

A Balanced Perception of Religion in International Relations

Written by Joanna Kulka

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JOANNA KULKA, JUL 9 2015

In the ongoing discourse on constructing the world order many new but also “new-old” approaches are being developed. One of the more discussed and controversial issues is the recognition of a religious dimension in international relations. While some authors refer to the “return”, “resurgence” or “renaissance” of religion (Thomas 2005; Petito, Hatzopoulos 2003; Fox 2001), others rather admit to discovering a “hidden reality” that has always been there but became more visible recently (Haynes 2006: 539).

Over the last two decades rich literature has been published on this topic and numerous initiatives have been undertaken to introduce a balanced perception of the roles played by religion within the global arena. Yet a fair assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of religion in IR is only a far-out hope and still “even the charismatic virtuosi of peace are less well known than the Yigal Amirs and Osama bin Ladens of the world.” (Appleby 2000: 122).

The notion of the “ambivalence of the sacred” (Appleby 2000) coined by Scott Appleby is widely acknowledged. Marc Gopin calls religion the “creator and destroyer of peace” (Gopin 2012: 271-279) and Jose Casanova refers to this phenomenon as the “Janus face” of religion (Casanova 1994: 4). Religion is undoubtedly a double-edged sword. But it seems that any discussion on the many different roles played by religion in the area of international relations is too often one-sided and the perspective in which the religious factor is recognized far too uneven.

The purpose of this article is to highlight that there is also this second face of religious activism and a faith-based oriented world view that enables religious peacemakers to resolve conflicts that others could not resolve. It is also to underscore that the very non-political notions such as reconciliation, forgiveness, healing of relations, and apology that developed in social science over the last decades are often rooted and connected with religious world views.

Religious Peacebuilding: Development of the Field

When in 1994 Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson edited their book *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (Johnston, Sampson 1994) they were discovering a reality that had existed for a long time, though not realized or presented in any systematic way to a wider audience. At the time of that publication, the role of religion and religious factors in resolving conflicts and rebuilding relations between conflicted communities was known only to a limited group of specialists involved in religious peacebuilding over the last years or decades.

Through telling the “untold stories” of religious peacebuilding from the 1990s more and more people all over the world felt urged to show the less known face of religion. The reality of religious peacebuilding slowly came into perspective countering an emphasis on religious violence which had dominated the discourse on the mutual relations between religion and world affairs (Hertog 2010: 12).

Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson presented many convincing cases of religious engagement in the service of peace, including the well-known example of reconciliation in South Africa, but also less-known and not fully realized efforts such as the Quaker conciliation during the Nigerian Civil War or the role of Moral Re-Armament in Franco-

A Balanced Perception of Religion in International Relations

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German reconciliation after World War II. In his foreword to their book Jimmy Carter referred to the essential role Menachem Begin's and Anwar-el-Sadat's religious backgrounds played in the successful negotiations and signing of the Camp David peace treaty between Israel and Egypt in 1978. But Douglas Johnston also called for a change of paradigm in the area of international relations, moving away from the realist-oriented approach toward one embracing a religious dimension. He pointed out that an understanding of contemporary world politics was not possible without including this element (Johnston, Sampson 1994).

The field of religious peacemaking continued to emerge in the following years with new important publications that stressed the complexity of the presence of religion in the global arena, highlighting its bonds to violence and to peace. Two of them significantly marked the development of the new field (Hertog 2010: 1) namely, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* by Scott Appleby (Appleby 2000) and Marc Gopin's *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking* (Gopin 2000).

Approximately since the year 2000 the field of religious peacebuilding has become clearly visible as an academic field through an expanding body of literature, the dedication of scholars, the establishment of research centers, the organization of separate disciplines and specific curricula (Hertog 2010: 1). Today separate courses on religious peacebuilding are offered by leading research centers such as the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, Eastern Mennonite University, George Mason University or the United States Institute of Peace. On one hand this ongoing recognition of the field is essentially part of the increased attention paid to the role of religion in the public sphere in general. On the other hand it is an effect of the remarkable effort of certain religious actors and their efficacy. A growing awareness of how crucial the religious dimension is for building long-term peace has contributed to developing relations between religious and non-religious peacebuilding. As Susan Hayward notices in her report, the field of religious peacebuilding has moved closer to the mainstream of conflict resolution practice and theory. Non-governmental organizations, both European and American, agencies in the US government, academia and international organizations, "sectors that once held religious issues at a distance or understood religion mainly as a driver of violence" (Hayward 2012a: 1), increasingly engage religious communities and institutions as partners in building peace. Meanwhile, religiously motivated organizations have institutionalized and professionalized those activities which contribute to a closer coordination between religious and secular organizations (Ibid.). According to Katrien Hertog, in recent years religious peacebuilding initiatives have become "more visible, more urgent, more numerous and more recognized" (Hertog 2010: xv).

Spiritual issues distinguish religious peacebuilding as unique and establish it as an area of specialization within the peace and conflict study field (Matyok, Flaherty 2014: 5). At the same time religion is an element of a larger multidisciplinary approach to conflict and a manifestation of positive peace, which is not simply the lack of war but also restoring of relations within the society and creating a social order that allows for the development of the whole society. Many of these fields both contribute to and gain much from the study of religious peacebuilding (Ibid). Religious peacebuilding has become a truly interdisciplinary study with common areas of interest not limited to theology and philosophy but also including sociology, psychology, law, communications and many others (Hertog 2010: 8-9).

Twenty years after the publication of *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* a more advanced approach to religious peacemaking has emerged. Vocabulary that has developed and enriched the field of peace and conflict studies is filled with terms common to many religious traditions. Peace, reconciliation, nonviolence, the right relationship are just some examples. In fact many of these terms, for example reconciliation, originated within different religious traditions and have entered fully into the secular dimension (VanAntwerpen 2008: 25-47).

For the last twenty years such notions as reconciliation, apology or even forgiveness became an integral element of a non-religious approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The shift in paradigm postulated by Douglas Johnston in the 1990s is growing and has reached the point in which apology and reconciliation, both terms definitely not part of a traditional political vocabulary, are commonly included in contemporary discourse on IR.

The Essence of Religious Peacemaking

A Balanced Perception of Religion in International Relations

Written by Joanna Kulaska

If religion can be the missing dimension of statecraft, it may also be the most underestimated phenomenon within the field of peace and conflict studies. There are, in fact, many arguments to defend the thesis that religion should no longer be overlooked as an important factor in peacebuilding.

Within each of the great religions there is a “moral trajectory challenging adherents to greater acts of compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation.” (Appleby 2000: 31) It is the call for a “change of hearts and minds” that offers hope for religiously inspired peacemaking (Cortright 2008: 183). The way towards peace is deeply rooted in Abrahamic traditions as well as in Buddhism and Hinduism, which also teach caring for each other. As a religion that emphasizes peace Islamic peacebuilding initiatives also have been growing. Islam, a religion that emphasizes peace, also has expanded its peacebuilding initiatives (Matyok, Flaherty 2014: 2).

Hundreds of organizations and religiously motivated individuals have engaged in various activities aimed at conflict resolution and peacebuilding. These represent many different approaches to peacebuilding. For example, the World Conference on Religion and Peace focuses on promoting interfaith dialogue while the American Jewish World Service, World Vision, Catholic Relief Services incorporate peacebuilding components into humanitarian assistance and development programs. Some organizations, like the Community of Sant’Egidio, specialize in mediating peace agreements (Smock 2001:1). The variety of these actors is extensive. In the typology proposed by David Steel religious peacemaking can be performed by indigenous and external players, individuals and institutions, denominations and *ad hoc* commissions, ecumenical and interfaith organizations, politically motivated religious leaders and religiously motivated political leaders (Steel 2008: 22). They play many different roles, being observers, educators, advocates and intermediaries (Sampson 1997: 279-280), both at the local and global levels as important transnational players (Haynes 2011: 178-188).

What motivates religious actors is their faith convictions. They see themselves as people of faith who have to be “pursuers of peace” (Smock 2001: 2). They perceive their engagement as a kind of ministry not in terms of the evangelizing mission but as “fulfilling the spiritual purposes of one’s faith” (Ibid.). Though some of those organizations’ mission statements explicitly articulate religious values, many local staff stress the humanitarian not just the religious motives of their commitment. Importantly they also express pride in their nonsectarian provision of aid (Peuraca 2003: 5). As David Smock notices, “almost all faith-based NGOs serve people without regard to their religious affiliations and most faith-based NGOs also recruit staff from a variety of religious backgrounds” (Smock 2001: 2).

The specific characteristics of religious peacemaking show at an advantage compared to non-religious bodies in many areas. Faith-based peacemakers are dedicated, respected, trusted and sensitive. Faith-based actors are also efficient at operating in those areas where traditional diplomacy possesses limited or no tools and resources to deal with the conflict. Some are able to engage in relation-building activities with no foreseeable time limits. They engage in truly direct interactions with the communities served with the result that the peacemakers are perceived not solely as relief providers but true friends (Peuraca 2003: 7).

One of the most often recalled examples of the remarkable efficiency of religious peacemakers is the building of long-term peace in Mozambique after a sixteen-year-long civil war. The Community of Sant’Egidio, which worked for many years to build relations between the conflicted parties, refers to its own very specific method as a “diplomacy of friendship”. After years of trying to provide humanitarian aid in Mozambique, the Community realized their efforts were not bringing expected results since the domestic conflict between the Mozambique National Resistance Movement (RENAMO) and the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) was leading only to further devastation of the country and greater suffering of the people. For that reason the Community of Sant’Egidio decided to become involved as a mediator between the parties, building close, friendly relations with those involved in the conflict and bringing them to the negotiation table. Cameron Hume, an American observer of Sant’Egidio’s efforts, commented on these methods: “Despite being conducted by non-professional diplomats, the Mozambique peace talks produced sophisticated technical tools – combining expertise in psychology, historical and legal culture, flexibility and political culture – that were extraordinary. Paradoxically, the very fact of coming to the process as outsiders, as essentially mediators *super partes* that were nevertheless seriously dedicated to the cause of peace without standing to gain any possible political or financial benefits or international prestige, proved to be one of the strengths of the entire

A Balanced Perception of Religion in International Relations

Written by Joanna Kulska

process. [...] The keywords throughout appeared to be friendship, dialogue and flexibility” (Riccardi 2013: 12).

In the case of bottom-up initiatives the role local religious leaders play and their effectiveness derive from the position they hold in their communities. Most of them are respected religious individuals with an acknowledged position within the community. They are perceived as authentic, credible and trust-worthy. In addition, they are a part of the community, sharing in the experiences and understanding the suffering of their neighbors (Little 2007: 5).

Madeleine Albright states in her often quoted opinion on FBOs (Faith-Based Organizations) that they have “(...) more resources, more skilled personnel and a longer attention span, more experience, more dedication and more success in fostering reconciliation than any other government” (Albright 2007: 77). In the two decades after the end of the Cold War in 26 peace mediations in civil wars religious actors played a strong mediating role 11 times, which means their input was direct and crucial. In 11 cases they played a weak mediating role and only in 4 cases they did not play any role. They also played a crucial role in reconciliation and transitional justice processes in 8 out of 19 analyzed cases (Toft, Philpott, Shah 2011: 188-190). Only one of these analyzed cases, mediation by the Holy See over Beagle Conflict between Argentina and Chile, had international range. From the 1980s almost half of Nobel Peace laureates have been religious leaders or lay people whose work has been inspired by faith (Powers 2010: 328).

This is not to say that faith-based actors are always successful or operate with no problems. They have shortcomings and difficulties as any other kind of “people-run bodies”. Some are criticized for their attempts to proselytize. But they also have a potential that not only can be further utilized but also should be noticed and appreciated.

Calling for Balance

In the 1960s specialists in the area of conflict resolution and peacemaking recognized that the field must develop a more holistic approach that would include understanding conflict through the prism of the basic needs of those specifically involved (Hayward 2012b: 51-53). By the beginning of 1990s the importance of the cultural dimension, including, and in many areas of the world consisting mainly of, the religious dimension of those involved, additionally had been noted. Overcoming a traditional, realist way of thinking about power and interest and approaching conflict with a more human-oriented perspective aimed at the rebuilding of relations between conflicted parties has become the common ground for religious and non-religious peacemaking. In fact such a way of dealing with conflict did not have to be discovered by religious peacebuilders. A relational approach or the rebuilding of relations (Cox, Philpott 2003: 31-40) has always been the basis of religious peacebuilding since this is the way many religions perceive individuals and relations between people. Such an approach strives to transcend the ego (Cristini 2007: 578-579) so as to concentrate on the needs of the other. As Daniel Philpott and Brian Cox, both experienced practitioners, show in their article, faith-based diplomacy is an “ancient idea” that is simply “newly emergent”.(Cox, Philpott 2003).

Reconciliation, forgiveness, apology, have become widely researched topics. For scholars interested in the area of peacemaking and peacebuilding, both theorists and practitioners, referring to “non-political language” will be perceived as *nihil novi sub sole* (nothing new under the sun). “To forgive the unforgivable” (Renner, Spencer 2012: 1-27) or “reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable” (Jeffery 2008: 179) seem more understandable than two decades ago. However, in spite of all these developments the discourse is not balanced.

In 2010 Katrien Hertog noticed that in contrast to the United States, where most of the literature about religious peacebuilding has emerged, the European academic world has only started opening up to the field of religious peacebuilding (Hertog 2010: 2). Although this gap has narrowed in the last five years (Brewer, Higgins, Teeney 2010: 1019-1037), Europe is still influenced by widely spread secular skepticism, which accounts for the considerable difference from the US in addressing the issue of religion in general (Mandaville, Silvestri 2015: 5).

Another and more challenging difficulty seems to stem from a lack of balance in the perception of religion among a wider audience shaped in its views on religion by the violent and tragic pictures of atrocities committed in the name of God. As Scott Appleby pointed out at the beginning of the new millennium a significant part of the problem is how religion is represented: reporters and commentators sometimes underplay or ignore the religious motivations and aspects of the work of peacemakers (Appleby 2000: 122). Religion is presented in a misleading way with a majority

A Balanced Perception of Religion in International Relations

Written by Joanna Kulska

of attention paid to those who kill in the name of religion and not to those who heal in that same name. During discussions with Polish but also with Czech and Slovakian students during a series of Erasmus lectures in Opava, Ostrava and Olomouc in the Czech Republic and in Nitra, Slovakia, the author observed that a majority of these IR students cited religious extremism and terrorism when asked about the role of religion in international relations. Knowledge of religion being the solution to problems in global politics instead of the source of the problem is limited.

It is hard to blame the public for not being aware of activities performed by faith-based actors in the area of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. It is even harder to expect a rise of such awareness in an era of Boko Haram or ISIS, when cruel acts performed in the name of God are broadcasted globally both by the world media and the perpetrators themselves. However, both academia and especially the media must be urged to show more interest and to notice that while ISIS and Boko Haram are killing in the name of God religiously-motivated individuals and organizations are helping and saving lives in the name of God at the same time, sometimes risking their own lives or the lives of their families (Lederach 2014: 17-28).

According to the 2015 Gallup poll on religious attitudes worldwide 63% of respondents described themselves as religious (WIN/Gallup International 2015). The number of people describing themselves as religious is expected to rise among young respondents. Thus, as religion in one form or another is not expected to disappear from public life in the coming decades, there is an urgent need both to use religion advantageously in making the world a more secure place and also to make its positive potential more widely known. Religion in IR – “the cousin we never knew” (Reese 2015) – deserves to be fairly pictured and fairly treated. It seems this cousin has already proved to not be the black sheep in the family.

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A Balanced Perception of Religion in International Relations

Written by Joanna Kulska

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A Balanced Perception of Religion in International Relations

Written by Joanna Kulska

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