Understanding Religion-Inspired Conflict and Peace

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Graduate students in the 1950-1990s were taught IR theory by academic elite who generally regarded religion as a historical artefact that modernization would banish into the mists of past. They were wrong. By the late 1990s social scientists "rediscovered" that people around the world not only continued practising their faith, but mobilized politically on the basis of ethnicity, nationalism, culture, and religion. In fact, religious dynamics (e.g. actors, worldviews, and cultures) infused numerous conflagrations in the 1990s including Bosnia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, and Sudan. However, it would be nearly as inaccurate for the pendulum to swing to the opposite end of the spectrum—to give credence that religion is the "problem" causing all today's conflicts, that we live in the era of the new "wars of religion." How best can we understand the role that religious dynamics play in contemporary war and peace?

Such an understanding is vital not only for IR theory but for foreign policy, particularly in the West, as well. Hence, developing an understanding for how religion directly and indirectly exacerbates conflict or nurtures peace is critical for students, for scholars, and for policy makers. Indeed, the recent historical record demonstrates the urgency of the issue: the West simply does not get religion when considering world affairs. This has been true from the religious cleavages in South Vietnam (where Buddhist monks self-immolated in protest against the Catholic elite) in the 1960s to the Iranian Revolution of the 1970s to the unexpected exhortation of a former Polish bishop which become a pillar of resistance to Communism in the 1980s to the consequences for the greater Muslim world when Arab *mujahedin* streamed home after trouncing the Soviets in Afghanistan to our failures in Iraq.

Religion can be a driver of conflict and/or of peace. More specifically, religious interpretations can *directly* induce or exacerbate conflict in a number of ways.[1] For example, a religious text or revelation directly mandates violence. The Ugandan government faces a long-term insurgency in the north of its country that fits this pattern because the leadership of the Lord's Resistance Army claims direct divine revelation for its campaign. LRA leader Joseph Kony claims that spirits talk to him and that the LRA is "fighting for Uganda to be a free state governed by the Ten Commandments, a democratic state, and a state with a freely elected president."[2] Elsewhere, religion may cause conflict is when a religious actor claims the authority, based on religion, to prescribe killing. Osama bin Laden claimed the authority to issue a *fatwa* to kill Americans and Jews: "The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it."

Elsewhere, the perpetrators of violence may justify their actions with religious claims. Some Arabs in the 1990s argued that the presence of Western troops in the land of Mecca and Medina was a desecration of Islam. Similarly, religion may sacralize a tangible thing or place, making it holy and therefore resulting in a perceived obligation to protect. The violence between Hindus and Muslims over the location of ancient Hindu temple sites in Jammu-Kashmir is a case in point.

Religion as the primary, direct cause of conflict is actually rare—despite the highly religious content of many cultures. What is far more common is when religious factors are important but indirect contributors to conflict, such as when religion, regardless of spiritual content, is a critical socio-cultural identity marker and therefore the cleavage point for competition and violence. That competition is usually between groups and over political power and material resources, such as among Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or among Lebanon's many communities. A change of religious affiliation may result in persecution, as happens to many evangelical Protestants in southern

Mexico and parts of Guatemala. Most of the time these groups are not fighting over spiritual practice or theology, but they utilize definitions of "us" and "them" that are faith-based or religio-cultural and difficult to overcome. In other places, religious symbols have been manipulated for sectarian, or mass, mobilization as "collective action frames. Ayatollah Khomeini vilified the Shah's "Persian" regime, in part by employing symbols that redefined citizenship and identity in religio-nationalist terms.

In any event, religious actors, themes, and ideas can be powerful—even transcendent—motivators. How else can one explain the self-sacrificial work of Mother Theresa? Or of a suicide bomber?

Fortunately, religion is a powerful, positive force for peace. More specifically, religious factors may *directly or indirectly contribute to peace*. A well-documented recent example is the role that the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic lay organization, played in brokering peace in Mozambique's two-decade civil war. The Community developed relationships with both sides of the conflict over more than a decade and provided the auspices for an ultimate peace deal. Furthermore, religious actors for peace include trusted intermediaries who provide social services during and after conflict. Sometimes those groups have embraced pacifism based on their faith, such as Quakers, Baha'is, and Mennonites. Generally they base their commitments to peace directly on a scriptural or spiritual revelation. The latter are well known for their peacemaking efforts in the midst of intractable conflicts, most notably in Central and South America. Likewise, there are many faith-based organizations that minister to the needs of the hurting in conflict and post-conflict settings through the provision of food, shelter, medical care, counseling, and other services. These are not "force multipliers" of the U.S. government or the United Nations, indeed, they may be critical of specific governmental policies. However, they are allies in the commitment of Western governments to human rights and flourishing.

Other agents for peace include individuals or groups who report a "calling" to engage in religiously-inspired peacemaking, such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu's reconciliation work in South Africa. Recently, USAID partnered with the Archbishop in a peace and justice conference in Colombia designed to build trust among communities divided by the long civil war there. This is not the first time that the U.S. government provided financial support for or ended up at the same table with religious peacemakers. Pope John Paul II claimed spiritual authority to act as an agent of peace, and he was clearly identified by Ronald Reagan as an ally of American ideals, although the pontiff was also critical of aspects of American society.

Finally, religiously-inspired claims can redefine identities to promote reconciliation, transforming opponents to "God's children" and "brothers/sisters." This is precisely what happened in Mozambique, and governments followed in the wake of religious peacemakers and helped guarantee the peace with offers of assistance to Mozambiquan society. Similarly, faith-inspired forgiveness transcends the often unresolved temporal issues of a conflict, as has happened for some victims of Latin America's military dictatorships and the Rwanda genocide.

In sum, religious actors and impulses infuse contemporary violence and peacebuilding and thus are critical for social scientific study (IR, comparative politics, etc.) as well as foreign policy consideration. Moreover, the U.S. and other governments need a sophisticated approach to the diversity and depth of these issues and should be bold in its condemnation of religiously-inspired violence while seeking opportunities to partner with religious and other actors to ameliorate suffering, build trust, establish security, and nurture long-term peace and reconciliation.

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[1] This categorization is taken from Eric Patterson, "Introduction to Religion and Conflict Studies" (unpublished manuscript).

[2] http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article680339.ece