to justify the '*undermining of humanity*', while 'good' religion, carried out by faith leaders, provides a counter narrative that promotes peaceful relations between communities (Hurd 2015, 2016; United Nations 2015). Simultaneously, this quote shows that faith communities are expected to contain certain '*vulnerable followers*', at risk of becoming violent. These followers thus need to be monitored and mentored.

The CVE discourse includes a "soft" counter-violence policy plan, refraining from a militaristic approach towards countering violent extremism. Instead, it focuses on the contextual factors, such as bad governance, high unemployment rates and human rights violations, that might influence individual actors and groups in their actions. In broad terms, CVE policies aim to shape an environment in which violent extremism cannot take root (United Nations 2015).

### 2.3.3 Conclusion

Radicalisation theory and the CVE discourse have several elements in common in their policy approach. First, both approaches address religious, particularly Islamic, communities as groups that carry a risk of conflict, especially among their youth members. To minimize this risk, these groups are considered to be in need of monitoring and guidance. Second, both approaches are based on the assumption that there is a link between specific religious ideology and violence. While the CVE discourse addresses contextual factors as well, there remains a strong focus on how this context invites individuals to adopt radical ideas, not on how it stimulates violent actions. That these violent actions follow from the radical ideas is uncontested and remains unexplained by either discourse.

Both policy approaches focus on promoting 'good religion' and countering 'bad religion'. This is done by the engagement of faith communities, the encouragement of interreligious dialogue and understanding, and the monitoring of groups at risk of radicalisation.

This section contributes to the central argument of this thesis by explaining that radicalisation theory and CVE policies are based on, and simultaneously help shape, a specific understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict. Policy making worldwide is influenced by these dominant policy approaches.

## 2.4 Conclusion

As described in the introduction of this thesis, Cameroon has characteristics that fit well with dominant ideas on a society at risk of religious conflict. Cameroon's large youth number and subsequent high youth unemployment rate, its exposure to radical Islamic ideas through the presence of Boko Haram in the north, its collection of different religious groups and its weak political and economic situation are all expected to contribute to the 'threat of religious radicalism', as the 2015 ICG report on Cameroon is aptly titled (International Crisis Group 2015).

This chapter has presented the assumptions that are central in globally dominant ideas about the relationship between religion and conflict. These ideas include the distinction between good and bad religion; the assumption that religion lies at the basis of conflict as the main identifier for individuals and groups; and the assumption that youth are most at risk of radicalisation. The globally dominant assumptions give shape to global policy. The policy focus lies on religious communities and religion as a driver of change, either in the direction of peace or conflict.

The conclusions of this chapter contribute to answering the main research question by explaining how the understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict is constructed on the level of global policy and international relations. The next chapters will explore a different view on religion and conflict, thereby contributing to the discussion on the understanding of the link between religion and conflict across different levels of politics and society in the 21st century.

### 3 METHODS

From the 23rd of June until the 30th of October 2016, I conducted field research in Yaoundé. In this chapter the methods used in conducting the research are presented. The first section describes how the research questions and focus were developed. The second section reflects on the ethnographic methods used in data collection. The third section describes the progression of the field work. Finally, the fourth section reflects on my role and position as a researcher. The chapter ends with some concluding remarks.

#### 3.1 Developing research questions

This section explains how the research questions were formed and why this thesis addresses certain themes and subjects. The initial focus of the research was to examine how the discourse and programming of the NGOs participating in the research differed. The assumption lying at the basis of this question was that there is indeed a difference between discourse and programming of these NGOs. This assumption came about through introductory interviews in the Netherlands with people working for or with local NGOs in Cameroon. These respondents indicated that the image that was sketched by the ICG report, of the threat of religious radicalism and intolerance, did not correspond with their perception of the situation in Cameroon. Yet the organisations they worked for did organise projects in the domain of conflict prevention, focusing on inter-religious dialogue and understanding. These interviews indicated therefore a difference between discourse and practice of these NGOs. However, during the interviews with NGO employees in Cameroon, it became clear that it was difficult to separate the official discourse of the organisation and the personal opinion and experiences of the employees being interviewed. In addition, different employees from the same organisation did not always view things in the same way, which obliterated the distinction between official NGO view and personal perceptions even more. Because of this practical limitation, the research focus shifted specifically to the personal perceptions of NGO employees. For the development of my research questions, this meant that the focus shifted from the analysis of an official discourse to a more personal approach.

#### 3.2 Data collection

The case study of this research is largely based on data collected during four months of field research in Yaoundé in the period of June – October 2016. In this section I reflect on the ethnographic methods used for the data collection.

The research includes 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews with employees of local NGOs based in Yaoundé. As will be explained more elaborately in chapter four, the organisations that took part in this research have been selected on the basis of their membership of, or cooperation with, the Réseau Foi et Liberation (Faith and Liberation Network, RFL). The RFL brings together civil society organisations and faith communities that together work towards a peaceful Cameroon.

My first contacts in Cameroon were made while still in the Netherlands, through people working with local NGOs in Cameroon. These first contacts gave me a list of telephone numbers of the organisations that are part of the RFL. In addition, word spread among these organisations that I was in Yaoundé to conduct interviews, so many already expected me to call in, which made it easier to make appointments. The organisations from outside the RFL that took part in the research were recommended by respondents of the research. By making use of these non-probability sampling methods, snowball sampling and response driven sampling, were not only practical, but also ensured that the research respondents did indeed fit well into the research. In addition, I paid attention to finding a balanced group of research respondents in terms of age, role in the organisation, religious affiliations and gender (Bernard 2011).

The interviews were held on a semi-structured basis, making use of a word spin of interview topics instead of a fixed question list. The semi-structured interview method has benefited the research by leaving space for the respondents to elaborate on issues or experiences that they deemed important. In this way, all

interviews touched upon similar topics so they could be compared, but the respondents themselves directed the interview towards the issue that was most guiding in their perception of the relationship between religion and conflict (Kvale 2008).

To stimulate the respondents to take charge, the questions asked were phrased in a non-directive way. In addition, by staying silent and adopting an active listening stance, respondents were encouraged to keep talking as well as to reflect upon what they said during short silent breaks in the conversation, after which respondents would often nuance their statements or come with examples. As a consequence of the semi-structured research method, the order of the subjects discussed in the interviews differs per interview.

In addition to the personal interviews and conversations with NGO employees, participant observation has been conducted during five events organised by one or more of the organisations involved in this research. These observations gave insight in the interaction between employees of different NGOs, thereby contributing to the understanding shared or contested ideas about religion between these employees.

During the events the focus was often on the benefits of cooperation between the different NGOs. During interviews, on the other hand, respondents often focused mostly on the views of the group they identified with most themselves. In this way, the different data collection methods complemented each other by providing different perspectives on the issue under investigation.

Next to these five events, fifteen informal conversations with NGO employees contribute to the data collected in Cameroon. These conversations have taken place largely in preparation for or in between interviews at the various NGO offices. What distinguished these conversations from the in-depth interviews was the fact that these conversations were often more informal and respondents were even more free to steer the conversation in a certain direction.

Most interviews and conversations were conducted in French, the main language in Yaoundé. However, several interviews were in English, either because the respondent came from one of the anglophone regions, or because the respondent was proficient in English. The first interview in French was conducted after a month in the field, because my French needed to be improved by practice in that first month. My French was good enough to understand the conversations and to ask simple questions, but sometimes it took some time to translate and process some of the answers of the respondents, so I could not react immediately by asking further questions about a certain topic. To deal with this problem, several respondents have been interviewed multiple times so there could be another opportunity to ask questions, or to illuminate answers given in a previous interview that I did not understand exactly.

Handwritten field notes were made during each interview, which were processed as soon as possible after the conversation. In addition, most interviews were recorded and specific segments were transcribed so as to complement the field notes where they were not clear or where important issues were discussed. The participant observation was recorded in field notes but not with a voice recorder. All respondents indicated to feel relatively comfortable with me taking notes or recording the conversations. The respondents were informed before the interview that their interview would be presented anonymously in the thesis. All quotes are therefore attributed to organisations rather than specific people within these organisations.

All interviews and conversations took place in the respondent's various offices. This benefited the research because we were not disturbed or interrupted. All respondents could speak freely, without colleagues or other people listening in. In addition, the location and decoration of the office provided information about the organisation, for example about which other organisations were located close by, or what information was shared in the public spaces of the office.

The field research in the form of interviews and participant observation was supplemented by the use of 'grey' literature, such as newspaper articles, NGO documents and policy reports. In addition, academic literature on the context of Cameroon has been consulted. The variety of research methods used ensured the triangulation of data, which contributes to the validity of the research.

### 3.3 Progression of fieldwork

As explained in the introduction of this thesis, my interest in Cameroon was sparked by the ICG report on religious radicalism in the country. To learn more about the situation, I contacted several people who came from or had visited Cameroon and who worked in the field of conflict prevention. Interestingly, both Cameroonians and visitors indicated to have no experience with religious radicalism in the country and claimed that the report's conclusions were exaggerated. This situation of tension between a globally renowned research group and local perceptions of the situation was promising for an interesting case study on the mismatch between global ideas and local realities.

Via the Dutch organisation *Mensen met een Missie* (MM) I was put into contact with Duplex Kuenzob, general secretary of the Cameroonian NGO *Dynamique Mondiale des Jeunes*, or World Youth Dynamics Cameroon (DMJ). I met Duplex in the MM office for an introductory interview. After the interview, Duplex facilitated my stay in Cameroon through his organisation by, among other things, writing an invitation letter for the Cameroonian embassy in the Netherlands; being my formal internship supervisor abroad; finding accommodation for my stay; and helping me get in touch with other organisations within the RFL. The other employees and interns at DMJ helped me get comfortable in my new environment by inviting me along on trips and taking me out for drinks. My accommodation was arranged in the guest lodgings of another organisation, the Ecumenical Service for Peace (SEP). Dr. Ndi Richard Tanto, the director of SEP at the time, helped me in my first days to arrange the basics such as a certified copy of my passport and a simcard, but also taught me how to find my way in Yaoundé by learning landmarks and hailing taxi's.

I started organising the research by making first visits to the organisations of the RFL. I used preliminary visits to introduce myself and my research topic and to meet different employees of each organisation. I then proceeded to make appointments for a formal interview, either during my first visit or later via the telephone. I noticed soon that it was much more common in Cameroon to use the telephone, rather than e-mail, to make appointments. Appointments were often made for the same afternoon or the following day.

Before going to Cameroon I expected to be able to do participant observation at one of the programs dealing with issues of religion and conflict. However, due to the timing of my research (there were only few programs organised in the 'summer months') and to financial constraints of the organisations, it turned out that no such programs took place while I was there. To get an idea about these types of programs anyway, I did talk about previous programs and about the planning of new programs on this topic during the interviews. In addition, I attended programs that did not specifically address related issues, but where I could see if, and if so, how and where, religion was a topic on the agenda.

### 3.4 My role and position as a researcher

As a researcher in the field, you are part of the social situation you are trying to research. This section therefore reflects on how the data collected may be biased by my specific role and position as a researcher (Madden 2017).

As mentioned above, my limited knowledge of French might have influenced the research findings. Especially in the first months, my hesitant French prevented me from striking up easy conversations with French-speaking Cameroonians. In addition, some words or parts of conversations I couldn't translate in the moment. I limited the negative effects of this as much as possible by recording and transcribing my interviews afterwards, but I could not always ask adequate follow-up questions if part of the conversation was unclear to me.

Being an atheist, I was in a minority in Cameroon. All of my respondents were religious believers. In almost every interview, my respondents asked me whether I was religious or with which religious group I



identified. It never surprised the respondents, however, when I replied I did not believe, nor did they judge me for it. I do therefore not think that this has influenced the research by inviting a particular response from the people I spoke to.

In practical terms, being fairly uneducated in the field of theology might have both hindered and benefited the research. On the one hand, the fact that I have limited knowledge on the differences between specific religious denominations ensured that my respondents could share their expert knowledge in this field without my preconceptions about the subject. On the other hand, my ignorance on the matter also prevented me from asking further questions if the conversation on religious practice and beliefs remained a bit superficial.

As the next chapter will explain, all organisations featured in this study cope with problems of funding. Some of the respondents, especially people operating at a higher level of the organisation or who directly concerned themselves with funding, might have sketched the situation in Cameroon a bit darker than the reality is in order to possibly open up funding opportunities. Some respondents even warned me that other respondents might do so, because I was associated - as a European student in the development sector - with connections to people and organisations with money. In order to prevent a bias in my data, I tried to interview multiple employees of each organisation. In addition, by speaking to as many people as possible, I could reflect on which realities were expressed by whom.

## 4 MAPPING THE FIELD

In order to interpret the realities of the local NGO staff interviewed for this research, it is important to place their information in the context of the organisations they work for. For this reason, this chapter describes the characteristics, aims and networks of the NGOs that took part in this research. In addition, it outlines the projects organised by these organisations that address issues of religion and conflict. The chapter answers the following research question: how do local NGOs in Cameroon engage with issues of religion and conflict? The first section describes the characteristics of the NGOs that participated in this research. The second section explores the NGO views on the cooperation between the different NGOs. The third section provides examples of specific projects focusing on the promotion of good relations between religious groups as organised in previous years.

In short, this chapter explains how the organisations see their role in addressing issues of religion and conflict in Cameroon. In this way, it contributes to answering the main research question by providing the working context against which local NGO staff shape their understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict.

### 4.1 Characteristics of local NGOs

The research in Cameroon was done among the staff of local NGOs that are part of or cooperate with the Faith and Liberation Network (RFL). The network plays a significant role in uniting a variety of organisations in Cameroon. The network includes both organisations that do and that do not identify themselves as primarily 'religious' organisations. Nevertheless, all organisations in the network acknowledge a need for the presence of religious organisations in the public domain. This interest in religion is in line with recent developments in global policy as outlined in chapter two. The explicit desire for cooperation between faith communities and civil society organisations in the RFL therefore provides an interesting point of departure for this research.

This research is based on interviews with staff from six of the fifteen member organisations of the RFL, namely Service National Justice et Paix (SNJP); Forum Cameroun; Dynamique Mondiale des Jeunes (DMJ); Conseil des Eglises Protestantes du Cameroun (CEPCA); and Conseil Supérieur Islamique du Cameroun (CSIC). The seven other member organisations of the RFL were not situated in Yaoundé and were thus not included in this research. The research did extend to several other organisations that associate themselves with the RFL: l'Association Camerounaise pour le Dialogue Interreligieux (ACADIR), l'Association Culturelle Islamique du Cameroun (ACIC), Jeunesse Islamique du Cameroun (JIC) and Ecumenical Service for Peace (SEP). Lastly, conversations have been held with employees of the organisations Conférence Épiscopale Nationale du Cameroun (CENC); Caravane non à la Terreur; and Nouveau Droits des Hommes (NDH).

In the RFL brochure, a distinction is made between faith-based organisations and other civil society organisations. In practice, however, this distinction is difficult to make. As religion plays a large role in the lives of most Cameroonian citizens, this is also true for the employees of the respective organisations. In the organisations that took part in this research, the employees of each organisation often shared the same religious affiliations. The interreligious dialogue organisation ACADIR, for example, only consists of catholic employees, despite its official neutral stance on religious issues. In addition, its office is located on the site of the Catholic church in Yaoundé. This suggests that the organisation can be associated with Catholicism. Some of the organisations work mainly with the target group of the religious affiliation of their background in mind, such as ACIC, CSIC and CEPCA. Other organisations, such as ACADIR and SEP, are established specifically to build bridges between the different religious groups.

All organisations are based in Yaoundé and conduct programs in the capital as well as in the other regions of Cameroon. The organisations employ mainly Cameroonian staff. The aims of the organisations vary, but all organisations described above work towards a peaceful future of Cameroon. The respondents

generally defined peace not only as the absence of conflict, but also as a situation of mutual tolerance and respect between groups and the freedom to live your life as desired. Most of the organisations respond to the contemporary problems Cameroon is facing, such as the presence of Boko Haram armed groups in the north of the country. The organisations all expressed a specific focus on youth as agents of change. In relation to conflict, youth, and especially young men, are seen by the respondents as susceptible to enrolment in armed groups.

Lastly, the field research showed that all organisations that took part in this research deal with problems of funding. Most organisations are dependent on donations from foreign organisations that sympathise with the local organisations' goals and projects. For CEPCA, for example, this was Brot für die Welt. These donor organisations often share the same religious affiliations. Some organisations receive government funds for (certain) projects, such as small subsidies for private education. However, the dependence on international funding for many of the organisations poses a challenge: how to compete with other organisations all over the world for funds. One of the organisations' directors described Cameroon's "problem" as follows:

'All organisations have a problem of funding. In Cameroon today, civil society is not being funded because people know Cameroon is in peace.'

In other words: the relatively peaceful Cameroon is at the bottom of international donor organisations' lists of places that need urgent funding. In comparison to the surrounding countries, for example, Cameroon is doing fairly well in terms of conflict and inequality. This results in organisations having extra trouble in finding funds for their conflict prevention programs because donor organisations favour programs that address issues they perceive as urgent. The respondents of this research indicated that they were aware of this bias of funding organisations. In addition, they indicated that they develop strategies to obtain funds, for example by phrasing a project in the language adopted by these funding organisations. The analysis in chapter six will argue that the funding organisations' perception is likely to be influenced by the dominant global discourse on religion and conflict. In this way, which problems will be addressed in the society of Cameroon and which problems will not may also be (indirectly) influenced by this discourse. This analysis will also explain how the local situation itself can be influenced by this relationship between local organisations, global funding and the dominant global discourse on religion and conflict.

## 4.2 Cooperation between NGOs with different religious backgrounds

This section outlines how NGOs with different religious backgrounds cooperate. It explains why this cooperation is valued. By doing so, the section contributes to answering this chapter's research question by explaining how NGOs relate to their role in engaging with religious issues.

The organisations that took part in this research all cooperated with organisations with different religious backgrounds. As mentioned before, six of the organisations interviewed are members of the RFL. Other organisations either cooperated with the network as a whole or with different organisations within the network. From the participant observation could be concluded that the employees valued cooperation between organisations of different religious affiliations highly. Respondents named several reasons for the importance of the organisations' cooperation across religious boundaries. First, the broad variety of religious groups in Cameroon society leads to all separate groups having only limited political power. This is so because each group has a small percentage of followers in relation to the total national population. United, however, religious groups can join forces to have a greater political influence. This is especially helpful in situations where cooperation with the government is necessary. Private education, for example, is often organized by religious institutions. Particularly since Cameroon's economic crisis in the 1990s, subsidies and grants from the government for private education have dropped dramatically. This has caused debts and bankruptcy for

many schools. Catholic, Protestant and Islamic organisations are therefore currently teaming up to advocate for higher subsidies for private education. During a meeting that was organised to harmonize lobbying strategies between the three groups (the 'Platform of national secretaries of private religious education'), the representative of the Catholic hosts of the meeting summarized the importance of cooperation between the religious groups as follows:

'We have proven that unity is strength. If the Catholics went alone: zero. If the Protestants went alone: zero. If the Muslims went alone: zero. But now we are three, and we have God helping us.'

This quote illustrates the prevailing idea that the various religious groups are stronger together. In addition, it implies that all three groups share the same God, which may justify their cooperation. This idea returned several times in the interviews, as will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

Second, Cameroon's history of pluralism and peaceful coexistence has shaped current structures for cooperation. The high diversity of the society of Cameroon suggests that social groups, either bounded by religious, ethnic, or other lines, will be connected in some way or another, especially in the capital Yaoundé where all groups come together. This can be illustrated by a quote of one of the respondents in this research:

'I do not see Muslims and Christians. People do not live in a Muslim neighbourhood and a Christian neighbourhood, they live together.'

Reference was often made to religiously mixed neighbourhoods, families and workplaces. The organisations that took part in this research respond to the close proximity of people with different world views by promoting communication and cooperation between these different groups.

The cooperation between organisations from different religious backgrounds is highly developed in Cameroon as a result of the dynamics outlined above. There are, however, boundaries to the degree of cooperation. As multiple respondents indicated, certain topics are avoided in discussions between the different organisations. An example is the topic of polygamy, which is rejected by Christian organisations but viewed as a normal phenomenon by Islamic organisations. This might hinder cooperation on certain topics in the development sector. Another example is the issue of women's rights, as expressed by one of the (Christian) respondents:

'There is theological discussion between and within religions. Sometimes we don't want to discuss certain issues, such as women in Islam.'

The way this respondent phrased the issue, 'women in Islam', indicates a difference between 'women in Islam' and 'women in Christianity'. This quote therefore shows the difficulties of cooperation between groups that are based on different moral frameworks: when ideas about topics are strong, it is harder to talk about them in relatively neutral terms, such as 'women's rights'.

Cooperation between the three mainline churches and other religious strands, such as revival churches, is more difficult to find. According to the respondents of the research, revival churches are less willing to engage with different faith communities. In the next chapter, several reasons are explored for why this is so.

In conclusion, there are several reasons why local organisations in Cameroon choose to cooperate across religious boundaries. Political power increases when the voices of the religious are united, and Cameroon's diversity and history of peaceful coexistence form a point of departure for further cooperation and mutual understanding. This does not mean, however, that cooperation is always natural and without tensions. Certain topics are avoided because of a lack of moral common ground between organisations. The idea that the three main monotheistic religions all share the same God helps to find this common ground.

### 4.3 Projects addressing religion and conflict

This section gives examples of the projects organised by the NGOs participating in this research that address issues of religion and conflict. The section contributes to answering the main question of this research by showing how local NGOs in Cameroon engage with issues of religion and conflict in their programming. As explained in the previous section, issues of religion are regarded to be of interest in the field of conflict prevention in Cameroon. This section explores the two main types of programs conducted in this field: interreligious dialogue programs and religious education. The section is based mainly on information provided during interviews and conversations with local NGO staff.

Interreligious dialogue projects in Cameroon in the past years were characterized by the promotion of interaction between members of different religious communities. Most of the organisations that took part in this research started interreligious dialogue programs after 2014, when Boko Haram first attacked the north of Cameroon. DMJ and SEP, however, already started their interreligious dialogue programs as soon as 1995. As the respondents of this research explained, ACADIR, an organisation focusing specifically on interreligious dialogue, was founded in 2005 after the idea had sparked during a general meeting of one of the main Catholic organisations. The timing of the emergence of these interreligious dialogue programs in Cameroon is similar to that of the increasing global interest in issues of religion and conflict. The direct reason for the development of these initiatives, however, was the influence of the Boko Haram attacks on relations between religious groups in the country.

The interreligious dialogue programs that have taken place in Cameroon focused mainly on the mainline religious groups: Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam. ACADIR also includes Christian Orthodox groups in its programs. Revival churches, while invited, have not been participating in many interreligious dialogue programs. The aim of the programs was to promote a culture of peace and mutual understanding across different religious groups in Cameroon. The programs were considered necessary to prevent the stigmatisation of Muslims and to promote the understanding of all religions as a basis for peace (Dynamique Mondiale des Jeunes 2014).

Interreligious dialogue programs organised by the NGOs frequently focused specifically on youth. The next chapter will explain in further detail how local NGO staff see the relation between youth, religion and conflict. In addition, the next chapter outlines how local NGO staff reflect on the interreligious dialogue efforts in Cameroon of the past years.

Another type of program organised by the NGOs participating in this research is religious education. Some organisations focus more on the religious education of their specific focus group than others. While interreligious dialogue projects are explained to have a strong educational aspect, for example in comparing religious texts, the term religious education is used here to indicate the specific teaching of religious doctrine to a religious group.

Especially Islamic organisations put emphasis on teaching '*the real Islam*' as opposed to violent, radical Islam. The need for teaching the 'right' religion is more pronounced among organisations that are based on Islamic tradition. Organisations that find their roots in Christianity, on the other hand, do not focus their religious education programs so much on how to be a 'good' Christian, but rather on how all religions are

based on principles of peace and tolerance. Christian organisations focused their efforts on fighting the stigmatisation of Muslims. A reason for this difference between Islamic and Christian organisations could be that globally, as explained in chapter two, there is a stronger association between Islam and violence than Christianity and violence since the September 11 attacks. Muslims may feel the need to defend themselves against stigmatisation. By putting a stronger focus on how Islam should be understood, namely as a religion of peace, the organisations present a counter narrative to the popular discourse of 'violent Islam'.

In addition, despite the consequent downplaying by government and civil society of the relation between Islam and Boko Haram, Islam is still strongly linked to the armed groups active in the North of Cameroon. Perhaps Islamic organisations do see an increased risk for Islamic people to join Boko Haram.

In conclusion, the projects organised by the NGOs participating in this research focus mainly on interreligious dialogue and religious education. The aim of the projects is to reduce the stigmatisation of Muslims and to prevent radicalisation. Youth are addressed specifically, because they are considered to be most at risk of enrolment in the armed groups of Boko Haram. To connect the issues addressed in NGO programs to the local situation, the next chapter will explore in further detail the perceptions of local NGO staff on issues of religion and conflict in Cameroon.

## 5 NGO STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF RELIGION AND CONFLICT

This chapter describes the results of the qualitative research conducted in Cameroon. By doing so, it answers the following research question: how do local NGO staff in Cameroon understand the relation between religion and conflict in the country? By answering this research question, this chapter contributes to the main argument of this thesis by presenting a different perspective on the relationship between religion and conflict compared to the dominant international discourse as outlined in the theoretical framework. Their differences will be further analysed in chapter six.

### 5.1 The place of “religion” in Cameroon

In order to reflect on how local NGO staff theorize religion, this section first explains how they situate religion in the society of Cameroon. Next, it describes what changes the respondents see in Cameroon's religious landscape. The section concludes by summarizing how local NGO staff think and talk about religion. In the next chapter, this view on religion will be set against the dominant global thinking about religion. This discussion contributes to answering the main research question of this thesis by showing how issues of religion are understood differently across different levels of politics and society.

#### 5.1.1 Religion in Cameroon

All respondents that took part in this research acknowledged the broad religious diversity in Cameroon. As explained in the introduction to this thesis, the three main religious groups in Cameroon consist of three monotheistic religions: Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam. All respondents referred to a further heterogeneity within these three broad religious categories. The differences within these three groups are related to a variety of strands and theological diversions within these groups, but also to specific practices that are related to origin and ethnicity of the religious actors. The spread of Islam in Cameroon, for example, has followed a different trajectory in different parts of the country, which is still visible in the way people practice Islam today (van Santen 2002).

In Cameroon, the ambiguity of the concept of religion can be seen in the description of the different religious categories given by the respondents in the field research. When asked about the differences between the different religions, respondents only gave superficial examples, such as *'protestants don't believe in the virgin Mary'*. To downplay the differences between religious groups even further, respondents frequently stated *'we all believe in the same God'*. This implies that the boundaries between religious groups are flexible, and that the difference is not perceived in terms of what people believe, but in how they practice their beliefs.

Religion is expressed by respondents to be strongly related to ethnicity and culture. In addition, religion and culture difficult to set apart. For example, during participant observation at the annual meeting of the RFL, I noticed that one of the members of the Protestant organisation CEPCA was wearing what I thought was traditional Islamic attire: an embroidered djellaba and a matching fez. These clothes were worn by the members of the Islamic organisation as well, and they were sold primarily in the Islamic neighbourhoods of Yaoundé. When I asked him about it, he responded that the clothes were not only associated with Islam, but also with the Far North region, where Islam is prevalent over the other religious groups. As he came from this region, he liked to express this by wearing his traditional clothes to this meeting. This incident exemplifies the fluid boundaries between religion and culture in Cameroon. The next subsection goes deeper into concrete examples of current changes in Cameroon's religious landscape.

#### 5.1.2 Changing religious landscape

The introduction of this thesis briefly outlined the history and characteristics of the religious landscape in Cameroon. This landscape, however, is never static. Religious institutions and practices change as a result of changes in society. These changes have been plenty in Cameroon in the past decade. In this section I summarize the changes that are most frequently mentioned by the local NGO staff that participated in the research. The role of religion can be connected to particular developments in society. This explains conflict in relation to a specific context instead of as an independent process, set apart from other dynamics in the country.

One of the most influential changes in Cameroonian society and particularly Yaoundé is the increased level of 'globalisation'. This term is used by the respondents to indicate the intensified connection between Cameroonian citizens and the rest of the world. Many respondents to the research reported significant changes in the religious landscape due to globalisation.

First of all, it was mentioned that increased exposure to imagery of religious institutions and interpretations all around the world strongly influences (young) people's interest in change in Cameroon. As there is more insight in the different options available, due to the internet and social media, the call for change from youth becomes stronger. Young people have more access to information about different ways to organise religion. From this follows that young people propose changes in their own religious institutions. For example, they ask for more influence in the decision making process, or more use of new technologies to support the preachings. This is illustrated in the following quote from an interview with an employee of CEPCA:

'Inside the churches, some people want a new way of doing things. Also with globalisation, practices coming from everywhere. People want these experiences within their church communities. They will start a movement, they will leave the church if they do not like it anymore. I think there is also an issue of power. People say: we create somewhere new, where we can have power, and money also. It is serious business.' (CEPCA, 3 October 2016)

A consequence of this development is that religious institutions are stimulated to adapt their structures and practices to the changing environment. Young people in Yaoundé are also reported to feel more free in their choice of religion, instead of following directly in their parents' footsteps, as was common before. Religious mobility, a term that indicates the increased fluidity of religious affiliation, has augmented as youth 'try out' multiple religious groups and institutions before settling down (Breen and Hayes 1996). This pressures religious institutions even more, because the choice to leave one religious group and join or even start another is made more quickly. This results in a scramble for membership among religious institutions.

Not only on the level of the individual, also on the level of religious institutions globalisation and social media influence thinking and practice. Religious institutions make use of mass media for evangelisation. Especially newer strands in the religious landscape of Cameroon, such as the revival churches, take advantage of to the increased consumption of social media in Cameroon. Social media also shapes the way different religious groups view each other. Stigmatizing messages spread easily and are accessible to many people at the same time, which may cause polarisation. Social media are not controllable by the government or other official institutions. Some of the respondents have therefore formulated a desire for more regulation of the use of social media by religious institutions, as is visible in the following quote from an employee of CSIC:

Religious institutions are using and contributing to globalisation and modern social media. Religion needs to be regulated more. The usage of mass media by churches invokes polarisation.



This quote illustrates the finding that the use of social media by religious institutions is seen as posing a threat towards the peaceful coexistence between religious groups in Cameroon, as is explained more elaborately in the next section. Simultaneously, however, social media are also being used by the organisations that took part in this research to share messages of peace and cooperation between religious groups. Social media apparently cut both ways. While the message spread by social media can be either polarising or bringing together, which message is most appealing to its receivers depends on their particular context and background.

Last, some respondents mentioned that the swift rate of change in Cameroon society as a whole was one of the reasons for an increased tendency to use religion as an anchor in a rapidly changing world. This was formulated as follows by one of the employees of CEPCA:

I think the problem is that churches have not yet adapted to the changes in society, they are still holding on to traditional ways. Yet society is evolving, new things are coming up with globalisation. (...) As a result, people seem to be willing to move towards fundamentalism because of the insecurity of the transition of society. (CEPCA, 5 July 2016)

The respondent refers specifically to 'fundamentalism', which, as is explained in the theoretical framework of this thesis, generally refers to a strict reading of religious doctrine. Fundamentalism can be seen as the opposite of insecurity because it leaves no room for uncertainties or flexible interpretations. Instead, fundamentalism offers a basis from which the world can be explained and classified.

Several respondents indicated an increased denominationalisation of the various religious groups. By denominationalisation, the respondents meant the development of stronger group boundaries and ideas about what separates one group from another. This has hindered project development, for example in the case of CEPCA, the umbrella organisation for Protestant churches. The eleven officially recognized Protestant churches under its wing are increasingly difficult to unify and mobilize for common projects. This has resulted in a problem of funding, as several churches do not feel represented by the umbrella organisation and therefore refuse to pay membership fees.

Relating to this, many respondents indicated that the number of people going to church had increased. This included both active and passive presence: church attendance as well as more active involvement in, for example, evangelisation. Especially Revival churches seem to attract new members, particularly youth and women. My respondents named several reasons for this dynamic. Firstly, as explained in the introduction to this thesis, youth are part of the most economically vulnerable groups in Cameroon society. Unemployment rates are high and many youths live in poverty (Abdoumaliq 2005). Revival churches offer opportunities for these youths: a network, but also the assurance that God will provide for His devoted followers. Church members are told they will find a job, a partner, a visa to Europe or a solution for their health problems as long as they pray and give money to the church (Akoko 2007). What also makes Revival churches attractive for youths is the importance of music and dance during church services, and the use of modern technology. Lastly, many revival churches are newly established. This often means that the input of young voices is welcomed in the organisational structure of these churches, whereas in many mainline churches the decision-making process is dominated by church elders who do not leave space for the youths. Of course the exact dynamics differ per individual church. Additionally, the competition with revival churches has led to organisational change in mainline churches as well, and traditional doctrines and structures are opened up for the input of youth in order to compete with new churches and religious strands.

Specific for the attraction of Islam is the strong Islamic community in Yaoundé. This community is known to provide certain services to their members. These services may include advice and people to turn to in times of need, but also more tangible services such as grants to study abroad.

The increased interest in (revival) churches was also criticized by the respondents. They were worried about the truthfulness of young people's connection to God. According to these respondents, the predominantly material motivation for engagement with certain religious groups is likely to obscure the individual's '*true relationship with God*'. This relationship should, according to the respondents, be characterised not by reciprocity, but by a personal connection and unconditional love and trust.

Another trend identified by the respondents is, paradoxically, a decreased interest in religion and religious institutions. Several respondents noted a negative change in attendance of religious services, again mainly among young people. As an employee of the Islamic organisation ACIC put it:

'Our concern now is that the youth are a bit lost. The people are not interested in religion, they are more interested in money.'

This quote indicates that religion is seen as a basic value in Cameroon. The idea that people without a 'true relationship with God' were missing something in their life was present in all conversations.

### 5.1.3 Conclusion

The previous subsections explain how the respondents see the place of religion in Cameroon. From this it can be concluded that religion is seen to be intertwined with the lives and practices of many Cameroonians. Local NGO staff talk about religion as something that concerns all Cameroonian citizens. It forms a common ground for people to connect with each other and lies at the basis of the actions of individuals and groups. Specific attention is paid to the individuals' personal connection with God (or Allah), which should be based on a principle of unconditionality.

Identification with religious groups is seen as flexible as the boundaries between religious groups are fluid and religious mobility is high. Simultaneously, the differences between mainline religious groups are downplayed. The focus in thinking about religion and religious issues is placed on the fact that everyone has their own specific set of beliefs, but each individual believes in the same God anyway. A point of concern is the denominationalisation process that enhances boundaries between religious groups.

Lastly, the examples outlined in the previous two subsections about how religion is perceived by local NGO staff already show how religion and religious groups can at the same time promote peace and tolerance, and invoke polarisation between groups. The next section goes further into how the relationship between religion and conflict is viewed by the respondents of this research.

## 5.2 Religion and conflict

This section gives an overview of how the local NGO staff understand issues of religion and conflict in Cameroon. It shows that, while the respondents recognize tensions between different religious groups, the general consensus is that religion is not at the basis of conflicts in society. Especially the good relationships between Christians and Muslims are emphasized, whereas the growing number of revival churches is frequently problematized. Youth are perceived to play a key role in conflict in the society of Cameroon. This section contributes to the main argument of this research by providing an example of how the relationship between religion and conflict is perceived across different levels of society.

### 5.2.1 Religious fragmentation

As mentioned in section 5.1.1, many of the organisations frame the difference between the various religious affiliations mainly as a difference of practice. When asked about the differences between religious groups, most people referred only to the worshipping of certain saints, or the adherence to a certain set of rules. Frequent mention is made to the idea that 'we all pray to the same God', an idea that reflects the flexible boundaries of specific religious groups.

As is explained in the previous section, religious mobility has increased, as has the number of new religious institutions. This fragmentation of the religious landscape is seen by some of the respondents as a threat to national stability. They argue that the newly established religious groups exist largely of group members who have belonged to different religious groups before. By consequence, a scramble for membership emerges and competition between religious groups increases. Respondents of this research have expressed concerns about the development of this religious fragmentation:

'At the dialogue level, the influx of new strands, both at the side of Christianity and at the side of Islam, the new strands take a destabilizing position.'

The increased religious mobility and fragmentation of the religious landscape has caused feelings of insecurity, which in turn set in motion processes of denominationalism, according to the respondents of this research. This means that the boundaries between different religions are more strictly defined. The organisations notice this in their programs. CEPCA, the Protestant umbrella organisation, has for example seen an increased problem of funding as the eleven member churches find it increasingly difficult to relate to one another. As a result, CEPCA staff have reported to struggle with explaining the relevance of the organisation to these different churches and some churches have become more hesitant to pay their membership fees. CEPCA employees explain this development as a result of the increased denominationalism.

The rise of Christian revival churches is also named as a cause of concern. Members of mainline Protestant and Catholic churches now divide themselves over the newly established revival churches. The closed attitude of some of these churches stimulates their members to break with their social network from before, which causes tensions in society. This dynamic will be explained in more detail in subsection 5.2.3.

Specific questions about the rise of fundamentalist Islam were mostly answered with the statement that while there are extremist groups emerging, these groups are still small.

In the interviews, two ways of framing the fragmentation of the religious landscape in Cameroon in relation to conflict could be detected. A number of respondents did see this fragmentation as a reason for concern.

'The risk of conflict is very weak, but there is a crisis of religion at the moment. There are extremist tendencies, as well as the new churches we call Pentecostalist. They are not open for dialogue. Among the Muslims, there is a new form of Islam that does not have a structure that permits dialogue.' (CEPCA, 5 July 2016)

However, an equally large number of respondents argued that even though newly emerging groups show more extremist tendencies, these tendencies cannot gain much ground in Cameroon. Several reasons were given for the limited power of extremist ideas in Cameroon, among which the long history of peaceful coexistence between religious groups; and diversity. These reasons will be further explained in subsection 5.2.4. The next subsections go deeper into the relations between specific religious groups.

### 5.2.2 Muslim-Christian relationships

In general, the relation between Muslims and Christians was described as one of tolerance and understanding. Muslims and Christians live in the same neighbourhoods, work at the same places, get married and have children together. All respondents of the research, Muslims and Christians alike, emphasized the peaceful coexistence of the different religious groups, as is exemplified by the following quotes:

'Religious tolerance is interesting: historically, culturally, politically. ... When you get to a Muslim community, you find families of both Muslims and Christians. In some cases one Muslim and one Christian are a couple. They raise children who practice both, or who choose which faith they want to practice. Their families accept this, they are emulated in family and community. Circumstances take extreme cases, to get into violent conflict is difficult.' (CEPCA, 14 September 2016)

'The Christians and the Muslims live in peace. There is no war, no crusade, no conflict. They are working together to fight the sect of Boko Haram.' (CEPCA, 26 September 2016)

'Apart from Boko Haram terrorism there are no problems in Cameroon. Christians and Muslims get on well together. Boko Haram is not Islamic. All relations go as well as before. We find solutions together. We've grown up together. Islam is a religion of peace. Christians like Islam because we're pious. Families are mixed. There are prayer facilities in public places. There are three grand groups: Djiani, suni, sjiit, they live together in peace. You invite everyone, some come, some don't. There is no oppression of one group. The key word is: respect. When there are two groups it is easy to set them up against each other, here it's more difficult because of the diversity.' (JIC, 4 October 2016)

As the above quotes illustrate, NGO staff gave examples of Christians participating in Islamic practices to illustrate the good relations between both groups. Especially the celebration of religious holidays was frequently mentioned as an occasion to bring the different religious groups together:

'Ramadan is an occasion to make the link with other religions, the Islam give gifts to other religions. All Muslims then invite Christians to eat with them. In Briqueterie, the Muslim neighbourhood, you can join for dinner with every family during Ramadan, you can eat in all the houses. It is a symbol of interreligious dialogue.' (DMJ, 28 June 2016)

'So far the relations between Christians and Muslims in Cameroon are good, really. We are living among Christians. I never heard of a problem. During the religious feast we open our door and they come and eat.' (JIC, 24 September 2016)

While Christian respondents frequently mentioned their participation in Islamic practice to illustrate the good relations between the groups, Muslim respondents often emphasized the peaceful nature of Islam. This is illustrated by the following quote:

'Islam is not a religion of war, we like only to be a friend. It is a religion of freedom of expression. Islam does not condemn, it has to be an example. A good Muslim is a mirror for all religions.' (ACIC, 28 July 2016)

A possible explanation for this difference in presenting the nature of the relationship between Christians and Muslims is the idea that Muslims might feel a need to defend themselves against allegations of violence. As chapter two explained, the Islam has carried a stigma since the events of 9/11. This stigmatisation is also visible in Cameroon, as will be elaborated upon later in this section. Presenting the Islam as a religion of peace and morality provides a counter narrative to this stigmatisation. Simultaneously, the expressed willingness of Christians to participate in Islamic practices also emphasizes the rejection of the idea of Islam as a religion of violence with which one does not want to associate oneself.

The conflict of Boko Haram, which is regarded a religious conflict in the dominant global discourse, is explained in Cameroon as a conflict that falls outside the realm of religion. All respondents of the research, both Christians and Muslims, stated that the attacks by Boko Haram cannot be considered a religious conflict. Instead, Boko Haram is seen as a political organisation that uses a religious framework to justify their actions, but also only to a certain extent. Several respondents stressed that the numbers of Muslim and Christian victims of the attacks in the north are similar, and that both mosques and churches have been attacked. The following quote illustrates how Boko Haram and religion are separated in the discourse of the respondents of the research:

'In Cameroon there is tolerance, which is why we did not have any religious violence, like in Nigeria. I don't think Boko Haram will get power, because right now Christians and Muslims are all working together to fight against Boko Haram. It is not seen as a religious movement, rather as a terrorist group.' (SEP, 24 September 2016)

Interesting about this quote is that the conflict related to Boko Haram in Nigeria is seen as a religious issue, but in Cameroon this is not so. This respondent states that Cameroon's peaceful relations between religious groups prevent the conflict from taking a religious perspective, despite the fact that the violent group explicitly identifies itself along religious lines. This idea is illustrated by a cartoon spread by DMJ, included in Appendix 1.

In addition, joining the ranks of Boko Haram is never explained by the respondents of the research as a choice one makes because of religious motives. Instead, the deteriorating socioeconomic circumstances for youth are emphasized as a reason to join, as the following quote shows:

"Boko Haram pays well. When you receive five thousand for a regular job, they offer fifteen thousand every day. When the young person does not have a job, he accepts" (CEPCA, 26 September 2016)

By doing so, the Boko Haram conflict is explained as a political issue rather than a religious issue. Respondents also express their concern about how a framework on the link between religion and conflict can shape people's understanding of specific situations. This concern is formulated as follows by one of the Protestant respondents of the research:

'Apart from individual problems between a Muslim individual and a Christian individual, there are no conflicts. Conflict between Muslims and Christians is not related to Boko Haram.' (CEPCA, 26 September 2016)

The respondent who expressed this quote meant to say that conflicts with religious dimensions, such as Boko Haram attacks in the North, should not be related to the general interactions between people who identify with religious groups associated with the conflict. Even if Boko Haram is associated with Islamic ideologies,

this does not mean that all tensions ever to occur between people should be viewed in light of this conflict. If the idea dominates that a country is under stress of a religious conflict, this conflict can be projected on situations that have nothing to do with the conflict at all, such as the individual problems between a Muslim individual and a Christian individual.

Finally, the following three quotes illustrate how the issue of Boko Haram can also bring people together:

“First, when they started at the national level everybody, Christian or Muslim, making contribution towards fighting Boko Haram. That is the only time I had seen Cameroon really come together as one to stand against an external enemy that was Boko Haram. There were a few people who wanted to use the Muslim approach, but that approach was completely defeated.” (SEP, 29 September 2016)

“On one side, Boko Haram has been good, promoted to come together as Muslims and Christians. On the other side, in each community we have also extremist groups. They have not yet gained a huge popularity but at least we have seen many faith communities express the need to come together. Many initiatives come up.” (CEPCA, 4 October 2016)

‘When religious holidays, religious feasts, Muslims have Mubarak, their Christian friends come visit them and they eat together. This has been strengthened due to Boko Haram. It has been reinforced, because with the Boko Haram issue we need to be cautious, so when Muslims feast the Christians come and eat together.’ (CEPCA, 2 August 2016)

These quotes present the assumption that a common enemy might bring groups together. This is a strategy that is, for example, often employed by national governments to unite their country: in providing an image of external threat against a group of people bounded by their national identity, this group identification becomes stronger (Anderson 1991; Eriksen 2002). This dynamic is also mentioned by the respondents of the field research: if Boko Haram is not seen as an Islamic group fighting Christians, but instead a terrorist organisation fighting everyone, this means that everyone has an incentive and moral obligation to join forces to fight back. In short, the presence of Boko Haram has not only destabilized the region, but has also united different religious groups in their fight against it. This assumption is illustrated by a cartoon spread by DMJ, included in Appendix 2.

Despite the generally good relations between Muslims and Christians, respondents reported an increased stigmatisation of Muslims since the first Boko Haram attacks. This stigmatisation was characterized by the assumption that Muslims are violent and dangerous.

‘When people say things about you that are not true and they do not ask you. If you are Mohammed or Moustapha and you do something bad, they talk about Islam. If you are Paul or John they talk about your tribe.’ (JIC, 24 September 2016)

Also the reference made to the 'Muslim approach' in the quote on the previous page refers to the stigmatisation of Muslims. Respondents specifically expressed their concerns about the fast rate at which stigmatisation could travel via (social) media. In addition, they addressed the role of their organisations in fighting this stigmatisation by promoting a positive image of Islam and spreading a general message of religious tolerance. Especially young people are addressed in this message:

'One religion has a stigma suffer from violent terrorism: Islam. We have to let children and young people know they mustn't draw conclusions about Islamic religious violence. People using Islam as a pretext for motives does not mean Islam as a religion is violent.' (CEPCA 14 September 2016)

'You know that the entire world is in danger because of the problems between Islam and Christianity. The Cameroonians are at war, we are at war against the sect Boko Haram. We have to teach the youth about peace.' (CEPCA, 26 September 2016)

In conclusion, Muslim-Christian relationships in Cameroon are generally considered to be good. NGO staff explain the issue of Boko Haram as a conflict that has no negative association with Christian-Muslim relations in Cameroon. It is perceived as a political rather than a religious issue. The Boko Haram attacks have influenced the increased stigmatisation of Muslims in Cameroon, but it has simultaneously brought Christian and Islamic groups together in the fight against Boko Haram.

### 5.2.3 Revival churches

An often heard response to the question whether there are tensions between religious groups in Cameroon was the idea that newly emerging revival churches create conflicts in Cameroonian society. These revival churches, as mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, were present before the 1990s. Since the economic crisis, they have changed in character to become more based on charismatic preachings and health and wealth gospel (Akoko 2007; Hunt 2000). The revival churches are indicated by the respondents of the research as 'revival', or 'evangelical' churches. Specific churches named are 'Jehovah's Witness', 'Pentecostal' and 'Born Again', but the distinction between these churches are not made clear. The characteristics of these churches were described as follows: charismatic preaching; long ceremonies; an important role in sermons for song and dance; and the presentation of testimonies (e.g. people explaining how their illness was cured by frequent preaching and investing in their church). The respondents did not distinguish between, for example, the flexibility of the group boundaries of different revival churches or the severity of theological doctrine.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the revival churches are especially popular among Cameroonian women and youth. This is explained by the respondents of the field research because of the perceived vulnerability of these two groups in Cameroon society. The revival churches often promote the prosperity gospel, a gospel that explains current hardships and predicts future prosperity if the believer follows a certain set of rules. This idea is expected to appeal to people with few opportunities, as the following quotes describe:

'The revival churches are not recognized in the territorial administration, they are fraudulent. At every moment they can be closed. You know that the people suffer, they are hungry and poor, they don't have a job, they are ill. The Revival churches offer a magical solution of prosperity and health, they say you will conquer.' (CEPCA, 26 September 2016)

'There are more extremist sects, like the revival churches, and youth who are attracted by sects. This is because they want to improve their living conditions.' (CEPCA, 26 September 2016)

These quotes indicate that revival church members are perceived to be attracted to revival churches because of material reasons, not theological conviction.

The risks that revival churches are perceived to bring into Cameroon society are multifold. Firstly, several respondents expressed concern about the rigidity of the religious doctrine of the revival churches. They adopted the language of radicalism to explain revival churches as extremist groups that promote a message of intolerance towards other religious groups. This illustrated by the following quotations:

'Revival churches cost people money, they have to pay the pastor. People stay at home and pray and hope their life will change. In reality it is religious extremism. They don't acknowledge other gods, they don't accept other religions. It is not tolerant.' (CEPCA, 26 September 2016)

'Especially the Jehovah's Witness make stigmatization. ... The Born Again Movement is a radical movement, they read the bible very strictly.' (DMJ, 28 June 2016)

In relation to this argument, several respondents feared the role of revival churches in the stigmatisation of Muslims in Cameroon. They stated that the intensive use of social media by revival churches contributes to the fast distribution of ideas of intolerance towards Muslims in particular. Because the revival churches do not accept Muslims, the relations between these groups become more tense. This can lead to conflict in the society of Cameroon.

Another point of tension related to the proliferation of revival churches is the creation of conflict within families and communities. Some members convert to revival churches while others do not. The scramble for church membership with the emergence of myriad new churches has caused an increased religious mobility, as was explained in the previous section. Subsequently, people leave one church to join another. This has caused divisions even on the household level.

Despite the fact that most respondents of the research identified tensions relating to revival churches, the NGO projects targeting religious communities did not yet extend to the communities of the various revival churches. Several reasons were given for this exclusion. Firstly, the RFL and the separate organisations that focus on interreligious dialogue and cooperation, such as ACADIR, have not included revival churches from the beginning. Instead, only the mainline churches were included from the start. A possible explanation for this is the fact that the Revival churches are not united in one overlapping organisation that could represent all Revival churches.

Secondly, the revival churches themselves were reported to have not shown interest in commencing dialogue with other religious communities, especially Islamic communities. The following quote from an employee of a protestant organisation illustrates this:

'Pentecostals do not want to associate themselves with people who do not confess to God, who do not confess to Jesus Christ. Generally we contact them, but the extremist people do not want to be together with Muslims, because they do not believe in Jesus Christ. We are talking about extremism, they rupture society.' CEPCA, (26 September 2016)

As this quote shows, the refusal of revival church communities to interact with people from different faiths, such as Islam, is labelled as 'extremism' by this respondent. In addition, the fact that the organisation hits a wall when inviting revival churches to join their interreligious dialogue is defined as 'rupturing society'. This implies that dialogue between different faith communities is considered to be the norm in Cameroon, and refusing to participate in this dialogue is met with suspicion.



Despite the formal obligation of churches to register before the government of Cameroon, many new churches, including these revival churches, are not registered. There is thus only little control over these churches by the government. Some of the respondents pleaded for increased control, so that the government can monitor what is being preached.

In general, many respondents indicated contempt towards the revival churches. The main argument for this contempt was the assumption that many pastors of revival churches are not genuinely religious, but rather conmen who earn money from other people's misery. The revival church members were described by respondents as people making irrational choices because of a hope for a better life. Phrases used to describe the members of revival church communities include '*believing in miracles*' and '*carried away by charismatic preaching and promises of deliverance*', and they are encouraged to '*work hard rather than wait and pray*'. This contemptuous attitude towards revival churches and their religious leaders and community members might also hinder the interreligious dialogue with these groups.

Finally, it can be noted that especially Christian respondents expressed concerns about the revival churches. This can be explained by the fact that revival churches are also Christian, and so there is a normative element of 'who is right' involved. While Muslims are generally far apart from Christian doctrine, Christians are now confronted with a different way of practising 'their' religion. While there are many different ways of practising Christianity present in the society of Cameroon, revival churches are relatively explicit about the superiority of their way. In addition, members of the revival churches are expected to evangelise other Christians to their specific church. This dynamic may create resentment between the different groups because they have different understandings of what it means to be a 'good Christian'. The soothing rhetoric of 'We all pray to the same God' is undermined by the statement 'but we pray better'.

In conclusion, Christian revival churches are perceived to bring tensions into the society of Cameroon. The attraction of the churches is explained in their promise of material gain. The churches are described in terms of radicalisation, spreading stigmatising messages and promoting intolerance. Especially Christian respondents expressed contempt towards the revival churches, stating that their way is not the 'right' way of practising Christianity.

#### 5.2.4 Peaceful coexistence

Despite the concerns listed in the sections above, the idea that was formulated most strongly by all respondents was that Cameroon is a country in which different religious groups can live together in peace. Numerous mentions were made of the constitutional reform that officially stated Cameroon is a secular state in which freedom of religion will be protected. The following two quotes illustrate how subsequently a Muslim and a Catholic respondent experience this freedom:

'Today we have this freedom. The proof: I walk around with my praying carpet in my bag. When the hour of prayer has commenced and I find myself in the middle of the city, I am free to lay my praying carpet down and in the middle of the city, I say my prayers. I will not be intervened by anyone, not by the authorities nor by the force of order. We already have this freedom of practicing your religion in Cameroon.' (ACADELHIB, 26 July 2016)

'Me, I am a Catholic, I am born a Catholic and will remain a Catholic. Everyone is free to think. If I would be an atheist, if I would not believe, that does not matter. We are free to think. Whether you walk on your head or your feet, you are free to do so. There is freedom as long as you do not disturb others.' (SNJP, 29 July 2016)

This freedom of religion is not seen as a new phenomenon. While the secular state formalized the freedom of religion, frequent mention is made by the respondents of a long history of peaceful coexistence, as is exemplified by the following quote:

'The situation here is of participation. The largest monotheistic churches have lived together for a long time without many troubles. In families there are more religions. At their [Islamic] feast Christians participate, and this is the same when the Christians have a celebration.' (CEPCA, 5 July 2016)

The organisations that took part in this research gave several reasons for the peaceful coexistence between the various religious groups shaping the religious landscape in Cameroon.

First of all, Cameroon's history as a peaceful, pluralistic society is considered sufficient reason to maintain this situation:

'Religion is respected, just because we have lived together for years, our parents and our children live like this.' (ACADELHIB, 26 July 2016)

Second, Cameroon's heterogeneity is seen as a reason for peace as well. The high diversity of the country in terms of social identity, as well as the frequent interactions between groups, prevents polarisation. One of the respondents of the research phrased this dynamic as follows:

'There are 300 tribes, we know how to manage these. How can we fight there? We are going to live together. (...) We don't have a dominant tribe. It is not because we are mixed that we are not finding conflict, it is just because we are tolerant. We have 300 groups, if you are not tolerant, you cannot live together. We are free' (JIC, 24 September 2014)

Third, religion is not considered the sole identifier for individuals. As explained before there is a multiplicity of social groups present in Cameroon. People do not only identify with their religious group, but also, for example, with their ethnic group and the region they grew up in. In addition, Cameroon's national identity is also strongly developed. One of the respondents stated that Boko Haram would have no success recruiting in the Far North region, because '*Cameroonians love their country. For Cameroonians, religion comes second. The people for whom religion comes first are still a minority*' (ACADIR, 5 September 2016). For this reason, possible tensions between religious groups are expected to be overruled by other, stronger identifications.

Fourth, religion itself is seen as a factor that brings people together, because all religions promote peace and mutual understanding. The following quotes present this argument:

'Religion will not really split people. It rather promotes coming together, trying to look at issues from the same directions. All churches are praying for peace, coming together because of one enemy.' (SEP, 29 September 2016)

Finally, these quotes also illustrate the argument made in subsection 5.2.2.: the identification of a common enemy brings different groups together in their fight against this enemy.

In conclusion, there is a strong understanding of the peaceful relations between different religious groups in Cameroon. The respondents would give examples of tensions when asked, but a discourse of peace and cooperation is prevalent in all interviews. The explanation for this peace lies according to the respondents mainly in Cameroon's high diversity and history of peaceful coexistence. In addition, religion itself is seen as a factor that promotes peace and tolerance.

### 5.2.5 Youth and conflict

As the previous subsections briefly introduced, respondents frequently mentioned a relation between youth and conflict in Cameroon. As the following quote indicates, young people are expected to be most at risk of adopting radical ideas because they are more exposed to social media:

'We think it is necessary because young children are in fact so exposed to forms of social media besides tv. This exposure could pave way for attitudes, ideas and actions that are not welcome when you talk of religious tolerance and acceptance. The experience in Europe is that young people are recruited. It seems at a distance but it can reach. That is why we are educating young people that that kind of language, religious attraction, is not the best. Violence does not solve the problem.' (CEPCA 14 September 2016)

This quote relates to the argument outlined in section 5.1.2: globalisation, expressed among others through social media, influences youth engagement with issues of religion. In particular, the statement made here is that organisations in Cameroon should work to prevent intolerant attitudes to spread to Cameroon through social media.

However, the attraction of these 'attitudes, ideas and actions' for young people is dependent on the situation these people find themselves in. The respondents argue that youth are vulnerable not only for the adoption of ideas, but also for involvement in violent actions. The examples given by respondents focus on enrolment in the armed groups of Boko Haram. Youth are enrolled not because they agree with the ideology of Boko Haram, but because they see no other option. This argument is formulated by several respondents as follows:

'Youth are the first layer of victims, they are favoured because they are vulnerable. Terrorist groups, Boko Haram, they enrol youth by giving them money. We must raise awareness, inform the conflict zone through youth organisations, to engage youth in interreligious dialogue. I have to respect your religion, and you have to respect mine. When they are less and less understanding, the story of Boko Haram makes sense [to these youth]. They give you money. When you see a sum of money you've never seen in your life, you are flattered; you accept.' (ACADIR, 19 July 2016)

'We know that mainly youth are involved in the war. Many young people are unemployed. Sects like Boko Haram recruit these young people by trying to give them a bit of money. We organized an evening of prayer to make youth understand that they should not let themselves be recruited.' (CEPCA, 26 September 2016)

Both quotes show that the NGO staff see a role for themselves in preventing youth enrolment in violent groups. These accounts state that youth join violent groups for the money. This is in line with statements by local NGO staff as outlined earlier in this thesis: Boko Haram is not seen as a religious organisation; people join specific religious groups to improve their lives; and youth are in an especially vulnerable economic position. Nevertheless, the NGO staff explain their role as '*raising awareness*' and promoting interreligious dialogue. It can be debated whether interreligious dialogue is a solution when religion is not considered to be the problem. This issue will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Lastly, it is interesting to note that the quotes above focus on the risk of Boko Haram recruitment. Boko Haram, however, was explicitly set apart as a terrorist organisation, a sect rather than a religious group relating to religious conviction. The same is true for revival churches: the religious meaning and spiritual value

of these churches is played down, while emphasis is placed on how church members are deceived and how people join for material gain, not out of religious reasons.

#### 5.2.6 Conclusion

This section explained how local NGO staff think about the relationship between religion and conflict in Cameroon. Several key insights can be distilled from the results.

Firstly, Cameroon is first and foremost explained by all respondents of this research as a peaceful country in which people from different religious backgrounds live together in peace. The relations between different religious groups have been peaceful for a long time. Historical structures help to contain conflict between groups. In addition, Cameroon's diversity prevents the outbreak of conflict. Tensions that may occur between religious groups are therefore generally seen as natural, limited, and fleeting.

Secondly, points of tension which do explicitly relate to religious issues are often framed so as to fall outside of the realm of religion. Boko Haram is explicitly politicized and set apart from Islamic ideology. Revival churches, too, are dismissed as a scam, obscuring the individual's '*true relationship with God*'. Nevertheless, solutions for these problems are expressed in religious terms: the NGO staff see their role in preventing conflict by promoting interreligious dialogue and religious education. This indicates an inconsistency between what people say is the problem, and how this problem is addressed.

Thirdly, youth are considered to be key actors in conflict situations in Cameroon. This assumption is based on the youth's economic vulnerability. The lack of opportunities stimulates young people to seek their fortune elsewhere: among the ranks of Boko Haram, or under the care of revival churches.

### 5.3 Conclusion

This chapter reflects on how local NGO staff in Cameroon understand the relationship between religion and conflict. The main arguments can be summarized as follows: firstly, the distinction between the religious and the secular in Cameroon is difficult to make. Religion is perceived to be dominant in the lives of all Cameroonians. While many religious groups are present in Cameroon's society, all religious communities are grouped together in the understanding that all specific religions represent a specific way to shape the individual's relationship with God. This God is the same in all religions. In this way, religion forms a common ground for all Cameroonians.

This chapter does not conclude whether or not religious conflict may arise in Cameroon. It can give an insight in what issues are seen as important in the relationship between religion and conflict according to local NGO staff. This relationship is perceived as complex. The peaceful relations between religious groups are emphasized, as is religion's role in promoting peace. However, the NGO staff do recognize an increase of destabilizing religious groups within both Christianity and Islam. Especially Christian revival churches are viewed with suspicion. The issue of Boko Haram is reported to both add to the stigmatisation of Muslims, and to bringing Muslims and Christians together in their fight against a common enemy. Youth are considered to be most at risk to be involved in conflict because of their vulnerable position in the society of Cameroon.

In conclusion, while the NGO staff do not deny the possibility of the outbreak of conflict with religious dimensions in Cameroon, the situation is explained against a specific contextual backdrop which allows for an understanding of the complexity of relations between religion, politics, economy and social circumstances. Policy aimed to prevent the outbreak of conflict should therefore subsequently address this complexity in order to have a chance of success.

## 6 ANALYSIS

This chapter compares the dominant global discourse regarding the link between religion and conflict with the results of the field research in Cameroon. The chapter answers the following research question: what are the similarities and differences between globally dominant assumptions and local perceptions on the relation between religion and conflict? In addition, this chapter includes a discussion on the possible implications of the interplay between global assumptions and local experiences. By showing how perceptions on the relation between religion and conflict differ across different levels of politics and society, the chapter contributes to the central argument of this thesis: understanding the relationship between religion and conflict is dependent on the context against which this understanding is placed.

### 6.1 Understanding religion across different levels

This section compares the dominant global ideas on religion with the understanding of religion as expressed by local NGO staff in Cameroon. It shows how the two different ways of thinking about religion are shaped by the context in which religion plays a role.

In the dominant global discourse the distinction between the religious and the secular is central in understanding religion. Religious actors are separate from non-religious actors. In Cameroon, such a distinction is not possible. As chapter four argues, the organisations participating in the research do not all formally refer to themselves as a religious organisation, yet many can be associated with a particular religious group. Section 5.1 shows how religion is considered to be an important factor in the lives of most Cameroonians. What is related to religion and what is not is difficult to distinguish. Simultaneously, this nation-wide engagement with religion forms a common ground and basic moral understanding in society. The boundaries between religious groups are flexible and religious mobility is high. In addition, differences between mainline religious groups are downplayed: believing in God/Allah is considered to be more important than how this belief is expressed. The differences between religious groups are explained in superficial terms. In addition, chapter four argued that there is a formal distinction between religious and non-religious organisations, but that this distinction in practice is difficult to make. These elements all contribute to an obscured distinction between the religious and the secular.

The difference between these two understandings of religion can be related to the different context in which these understandings take shape. The dominant global discourse on religion is constructed largely by non-religious actors from secular societies. In these societies, keeping religion from the public domain has long been an active strategy to prevent an unequal power division between religious groups, as explained in chapter two. Since the events of 9/11, religion has been brought back into the public domain, but it remains a separate, bounded, controllable entity in the global discourse. In Cameroon, however, the longstanding history of religious diversity and peaceful coexistence forms a basis for understanding religion as a deeply ingrained element of society. What is religion and what is not is not explicit, yet religion is expected to play a role at all levels of society at all times.

The 'two faces of faith' distinction central in the dominant global understanding of religion is a framework that sorts religion into two categories: 'good faith' and 'bad faith'. Using this framework to look at the data collected during the field research, the NGO staff accounts of religion and its role of society are easy to categorize. The idea of 'good religion', promoting peace and mutual tolerance, is for example present in the statement that:

'Religion will not really split people. It rather promotes coming together, trying to look at issues from the same directions. All churches are praying for peace, coming together because of one enemy.' (SEP, 29 September 2016)

This quote was used in the previous chapter to illustrate the conclusion drawn from the field research that many NGO staff share the conviction that religion is not an important driver for conflict in Cameroon. The quote also explains religion itself as something that brings people together, promoting peace.

However, examples of the local NGO staff describing incidents as 'bad faith' can be more debated. The respondents quickly dismissed the role of religion in issues of conflict. Conflicts with religious dimensions, such as the presence of Boko Haram, are explicitly defined to fall outside of the realm of religion. Revival churches, too, are perceived as institutions that do not promote a 'real' relationship with God. In addition, reasons to join intolerant groups are not explained by religious motivation. Rather, people join these groups in search of material gain. In short, the respondents associate religion mainly with peace and tolerance, not with violence and hatred. For these reasons, it can be argued that 'bad faith' is a notion that the respondents of this research do not recognize, and that therefore the 'good faith/bad faith' distinction is not in line with their understanding of religion. In this reasoning, the understanding of religion is not binary such as the 'good faith/bad faith' framework, but singular: religion is either peaceful, or it is not religion.

This argument can be refuted by stating that the respondents all work for local NGOs that aim to prevent conflict along religious lines. Their expression of religion solely in terms of peace can be a strategy to prevent polarisation between religious groups. However, the fact that all respondents engaged with issues of religion in the same way suggests that this is not a planned strategy. In addition, it can be speculated that the religious beliefs of the respondents themselves shape their perception. If they engage with religiously inspired ideas of peace and love on a daily basis, the idea that religion can also indicate violence may be difficult or even impossible to take over. Also the idea of a common God that all religious believers pray to may prevent the respondents from explaining this same God at the basis of both peaceful and violent religion.

A final argument against the statement that the 'good faith/bad faith' narrative is not recognized by local NGO staff in Cameroon is the fact that religious education programs are organised by certain NGOs. If there is a need to teach '*the real Islam*', as stated in section 4.3, there is also 'false' Islam. However, as this distinction is true/false instead of good/bad, respondents may again perceive 'false' Islam as no religion at all.

Finally, whether or not the local NGO staff themselves recognize the possibility of 'bad religion', the respondents did indicate that Cameroonian citizens may think about religion in that way. This can for example be concluded from the following quote:

'One religion has a stigma to suffer from violent terrorism: Islam. We have to let children and young people know they mustn't draw conclusions about Islamic religious violence. People using Islam as a pretext for motives does not mean Islam as a religion is violent.' (CEPCA, 14 September 2016)

This quote shows both the tendency of the respondents to explain religion as non-violent and the concern that Cameroonian citizens can associate conflict with specific religious groups.

In conclusion, this section has shown that the understanding of religion by local NGO staff in Cameroon differs from the dominant global ideas on religion. The section argues that this difference can be explained by the different context against which the understanding of religion has developed.

## 6.2 Religion and conflict: friends or foes?

This section compares the assumptions on the relation between religion and conflict that underlie the understanding of this relation at the level of global policy and at the level of local NGOs in Cameroon. It shows how the two different ways of thinking about religion are shaped by the context in which religion plays a role.

As chapter two has argued, global assumptions regarding the relation between religion and conflict are based on a series of arguments that explain religion as a trigger for conflict. These arguments can be interpreted differently when viewed from a different perspective. The case study of Cameroon can provide this different perspective.

Firstly, the dominant global assumptions reflect the idea that religion triggers conflict because violence is justified by the idea of a higher cause. The local NGO staff in Cameroon never mentioned this as a reason for conflict. Instead, all examples provided by the respondents that related violent action to a religious issue, such as the attacks of Boko Haram, were explained primarily in political and economic terms. People are explained to join Boko Haram because of material reasons, not religious conviction.

Secondly, the assumed relationship between religion and conflict is based on the argument that religion becomes part of identity politics, thereby promoting power conflicts. The respondents of the field research in Cameroon, however, argue instead that religious identities in Cameroon are not likely to trigger conflict. This is explained firstly by the fact that the multiplicity of religious groups actually prevents the outbreak of conflict, because none of the groups can obtain dominance over the others. Secondly, the respondents argue that religion is not the only social identifier for Cameroonians. A too singular focus on religious identity can therefore be considered to be insufficient to capture tensions in the society of Cameroon.

In addition, the argument on religious identity is based on the assumption that violence is more easily inflicted upon out-group members. In addition, the framing of out-group members as less worthy or less human contributes to the psychological difference, which also aids the ease with which to conduct violence against the out-group. In Cameroon, however, the results of the field research showed that most group boundaries along religious lines are not very strong. A remark that came back in multiple interviews was: "We all believe in the same God", often as an answer to the question whether there were cases of rivalry between religious groups in the country. The comment is remarkable because it emphasizes the similarity rather than the difference between the religious groups present. If this is the way everyone in Cameroon thinks about religion and religious groups, the dynamic of defining unworthy out-group members is not common and thus the risk of conflict with religious aspects is reduced. Besides, the data showed also that religious mobility is high. This also indicates that the social boundaries between religious groups are flexible and there is thus a limited distinction between in-group and out-group members.

In line with the second argument, however, the respondents of the research did also consider globalisation as a factor changing relations between religious groups in Cameroon. Especially young people are expected to be influenced by the increased access to information about different ways to practice religion. This causes intrareligious tensions in Cameroon, because different religious institutions experience competition over church membership. Nevertheless, this development is not seen as a very destabilizing factor in the society of Cameroon, but rather as a regular dynamic of change.

Thirdly, the argument that a strong narrative of religious superiority can trigger religious conflict is not seen as an issue in Cameroon. The respondents of the research do recognize the emergence of more fundamentalist religious strands in Cameroon. However, they did not expect these strands to gain much power in Cameroon, because of the historical balance between religious groups and Cameroon's high diversity.

In short, local NGO staff do not see the arguments underlying the dominant global assumptions on the relation between religion and conflict play out in the same way in Cameroon. This can be related to the definition of conflict as explained in chapter two: "the situation that arises when rival interests can no longer be contained by the structures and processes ordinarily competent to do so" (Lincoln 2003, 74). The reasons named in chapter five for the peaceful coexistence between religious groups in Cameroon (long history of peaceful coexistence; diversity; multiple social identities; religion as a moral common ground for peace) can be explained as these 'structures and processes ordinarily competent to [contain rival interests]'. As explained in the previous section, structures and processes that are expected to contain issues conflict in the

society of Cameroon are still in place. Despite this, chapter four shows that local NGOs in Cameroon have organised programs to strengthen these structures, for example through interreligious dialogue programs. It can be argued that changes in the society of Cameroon, for example caused by processes of globalisation, are eroding these structures. Local NGO efforts to emphasize the importance of these structures can be interpreted accordingly: these efforts are aimed to uphold structures at risk of breaking. Nevertheless, to what extent this risk is present, and whether these efforts are most effective in preventing conflict in Cameroon is debatable.

The reflection on the argumentation underlying the globally dominant understanding of the relation between religion and conflict underscores the critiques of this argumentation as outlined in subsection 2.2.2. Local NGO staff refer to Cameroon's context of diversity and long history of peaceful coexistence to explain why they do not see religion as a dominant cause of conflict in the country. In addition, the respondents agree with the notion that the risk of conflict is reduced in a context characterized by a large variety of social groups and subsequent identifications.

The dominant global assumption that young people are generally expected to be among the first people to adopt radical religious ideas and undertake violent action is reflected in the accounts of local NGO staff as well. However, as explained above, the link between radical religion and violent action is less pronounced. Instead, radical groups as well as violent actions are explained to be perceived by youth as a way out of a hopeless situation. The actions are thereby not seen as religiously motivated.

In conclusion, the understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict differs across the level of dominant global ideas and the perception of local NGO staff in Cameroon. The global understanding is shaped largely by assumptions of how religious ideas and identifications justify and induce conflict. The local NGO staff in Cameroon, however, placed more emphasis on the complexity of the context in which conflict may occur. In addition, as explained in the previous section, issues of conflict are explicitly placed outside the sphere of religion.

### 6.3 Global ideas, local policies

As is argued in chapter two, the dominant global assumptions on the relationship between religion and conflict have shaped global policy engaging with these issues. Two popular policy approaches explained in this thesis are radicalisation theory and Countering Violent Extremism. These approaches have several elements in common. Firstly, both policy approaches are based on the assumption that conflict is a result of the adoption of religious ideas that promote intolerance. To address conflict prevention, the focus therefore lies on the policing of religion and religious communities. Especially Islam is associated with these intolerant ideas. In conclusion, both policy approaches are based on an idea of when and where a risk of religious conflict will arise and focus therefore on reducing this assumed risk.

The language of radicalisation/fundamentalism/violent extremism, as explained in chapter two, has become associated with Islam in the dominant global understanding of the relation between religion and conflict. In Cameroon, however, the language of radicalisation is used more frequently to depict Christian revival churches. As explained in the previous chapter, these churches are considered by the respondents of this research to have a destabilising influence on the society of Cameroon. The churches are not associated with physical violence, as is Boko Haram, but rather with deception, polarisation and exclusion. In this way, the revival churches pose a threat to the society of Cameroon because they form a large - and growing - group of people and institutions that set themselves apart from the rest of society. It can be argued that the respondents use the language of radicalisation to express this threat.

However, the perceived danger of these Christian revival churches does not correspond with the dominant global discourse on religion and conflict, which focuses on Islamic violence. In this light the exclu-



sion of Christian revival churches in interreligious cooperation as explained in the previous chapters is interesting. The organisations that are described by the respondents of the research in the language of radicalisation are not included in counter radicalisation programs. It can be argued that this is a result of the global policy focus on Islamic communities: the emphasis on Christian-Muslim relationships in global thinking about issues of religion and conflict may obscure other dynamics.

Simultaneously, while the language of radicalisation was mainly used during the interviews to describe Christian religious groups, the religion that was defended both during the interviews and in the projects organised by the organisations participating in this research was Islam. The description of the interreligious dialogue projects in chapter four shows how the focus in these projects lies on improving Muslim-Christian relationships. The images in appendix 1 and 2 illustrate this. This indicates an inconsistency between NGO practice and what NGO staff see as the problem in Cameroon.

Local NGO staff explained conflict with religious dimensions, such as youth enrolment in armed groups of Boko Haram, as a result of contextual factors such as political instability and economic hardship. However, the solutions they proposed were based on education of youth and interreligious dialogue. The respondents also frequently referred to the enthusiasm participants in the interreligious dialogue programs expressed. The groups that were described as radical, destabilizing factors in the society of Cameroon - revival churches, Islamic fundamentalist groups - were not included in these programs. As a result, the effectiveness of the interreligious dialogue programs organised in Cameroon can be questioned.

What use is it to facilitate dialogue between groups that already engage in interaction? And if youth join Boko Haram for financial reasons, how will teaching "good" religion prevent them from doing so? The interreligious dialogue programs do nevertheless fall into the same category as the recommended programs by the radicalisation theory and CVE framework. I would argue that local NGOs in Cameroon are influenced by the global discourse. This could be implicit, through the contemporary global attention for issues of religious conflict; or explicit, through the opening of funds available for projects that tackle assumed problems of radicalisation and religious violence.

This situation can be explained in various ways. Firstly, most of the programs that have been developed on issues of religion and conflict were organised in direct response to the Boko Haram attacks in Cameroon since 2014. The programs were aimed towards conflict prevention and based on the assumptions that conflict may arise as a result of the stigmatisation of one religious group: Islam.

Secondly, it can be argued that the local NGOs are influenced by globally dominant ideas on what issues are at risk considering the link between religion and conflict. If global concern is focused on Muslim-Christian relationships and Islamic violence, these are the issues that will be addressed locally as well. The ICG report described in the introduction to this thesis exemplifies how global actors frame the situation in Cameroon from their perspective. This may nudge local NGOs in a certain direction.

The influence of the dominant global discourse can be even more explicit through global funding opportunities made available for local NGOs. It can be assumed that a dominant way of thinking about issues of religion and conflict shapes the opening of funds available for projects that address issues globally seen as a threat. This may in turn shape the development of projects locally.

In conclusion, the case study of Cameroon shows an inconsistency between the risks relating to religion and conflict as perceived by local NGO staff, and the risks addressed in local NGO programs. The programs do, however, align with assumptions that lie at the basis of dominant global ideas on the religion between relation and conflict. In this way, this case study suggests that understandings of the relationship between religion and conflict at different levels of politics and society influence each other. In the next section I reflect on the possible implications of this dynamic.

## 6.4 Discussion

The argument central in this chapter is that the understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict across different levels of politics and society is based on the specific context against which this relationship is understood. In addition, the previous sections suggest that the dominant global understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict influences local NGO programs in Cameroon. In this discussion, I reflect on the implications of this argument.

As described earlier in this research, policy makers across different levels - global, local - are in interaction with each other. This interaction shapes discourse and practice at either side. The adoption of concerns that are dominant in the global understanding of this link in a local context can have negative effects, both globally and locally.

Firstly, it can be argued that certain problems are overlooked. For example, the theoretical framework explains how the development of conflict is difficult in plural societies because of the multiplicity of identifications and social groups. As chapter five shows, Cameroon's religious diversity is seen as a reason that conflict over interest or power between religious groups is limited. However, the 'Anglophone Problem' as outlined in the introduction to this thesis, is a conflict between only two social groups with relatively fixed social boundaries: the anglophones and the francophones. In combination with the fact that the situation has been tense since reunification in 1961, it is remarkable that the NGOs participating in this research have focused more on religious conflict, even though the NGO staff all emphasized the good relations between religious groups. This could be explained with the argument that local NGOs are influenced by the dominant global trend, following the aftermath of the events of 9/11, to focus on religious conflict (Hurd 2016).

Secondly, as outlined above, it can be argued that local NGOs formulate their project proposals in such a way that they relate to the dominant global discourse, for example because funding opportunities maybe opened up for them. This can influence the local situation in several ways. By looking at the situation in their country from the perspective of the dominant global discourse, local NGOs are directed to view the situation in their country in a specific way. As such, specific dynamics in the country might suddenly attract their attention whereas these issues were not of their concern before. As a result, local NGO programs may be developed that address issues that never have been addressed before, thereby making these issues more important. An example from this study could be the issue of interreligious dialogue projects. As explained before, the development of these projects had the effect of placing increased focus on boundaries between religious groups, thereby strengthening these boundaries. If the development of this projects is influenced by funding opportunities, a vicious cycle is created: a global discourse about religious conflict opens up funds for interreligious dialogue, this leads to more interreligious dialogue projects in a country, this strengthens religious identification which in turn confirms the assumption of the global discourse that religion is becoming a global issue of concern.

Another possibility is that local NGOs phrase their project of choice so that the project fits into the framework of the funding organisation. This would for example be the case if local NGOs see a problem of youth unemployment but would frame a project that tackles this problem as a counter radicalisation project. By doing so, the organisation may receive more funding, but it also adds to the global understanding that counter radicalisation projects are necessary. This way, the global discourse is strengthened and local realities are obscured.

These dynamics can be dangerous. Not only can local problems be overshadowed by global concerns, but also is the global discourse strengthened each time it is allowed to shape local policy, thereby securing its power. Meanwhile, the voice of the local understanding of a situation wanes.

As a final example, I would like to discuss once more the ICG report presented in the introduction of this chapter. This report focuses on how religion is an issue of concern in Cameroon. The report's conclusions align with the dominant global discourse on the relation between religion and conflict: in order to prevent conflict, religion needs to be policed through interreligious dialogue programs and the engagement of Islamic

communities. Respondents of my research have debated the value of the research, as they think it is insufficiently informed. Yet, this document will be among the first documents to be read by policy makers and researchers, such as me, who are interested in Cameroon. In this way, the readers of the ICG report associate Cameroon from the start with issues of religious conflict, whereas locally these issues may be not considered to be as relevant. For these reasons, I want to conclude this section with the warning that the dominant global understanding of the relation between religion and conflict does not suffice to understand what is happening locally. The importance of attention for understandings of this relation across different levels of politics and society cannot be overestimated.

In this discussion I can merely speculate about the implications of the interplay between different understandings. The scope of this thesis does not reach to a conclusive explanation of how different understandings of the relationship between religion and conflict across different levels of politics and society influence each other. For an in-depth understanding of this interplay, more research is needed.

## 6.5 Conclusion

This chapter examined the similarities and differences between the dominant global understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict and the perceptions of local NGO staff in Cameroon on this topic. It shows that the religious/secular distinction as is central in global thinking about religion is not viewed in the same way in Cameroon. Instead, the data suggests that what is religion and what is not is difficult to separate. However, it can be argued that the respondents explain religion primarily in terms of peace and tolerance. Dynamics of violence and conflict are removed from the realm of religion in the understanding of religion by local NGO staff in Cameroon.

In relation to conflict, most arguments linking religion to conflict as central in the dominant global assumptions on religion and conflict are not relatable to the perception of the respondents of the field research. However, the question of youth involvement and the influence of globalisation are dynamics recognized in both understandings of the relation between religion and conflict.

Finally, the global policy approaches of radicalisation and CVE are related to the situation in Cameroon. Whereas these approaches focus on Muslim-Christian relationships and preventing Islamic radicalisation, the language of radicalisation in Cameroon is mostly used to indicate Christian revival churches. Muslim-Christian relations are generally described as good. Programs developed in the field of conflict prevention, however, aim to improve Muslim-Christian relationships. This indicates an inconsistency between perceptions of conflict and the programs developed.

From these findings can be concluded that the understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict across different levels of politics and society are shaped by the specific contexts in which these understandings are constructed. For this reason, the understanding of the relationship differs at different levels of politics and society. However, the data suggests that local NGO programs are influenced by assumptions central in the dominant global discourse. The final section therefore speculates on the implications of this influence. It concludes by problematizing the and emphasizes the importance of interpreting a situation in reference to different understandings of the situation across different levels of politics and society.

## 7 CONCLUSION

'When you begin, when you don't live in a situation yourselves, you probably carry misconceptions. But if you live here, you are able to talk to people who can say what is happening within. You see that religion is not a big problem here.' (SEP, 29 September 2016)

This thesis answers the following research question: How is the relationship between religion and conflict understood across different levels of politics and society in the early 21st century? The previous chapters have presented different views on the understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict.

Dominant global assumptions on the relationship between religion and conflict are shaped by a contemporary understanding of religion formed mainly by secular actors. Therefore, the distinction between the religious and the secular is central in this understanding. Religion is simplified to indicate specific sets of beliefs, rituals and practices, separate from other domains of society such as culture and ethnicity. It is described in binary terms: promoting either peace or conflict. This understanding of religion forms the basis of an argumentation for the link between religion and conflict. Religion is explained as a trigger for conflict and therefore as a societal domain that needs policing. Dominant policy approaches have developed accordingly. These approaches focus on the promotion of 'good religion' and fight against 'bad religion'. They have a strong bias on Islamic communities, that are assumed to be most prone to radicalisation. Youth are the main focus group because of their perceived vulnerability. In short, the dominant global understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict can serve as a frame to assess whether a situation is in risk of religious conflict.

For local NGO staff in Cameroon, religion is explicitly and implicitly entangled with all domains of society. What belongs to the understanding of 'religion' and what does not is not specifically set apart. Religion is understood as an overarching element in society that first and foremost promotes peace. Issues of conflict are related to material and political motivations rather than religious conviction. Local NGO staff do not deny the existence of tensions in Cameroon's religious landscape. They do, however, argue that these tensions can still be contained by the dynamics present in Cameroon that prevent the outbreak of religious conflict: a longstanding history of peaceful coexistence; and a moral common ground shared by many Cameroonians that is focused on the understanding of religion as a cause of peace rather than conflict.

The comparison of the different understandings of the relationship between religion and conflict has shown that the main difference can perhaps be captured as follows: while the global dominant ideas focus on religion as a line of division between people, religion is mainly understood by local NGO staff in Cameroon as a factor bringing people together. These are two fundamentally different ways to look at issues of religion. The reason such a difference exists is that these understandings are developed against different backgrounds.

'Religion and conflict, friends or foes?' is a question this research does not answer. The research outcomes and conclusions of this thesis do not present fixed, bounded frameworks of how people think about religion and conflict. Rather, the research sketches dominant ideas at different levels of global society. Instead, the research argues that the link between religion and conflict is a social construct, to be interpreted in multiple ways. This thesis shows that different contexts and different people have different understandings of how religion and conflict relate to one another. In general terms, the research explains how the understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict across different levels of politics and society is based on a specific context in which this understanding is constructed. In the interplay between the different understandings, however, it is important that all understandings are assigned equal value, so as to prevent the development of programs or ideas that do not fit a specific local context.

Opportunities for further research into the specific dynamics of Cameroon lie in a more in-depth analysis of the contacts between mainline religious groups and religious groups that are perceived as 'radical'

by these mainline groups. In addition, a historical analysis of how religion is addressed in NGO discourse and programming could tell us more about the way perceptions on religion and conflict in Cameroon might be changing, perhaps under the influence of the dominant global discourse. Last, a more in-depth analysis of the history of peaceful coexistence in Cameroon could teach us more about what structures and processes contribute to the development of strong, positive relations between different religious groups.

This thesis has touched upon the role of globalisation and social media. These dynamics could be explored more in-depth. For example, one important group of actors that is very influential in shaping the global discourse on religion and conflict is 'the media'. This group has not been addressed in this thesis. An interesting connection for further research could therefore be the influence of media framing on this topic.

In addition, the discussion section in the previous chapter addressed the question of how dominant global assumptions may influence the discourse and programming of local NGOs responding to a local context. Due to the scope and time available for this specific study, the argument of the relation between a dominant global discourse, funding opportunities and local programs cannot be founded more elaborately. Further research can be done to explore this relation in more detail.

Finally, I would like to conclude that further research is always needed to research the specific contexts that shape our world views. This thesis has presented different ways of thinking about the relation between religion and conflict. These perceptions are social constructs, developed in specific places and based on specific information. The comparison of different perceptions broadens our understanding of the world, but it also poses a challenge: how can different perceptions receive equal attention and value in assessing a specific situation? There is a need for constant interaction and reflection in international cooperation, to prevent weaker voices from being drowned out.

APPENDIX 1: IMAGE 1



Image 1: 'Muslims are not terrorists.' Cartoon in an educational comic book for youth commissioned by DMJ in 2015.

APPENDIX 2: IMAGE 2

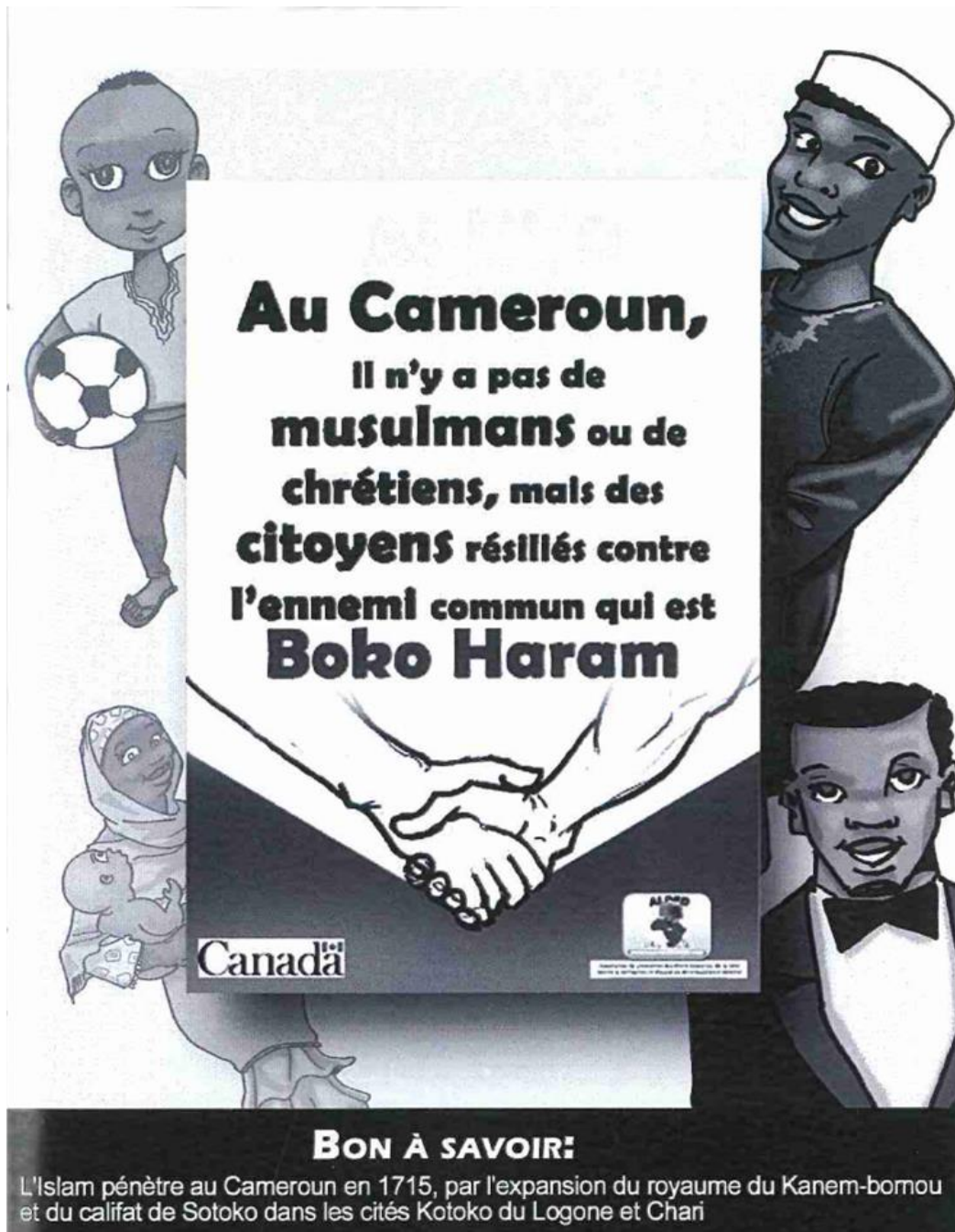


Image 2: 'In Cameroon, there are no Muslims or Christians, but there are citizens resiliated against the common enemy Boko Haram'. Cartoon in an educational comic book published by DMJ in 2015.

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