

Religion and Peace: @PKO Now! No. 83

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Introduction

The world's attention remains captive to religious terrorism today. The hostage crisis that shook Sydney's central business district in December 2014 which saw the use of a flag bearing the Muslim creed, the armed attack by two Islamists on the French satirical weekly newspaper in January this year, the killing of two Japanese men by ISIL several weeks later, and the attack on a free-speech debate and a synagogue in Copenhagen this month are just the latest of the media's coverage of religion-invoking violence. Yet, what goes unreported and unnoticed to a large extent are the steadfast and committed efforts of religious actors to transform violent conflict, build peace, and encourage reconciliation. By advancing a brief overview of religion's relationship to peacemaking and peacebuilding, this article is an effort to achieve a little more balance in the way we think about the role of religion in the world today.

There are various ways in which religion can be conceived. One might see it as a compensatory psychological mechanism to escape the woes of the world as Marx and Freud had done¹, or as a system to shape social relations including those related to class and economy (Weber²) or to unite and integrate a community (Durkheim³). Or one may rather see religion in terms that are consistent with the worshippers' interpretation of what is sacred following the approach of the phenomenologists of religion⁴. There are also different units of analysis when looking at religion, depending on whether one chooses to examine institutions, religious leaders, the lay, religion-inspired NGOs, or the more doctrinal and philosophical aspects of religion. While recognizing the diversity of religious forms as well

as the interpretations of those forms, this article will focus on the contributions of major world religions, taking up mainly activities of religious leaders and organizations (including lay organizations), and programmes directed at religious actors initiated by secular institutions such as the United States Institute of Peace.

Religious Peacemaking and Peacebuilding

In the Brahimi Report (2000) the achievement of peace is conceived in terms of three types of activities: (1) conflict prevention and peacemaking, (2) peacekeeping, and (3) peacebuilding. Conflict prevention, however, is increasingly viewed as integral to each of the three types of peace activities, and here I refer simply to “peacemaking” so as not to single out the linkage between peacemaking and conflict prevention. Noting that religious actors may contribute to peacekeeping as military chaplains⁵, the focus here is nevertheless on peacemaking and peacebuilding, processes in which religious organizations and leaders have played dynamic and varied roles.

Peacemaking is described in the Brahimi Report as actions attempting to bring to a halt conflicts in progress, using the tools of diplomacy and mediation⁶. As an example of peacemaking by NGOs, the report refers to the case of Mozambique. Although there is no mention of what kind of NGO had been involved, it was in fact a Catholic organization called Sant’ Egidio which had played a pivotal role from 1989 to 1992 in mediating between the government and the insurgents of the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO), bringing an end to the country’s civil war⁷. The success of Sant’ Egidio was largely due to its neutrality and integrity, which were appreciated by both sides of the conflict, and the case provides an example of peacemaking where a religious organization was able to draw on its particular moral strengths to effectively mediate a conflict.

Peacebuilding, on the other hand, has been defined variously depending on the document or author⁸. Emerging first as a term in the work of Johan Galtung in 1976⁹, the concept has seen incarnations in the Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s 1992 report, *An Agenda for Peace*, as well as in the Brahimi Report. In 2007, the UN Secretary-General’s Policy Committee agreed on the following definition of peacebuilding to inform UN practice: “a range of measures

targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development.”

An example of religious peacebuilding can be found in the Dhammayietra (meaning “pilgrimage of Truth”) peace marches in Cambodia led by Buddhist patriarch Maha Ghosananda, which helped to build popular confidence prior to the 1993 elections and overcome the fear of Khmer Rouge violence¹⁰. In the end, 90 per cent of the Cambodian electorate voted, and although the UN peacekeeping mission at that time, UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia), created the immediate conditions for the elections, it is said that the broad popular participation was, to a great extent, due to the success of the Dhammayietra¹¹.

Resources for Peace and Modes of Activity

Religion has a number of internal resources that can be mobilized in peace work. Firstly, as approximately two-thirds of the global population identifies with a religion, religious organizations often constitute the biggest civil society actor in a country¹². They can also draw on its transnational networks to engage in peace activities abroad or in the countries of their co-religionists. Religious organizations and leaders are often called upon to exercise moral leadership by the local community, and thus have an enormous influence in many conflict-affected countries, especially where the state has sunken to dysfunction or disrepute. Finally, in the major world religions, one finds extensive teachings on peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and even the proper conduct of war including the protection of the vulnerable¹³.

The potential of religion as a peace actor is gradually being recognized and efforts to harness this potential have arisen in recent decades. For example, in 2000 the United Nations held a Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, attended by over a thousand leading religious and spiritual figures, with the aim of promoting interfaith cooperation to help resolve violent conflicts in the world. The summit resulted in the creation of the World Council of Religious Leaders in 2002, which seeks to support the work of the

UN and other international organizations in the quest for peace by acting in an advisory capacity¹⁴. Initiatives in which the council has been involved include a partnership with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to bring religious and spiritual voices to combat intolerance and racism; the Religious Leaders Initiative of the World Economic Forum in 2001; the religious component of the World Youth Summit in 2006; facilitation of international interfaith dialogue in Iran; and the establishment of an International Congress on the Preservation of Religious Diversity in India to address tensions between Christian and Hindu communities¹⁵.

The United States Institute of Peace has also sought to tap into religion's potential and in 2000 began a Religion and Peacemaking Programme (RPP), which offers peacebuilding skills training to religious actors with the aim of fostering peaceful inter- and intra-faith coexistence and cooperation¹⁶. The RPP was created out of a recognition that there is a need to promote the role of religious resources to counter violence in places where religion is a driving force behind conflict¹⁷. The programme began with a number of survey meetings to highlight the peacebuilding activities of several faith communities, and also focused on promoting interfaith dialogue in divided societies such as the Balkans, Nigeria, Israel-Palestine, and Sudan¹⁸. Recent RPP projects focus on countries like Pakistan, Iraq, Myanmar, Nigeria, and on issues concerning women, conflict and peace¹⁹.

An organization created on the initiative of religious believers is Religions for Peace, the world's largest multi-faith coalition for the advancement of peace. The organization was created in 1970 (though its origins date back to the 1960s), and since October 1970, it has organized the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) on a regular basis to promote interfaith peace work²⁰. Religions for Peace is accredited to the United Nations, and undertakes work on interfaith dialogue in 92 countries. A major part of the organization's global work is the creation of inter-religious councils (IRCs), which exist in such places as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Kenya, Cambodia, Israel, Bosnia and Kosovo, to name a few.

Religious peace activities can take various forms. They may be in the mode of diplomacy, negotiation and mediation, such as the work of Sant' Egidio referred to above, or the diplomatic efforts of the Pope from 1978 to 1984 in the mediation of the territorial conflict

between Argentina and Chile over several islands²¹. Activities may take the form of education and training for peace, or peacebuilding programmes and post-conflict community development. Religious believers have also been active in advocacy, nonviolent protest, and social reform efforts. The nonviolent campaign of Mahatma Gandhi which drew on numerous Hindu symbols; the Khudai Khidmatgar (“Servants of God”) movement of the Pashtun Muslims under Abdul Ghaffar Khan which maintained nonviolent discipline during India’s independence struggle and Partition; the Liberation Theology developed in Latin America in the 1950s; and the black civil rights movement in the US led by Baptist minister Martin Luther King Jr. are just a few examples where religiously inspired actors have sought to overcome social injustice and build peace. Finally, spiritual guidance to bring about forgiveness, reconciliation and healing can play a central role in achieving restorative justice in a post-conflict society, as exemplified by the involvement of religious actors in the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of countries like South Africa and Sierra Leone²².

This article has sought to present a general overview of religion’s capacity for peacemaking and peacebuilding. In the next article, I will focus on Islam and take up several examples where Muslims have engaged in peace work inspired by their faith.

End Notes

¹ Karl Marx (1976) *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Sigmund Freud (1957). *The Future of an Illusion*, translated by W.D. Robson-Scott. Garden City, N.Y. : Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co.

² Max Weber (1963) *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press.

³ Émile Durkheim (1926) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*. London: G. Allen & Unwin.

⁴ Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye (1925) *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte (Handbook of the History of Religions)*. Tübingen, Mohr; Gerardus Van der Leeuw (1963) *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*. New York: Harper & Row; William Brede Kristensen (1971) *The Meaning of Religion: Lectures in the Phenomenology of Religion*, translated by John B. Carman. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff; Mircea Eliade (1987) *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

⁵ See Eric Patterson (2014) *Military Chaplains in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Beyond: Advisement and Leadership Engagement in Highly Religious Environments*. London: Rowman & Littlefield; David M. Last (1999) "The Spiritual Dimension of Peacekeeping: A Dual Role for the Chaplaincy?" *Peace Research: The Canadian Journal of Peace Studies* 31 (1) February, pp. 66-75

⁶ Brahimi Report, UN Doc. A/55/305 S/2000/809 (2000), p.2.

⁷ David Smock (2002) "Divine Intervention: Regional Reconciliation through Faith" *Harvard International Review*, Winter, p.48.

⁸ For example, Coward and Smith defines "religious peacebuilding" as "activities performed by religious actors and institutions for the purpose of resolving and transforming deadly conflict, with the goal of building social relations and political institutions characterized by an ethos of tolerance and nonviolence." See Harold Coward, H. and Gordon S. Smith (Eds) (2004). *Religion and Peacebuilding*. New York: State University of New York Press, p.5 (emphasis in original).

⁹ Johan Galtung (1976) "Three Approaches to Peace: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking, and Peacebuilding" in *Peace, War and Defense: Essays in Peace Research Vol. II*. Copenhagen: Christian Ejlertsen, pp. 297-298.

¹⁰ Harold Coward, H. and Gordon S. Smith (2004). *Religion and Peacebuilding*. New York: State University of New York Press, pp.6-7.

¹¹ Ibid, p.7.

¹² Andrea Bartoli (2005) "Conflict Prevention: the Role of Religion is the Role of its Actors", *New Routes* 10(3), p.3; Chadwick F. Alger (2002) "Religion as a Peace Tool" *Ethnopolitics* 1(4), pp.94-109.

¹³ See for example, Vesselin Popovski, Gregory M. Reichberg, and Nicholas Turner (Eds) (2009) *World Religions and the Norms of War*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press.

¹⁴ The World Council of Religious Leaders website:

http://www.millenniumpeacesummit.org/wc_about.html (accessed 12 February 2015).

¹⁵ See "Ongoing initiatives" of the World Council of Religious Leaders website:

<http://www.millenniumpeacesummit.org/initiatives.html> (accessed 12 February 2015).

¹⁶ Religion and Peacebuilding Centre, United States Institute of Peace

website:<http://www.usip.org/centers/religion-and-peacebuilding-center> (accessed 11 February 2015).

¹⁷ Susan Hayward (2012) *Religion and Peacebuilding: Reflections on Current Challenges and Future Prospects* [Special Report 313]. Washington: United States Institute of Peace.

¹⁸ Ibid., p6.

¹⁹ See Religion and Peacebuilding Center, United States Institute of Peace webpage:

<http://www.usip.org/centers/religion-and-peacebuilding-center> (accessed 14 February 2015).

²⁰ Religions for Peace website: <http://www.religionsforpeace.org/vision-history/history> (accessed 14 February 2015).

²¹ Luc Reyckler (1997) *Religion and Conflict*, *The International Journal of Peace Studies* 2(1), p.30.

²² H. Russell Botman "Truth and Reconciliation: The South Africa Case" in Harold Coward, H. and Gordon S. Smith (Eds) (2004). *Religion and Peacebuilding*. New York: State University of New York Press, pp.243-260; J. Peter Pham (2004). "Lazarus Rising: Civil Society and Sierra Leone's Return from the Grave", *The International Journal of Not-For-Profit Law* 7(1): http://www.icnl.org/research/journal/vol7iss1/art_2.htm (accessed 18 February 2015).