

# RELIGION, CONFLICT AND PEACEMAKING

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the reluctance or unwillingness of modern society to cross the boundaries that have been fixed for religion and politics. Many contemporary civilizations keep religion apart from politics and from all forms of government. A more primordial way of thinking, however, claims that a fundamental relationship between religion and politics remains in effect even in societies where there is no close connection between them. The primordial approach considers ethnicity and religious belonging to be the determining characteristics of communities and individuals. The new awareness of religious plurality evident in the contemporary world has enabled various methods of interreligious dialogue to become instruments of peacemaking.

Keywords: Religion, politics, conflict, diplomacy, structural violence, peacemaking

## INTRODUCTION

Religion has recently regained significance in sociology, political science, and the literature of international affairs. Religion does not just result in violent conflicts; it may also be utilized to settle disputes and develop a peaceful society. Research suggests that religious leaders may help to reduce violent killing and to promote peace. Many individuals believe religion brings them calm, tranquility, stability, and spiritual advancement. However, certain individuals, racial and ethnic groupings, social levels, and governments seem to be increasingly adopting religious beliefs as a justification for conflict.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence of this propensity, "culture wars" are raging in many nations across the world. When disputes erupt, it is obvious that religious differences, whether actual or perceived, may play a role in fueling hatred and violence. Religious fanaticism creates political victims all around the globe, from Sub-Saharan Africa to Asia, demonstrating the need to search for way to reduce religious fanaticism. But non-religious elements such as race, gender, culture, social class, money, and power should also be considered in situations where tensions reach the point of violence and conflict.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>. Balzer, M. M. (ed.), (2010). *Religion and Politics in Russia: A Reader*. London: Routledge.1-15

<sup>2</sup>. Cerna, L. (2013). "The Nature of Policy Change and Implementation: A Review of Different Theoretical Approaches." *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Report*. 492-550

Religious participation in politics may not necessarily result in conflict or threats to peace. On the contrary, religion can play a significant role in efforts to address inter- and intra-group disputes and so contribute to peace building. According to a synthesis of research on religious peace building, religious leaders play an important role in ending hostilities and developing peaceful communities across the globe.<sup>3</sup> Because conflicts are the result of many different factors, it is particularly crucial for religious leaders to have a role in encouraging conflict transformation by developing constructive and collaborative ties among ethnic and religious groups.

When adherents of various religious traditions encounter one another, it is not always for the better and may result in "cultural wars." In contrast to secular worldviews, a religious worldview may include a variety of allegiances and connections in several essential domains, such as society, gender, state, territory, and politics, each of which may give rise to cultural tensions. There may even be confrontations in which "good against evil" takes on "supernatural dimensions." According to a prominent Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Küng, political confrontations that are inspired and legitimized by religion are the most fanatical and ruthless.<sup>4</sup>

Religion has influenced, motivated, and legitimized some of the most ardent and deadly political confrontations. Many political issues can be reduced to ideological ones since many of today's conflicts have religious and cultural origins, which foster both hate and violence in the contemporary world. In order to minimize such conflicts, religious leaders and communities of religion are increasingly being encouraged to serve as "angels of peace" rather than "war-mongers." Since religious attitudes to violence are ambiguous, religions throughout the world will continue to play a part in contemporary wars.<sup>5</sup> However, we could also concentrate on the "civilizing" side of the sacred. In this article, I intend to examine how the 'applied' nature of religious beliefs and actions can contribute to peacemaking. In other words, I argue that religions contain practical teachings, such as mutual respect and dialogue that can be significant for peacemaking.

## THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN SOCIETY

Much has been written lately on the link between religion, politics and global peace. This collection of written work is motivated by academic and political interest in the link between religion and politics. Since the 1980s, academics have been increasingly

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<sup>3</sup> Bush, K. D., & Saltarelli, D. (2000). *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict: Towards a Peace-building Education for Children*. Florence Italy: Unicef. 2-8

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, N., & Arieli, T. (2011). "Field Research in Conflict Environments: Methodological Challenges and Snowball Sampling." *Journal of Peace Research*. 48 (4) 423-435

<sup>5</sup> Cleaver, F. (2017). *Development Through Bricolage: Rethinking Institutions for Natural Resource Management*. London: Routledge

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interested in the role of religion in the social sciences, especially in the study of politics. Social scientists are now devoting greater attention to the influence of religion on people's lives. It is often assumed that religion plays a significant and, in some instances, decisive role in wars.<sup>6</sup> Religion, depending on how it is employed, may either contribute to violent conflict or play an important part in bringing it to a peaceful resolution. For example, religious intolerance was one of the distinctive features of the recently concluded conflict in Northern Ireland. According to a growing amount of evidence, religions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may have an important role in reducing social violence and interstate conflict. When disagreements emerge, religions may warn their followers of the dangers and they may assist in resolving confrontation that has already begun. Moreover, religions may be able to bring warring sides together once their disagreements have been resolved with the help of mediators.<sup>7</sup> Such mediators often arise from within a religious tradition. For example, religious leaders have resorted to traditional diplomacy as well as track-II diplomacy in order to mediate in situations of conflict. These diplomatic approaches are discussed later in this article.

Difficulties with regard to "good governance" often lead to religious disputes. Globalization since the end of the Cold War has the potential to bring to the surface or exacerbate previously dormant religious disputes. Traditional value systems are being weakened or even demolished because they cannot keep up with the high speed of change brought about by globalization. Many individuals turn to religion to (re)discover a sense of lost comfort, tranquility, and stability, as well as to uplift themselves spiritually. On the one hand, religion may help people to discover new meaning and purpose in their lives. On the other hand, religion may motivate them to despise or loathe others.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, new or exacerbated interreligious competition and warfare may ensue, making the pursuit of peace even more difficult to achieve. Disputes arising out of the need for self-identification have the potential of becoming all-consuming and very difficult to resolve. Religion seems to be a determining factor in many existential fights between "good" and "evil".<sup>9</sup>

All religions have opposing viewpoints on matters such as peaceful coexistence and the role and function of religion in society. Religious actors may be seen as peacemakers, although this is not always the case in reality. Moreover, many disputes

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<sup>6</sup>. Peters, B. G., Pierre, J., & King, D. S. (2005). "The Politics of Path Dependency: Political Conflict in Historical Institutionalism." *The Journal of Politics*. 67 (4) 1275-1300

<sup>7</sup>. Ramsbotham, O., Miall, H., & Woodhouse, T. (2011). 4<sup>th</sup> edition. *Contemporary Conflict Resolution Policy*. London: Wiley. 49-60

<sup>8</sup>. Sabatier, P. A., & Weible, C. M. (2007). "The Advocacy Coalition Framework." *Theories of the Policy Process*. 2. 189-220

<sup>9</sup>. Thomas, S., Tutu, D., & Tutu, D. M. (2005). *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: the Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 235

that seem to arise from religious tensions are actually based on non-religious factors.<sup>10</sup> References to conflict and division as well as implications for community peace-keeping exist in each of the world's five major religions. Many books, book chapters, journal articles, blogs, and reports have dealt with these issues since the 1980s. Most academic material concentrates on the many ways in which religious actors may incite, exaggerate, or assist in the resolution of conflicts. Because of their social position and their influence on cultural expression, religious leaders may be key players in efforts to build permanent peace among warring factions in many parts of the world. Moreover, local knowledge and wisdom are generally retained and handed down from generation to generation in communities where religious leaders have strong familial connections.<sup>11</sup>

## RELIGION AND CULTURE WARS

Religious leaders may try to justify the abuse of power and the violation of human rights committed by religious organizations in the name of their faith. The resulting religious fanaticism can endanger liberal democracy and pluralism. According to some scholars, religion can both encourage aggression and the urge to employ violence. Referring to secular impulses and objectives as "holy" may give them symbolic significance. Furthermore, anybody inclined to make use of religious authority may take advantage of the following practices:

- The manipulation of divisions through identity politics, in which "ethnic-cultural and cultural-religious" divisions are manipulated to obtain power.
- The attempt to explain terrorist activities by saying they are inspired by religious faith.
- The attachment of a single and ultimate theological interpretation to the pursuit of political power.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the claim to possess exclusive truth may endanger the coexistence of many religious traditions and violence may develop as a consequence. On the other hand, the teachings of many religious systems can also lead to a more peaceful society because there are many parallels between the three Abrahamic faiths in terms of their theological and spiritual principles. For this reason, some religious leaders in the developing world are taking the lead in conflict resolution and the achievement of post-conflict reconciliation. Their capacity to contribute favorably to the settlement of disagreements may be the result of the similarity of spiritual principles. Strong links among the various religions are also more likely to facilitate their participation in

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<sup>10</sup>. op. cit. Ramsbotham, O., Miall, H., & Woodhouse, T. (2011).

<sup>11</sup>. Kazi, T. (2016). "The Changing Dynamics of Religious Authority on Pakistani Religious Television." *Culture and religion*, 17 (4) 468-485

<sup>12</sup>. Sherif, M. (2015). *Group Conflict and Co-operation: Their Social Psychology*. London: Routledge. 60-78

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conflict resolution because religious peacemakers try to foster peaceful coexistence in multi-faith societies.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, there is a general consensus that:

- Religious leaders and faith-based organizations can play a vital role in conflict resolution and peace building.
- Even though the peace building efforts of religious non-governmental organizations (NGOs) sometimes resemble those of secular NGOs, their religious orientation may continue to separate them.
- The participation of religious and secular NGOs in conflict resolution and peace building, however, does not have to be confined to the resolution of "religious" disagreements.
- The peace building aims of faith-based organizations are diverse, ranging from high-level mediation to training and peace building via grassroots development.
- Integrating peace building with traditional humanitarian assistance and economic development is usually the most efficient way to promote peace.

We can conclude that faith-based peace building efforts contribute "positively to peace building" in four ways. They may, for example, (1) give "emotional and spiritual aid to war-affected communities," (2) facilitate "successful mobilization for their communities and others for peace," (3) offer "mediation between warring parties," and (4) act as "a conduit in the purpose of reconciliation". However, political and social conflicts seem to be on the increase across the Middle East and North Africa and many religious leaders cannot exploit their strategic competence as global actors.<sup>14</sup>

## RELIGION AND CONFLICT

It is difficult to comprehend the New World Order (from 1990 onwards) without taking religion and religious groups into consideration. During the Cold War period (1945-1990), however, the phenomena of nationalism and religion received little attention because Western political culture had separated an individual's private life from his or her public involvement. Following the toppling of the former Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (born 1960), there was a surge in research on conflict dynamics and the role of faith and traditions.<sup>15</sup> Both positive and negative trends have led to the rising emphasis on the role of religion in armed conflict. Strategic surveys

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<sup>13</sup>. Quamar, M. (2021). *Changing Dynamics of Religion and Education: Education System in Saudi Arabia*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan. 203-225

<sup>14</sup>. op. cit. Cleaver, F. (2017).

<sup>15</sup>. loc. cit. Cerna, L. (2013)

have increasingly taken into consideration the danger presented by severe types of religious extremism. Moreover, there have been various instances of realignment, which is usually defined as cross-denominational collaboration between progressives and traditionalists in the pursuit of certain causes. Furthermore, the influence of church leaders on the dynamics of conflict in various African conflicts has been adequately recorded. An example from last century would be the nuclear debate of the 1980s and the involvement of the American bishops in this debate.<sup>16</sup>

## RELIGIOUS RADICALISM

Every religion has adherents who take ideas to their extreme logical conclusion. Religious organizations have been known to engage in small-scale violence, political persecution, and even terrorist acts to attain their objectives. Former political leader Rabbi Meir Kahane urged his followers to harass and physically assault Palestinians. In Bangladesh, fanatical Muslims have threatened the lives of Bangladeshi authors Salmon Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin because of their writings. Their organizations must be evaluated objectively.<sup>17</sup> A next step would be to make more headway in "depoliticizing" religion. Extremist viewpoints thrive in an atmosphere bereft of a fair dose of common sense. Sincere dialogue, however, can take place only if the proper conditions are met. It is significantly more difficult to maintain a radical religious approach in the public forum where one needs to provide clear arguments, counter-propositions and facts and which provides the opportunity for cross-examination.<sup>18</sup>

## STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE IN POLITICAL SYSTEMS

Certain elements in political systems can lead to the violent use of religion. Likewise, the fact that many religious organizations have authoritarian systems that suppress democratic aspirations provide examples of how religious organizations can also be implicated in systematic violence. Any sort of institutional or cultural violence perpetrated by religious leaders inside their organizations, however, cannot be entertained. It is important to reduce the likelihood of religious violence within the political structure. For example, structural violence opposed Aristide's candidacy as the president of Haiti but recognized the military's role in carrying out the country's democratic process.<sup>19</sup> Structural violence can be described in the following ways:

### i) Cultural And Social Violence

Cultural violence refers to the methods and processes used to justify or legitimize direct and indirect violence. The practice of discriminating between certain people

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<sup>16</sup>. loc. cit. Kazi, T. (2016)

<sup>17</sup>. loc. cit. Cohen, N., & Arieli, T. (2011)

<sup>18</sup>. loc. cit. Kazi, T. (2016)

<sup>19</sup>. Hart, J. A., & Spero, J. E. (2013). *The Politics of International Economic Relations*. London: Routledge. 18-27

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who are selected and others who are not selected is an example of cultural violence. In religious terms, this could be taken to mean that certain people from the higher socio-economic classes in society could think that they were closer to God and, hence, entitled to greater privileges than those belonging to lower socio-economic classes. This religious attitude can also lead to cultural and social violence.

### ii) Mutual Cooperation

The never-ending effort to construct steps towards peace-building to meet the mountain of human misery can become a Sisyphean task for peacekeepers and humanitarian workers. Case studies, and particularly actual field experience, are increasingly being recognized as useful in research to improve conflict management and to train professional conflict managers. Long-term deployment of non-governmental teams in conflict zones is referred to as "field diplomacy" with the aim to inspire and assist local activities opposed to violence. Since a strong network is required to monitor the dynamics of any dispute, issue early warnings, and take appropriate action, the first priority is to form a group of trustworthy individuals.<sup>20</sup> Political and religious leaders have always found ways to benefit from each other. One model of such mutual cooperation is the way religion has used politics to dominate state politics and to spread its message during different historical periods. A second model is the way the state makes use of religion to achieve its goals. A third model, more evident in modern nation-states, is the way religion and politics cooperate with each other without interfering in each other's sphere of activity. In short, world politics provides many examples of these three models of cooperation between religion and politics.

Under a totalitarian and authoritarian regime, society's creative power is suppressed and reduced to passivity. Since religion and politics both utilize individuals, their talents and resources to acquire power, these individuals are robbed of their ability to participate in social and cultural activities during times of conflict. An example can be found in contemporary Saudi Arabia where, despite the country's immense riches and resources, people find it difficult to make a helpful connection between religion and peacemaking. When religion is given a certain freedom from political, social, or economic pressures, people discover the inspiration to develop philosophy, art, literature, and music. Society thrives when religious institutions loosen their grip on society. In contrast, society becomes barren and unproductive when religious institutions maintain control. There seems to be no basis for the view that religion becomes weak as soon as it is separated from politics. The ultimate power of religion

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<sup>20</sup>. loc. cit. Quamar, M. (2021)

does not derive from official support or from protective political power but from the sense that its teachings are real. Hence, the best way to strengthen religious traditions is to separate religion from politics, economics, science, and technology. In this way, religious traditions find opportunities to contribute to peacemaking

## TRADITIONAL WAYS OF DIPLOMACY

Historically, we cannot disregard the role of the Vatican in the development of helpful interaction between religion and politics in the interests of peacemaking. Diplomacy has been a traditional way to communicate and to persuade others to accept one's own point of view. In order to maintain a seamless flow of information, the Vatican's Secretariat of State employs 150 people to manage eight language desks. The title "nuncio" refers to the highest-ranking ambassador who represents the Vatican in 122 countries. One example of Vatican diplomacy is the way Pope John Paul II effectively mediated in a dispute about an island between Argentina and Chile for several years (1978 to 1984). According to Thomas Princen,<sup>21</sup> the papacy has access to resources that are accessible to few other world leaders. The Pope has a genuine interest in spiritual or moral issues, such as peace keeping or the protection of human rights. Moreover, the Holy See can maintain its secrecy because it does not claim to adopt democratic or transparent management procedures. Such secrecy is critical in order to retain anonymity during the mediation process.

## TRACK II DIPLOMACY AND PEACEMAKING

Track II diplomacy is another peacemaking instrument based on the assumption that the other party's motivations and intentions are positive. While traditional diplomatic methods are characterized by mistrust and a pessimistic view of human nature, peace makers who adopt track II diplomacy believe that the different parties engaged in conflict are the only ones who can find a solution.<sup>22</sup> The Quakers are a Christian movement founded by George Fox around the year 1650 which is devoted to the promotion of peace. Members of the Quakers movement have been engaged in several global peacemaking projects by eliminating "all external disputes, strife, and bloodshed." They are convinced that seminars and collaboration between opposing groups can lead to effective dialogue and reconciliation. In situations of injustice or the imbalance of power, the Quakers resort to witnessing and strong advocacy

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<sup>21</sup>. Princen, T. (1992). *Intermediaries in International Conflict. Conclusion*. Princeton: University Press. 214-226

<sup>22</sup>. Simons, G. (2009). *The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia Since 1990: Changing Dynamics of Politics and Religion*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press. 50-76

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strategies to resolve conflict and war and to bring peace. According to Yarrow, "balanced partiality" means listening to each party in the conflict with empathy and trying to imagine what it feels like to be on the other side of an argument. The Catholic community of Sant'Egidio is another group that has adopted track II diplomacy during the peace talks in Mozambique in 1992. Their efforts brought permanent stability and fostered further development in Mozambique.<sup>23</sup>

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF RELIGIOUS NGOs

Religious Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are non-state actors that assist in the performance of various religious activities. These religious NGOs can make an important contribution to conflict management and peacemaking. Non-governmental diplomats make a distinction between "conflict settlement" and "conflict resolution" by means of alternative dispute resolution skills. The goal of conflict resolution is to achieve a self-sustaining and stable result that will benefit every party concerned. Those involved in peacemaking by adopting track II diplomacy consider their efforts to be a supplement to other formal diplomatic endeavors. Moreover, peace-making projects can be undertaken at several levels, including the levels of government and non-governmental organizations. All the requisite diplomatic, political, military, economic, cultural, and psychological conditions must be met as part of a comprehensive strategy.<sup>24</sup> Track II diplomatic peace makers are of the view that violence and conflict are the results of inaccurate estimates of the costs of war. They believe that further research on peace and efforts to educate people about peace can help them relearn what they have learnt about their violent as well as their peaceful behavior.

## A NEW AWARENESS OF RELIGIOUS PLURALITY

Conflicts are not only the result of factors external to the religions. Much violence in history has been caused by conflicting theological or religious views of religious people themselves. It would not be difficult to find examples of such conflict and violence in the history of each of the major world religions. It could be said that one of the root causes of conflict and violence stemming from within the religions themselves could be described as exclusivist views of the other. An exclusivist view considers one's own religion as the only means of salvation. History provides many examples of religious disagreement leading to hatred and even wars caused by exclusivist views of the other. In contrast to the negative consequences of exclusivism,

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<sup>23</sup>. Finke, R., & Stark, R. (2003). "The Dynamics of Religious Economies." *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. 96-109

<sup>24</sup>. op. cit. Simons, G. (2009)

religious pluralism leads to profound respect for all religions based on the view that all religions are paths to truth. According to Catherine Cornille, religious pluralism may arise as a reaction against traditional forms of exclusivism that have led to violence and exploitation and to the demonization of the religious other, . . . We can see the destructive effects of the Christian claims to superiority in particular in the relationships between European and North American Christians and peoples in other continents, and between Christians and Jews. [Exclusivism] is viewed as the source of antisemitism, colonialism, racism, and Western imperialism. Awareness of these dynamics may thus lead to reticence about imposing one's own judgment on the teachings of other religions.<sup>25</sup>

Conflict and violence on the basis of differing religious or theological views has gradually led to a new awareness of the benefits of interreligious dialogue as a bridge between the religions and, thus, as a path to peace. In this way, the religions themselves have struggled to confront exclusivist views with a more pluralist outlook. Recent history has seen a steep rise in awareness of the diversity and richness of the world's religions. This new awareness of religious plurality has led to the development of various methods of interreligious dialogue. One major thrust of interreligious dialogue has been to confront exclusivist views leading to violence. By fostering interreligious dialogue, the religions themselves have contributed to peacemaking in the modern world. ■

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<sup>25</sup>. Cornille, C. (2020). *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell. 61