

# Inter-Religious Work for Peace through Globalised Transnational Civil Society

Written by Pauline Kollontai

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PAULINE KOLLONTAI, DEC 28 2015

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During the latter part of the twentieth century the view that religion had been eclipsed by modernisation and secularisation has been challenged by the realities of the world in which we live. Scott Thomas argues there is a global resurgence of religion and one of the areas through which religions have re-entered the political spheres, foreign and domestic, is through Transnational Religious Actors (TRAs).[1] Recognition of this is seen in the work of scholars such as Rudolph and Piscatori and also Haynes.[2] Petito and Hatzpoulos argue religion must be given serious consideration in the study of international relations because it can be both a positive and negative force within and across borders.[3] Studies on TRAs demonstrate this dual capacity within religion by looking at the role of such groups and organisations as the Roman Catholic Church; the Christian Right in the USA (known as the Moral Majority); Al-Qaeda; Sikhs United; and the Organisation of Islamic Conference.

Less work has been done on the work of Inter-Religious Transnational Actors (IRTAs) such as the United Religions Initiative, World Council of Religious Leaders, Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions and Religions for Peace. One of the important aspects of these actors is that they are already modelling working together across religions to manifest the principles and values associated with peace and justice which are present in the fabric of all religious teachings. This chapter focuses on the work of the inter-religious transnational organisation, Religions for Peace, to examine its peace-building work under the aegis of globalisation. One of the areas of its work is Women, Community Development and Peace-Building which is looked at here to identify methods and approaches and the potential of this work to constitute an embryonic globalised transnational civil society.

### The Exile and Return of Religion from International Relations

The exiling of religion from the foreign policies of states began in Europe during the seventeenth century following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 because religion had been the cause of numerous religious wars and each religion's claim to have the absolute truth was considered by political leaders as potentially detrimental to embodying more of a spirit of co-operation in international relations. The superiority of secular power and authority, first in Europe and then across the globe, became the dominant operating principle for international relations. Religious voices—their ideas, values and principles—became marginalised in this area of state policy and governance. An interesting question to ask is whether the exiling of religion in this sphere meant that international relations proceeded to develop more co-operatively. The growth of imperialism and colonialism which were a central part of the foreign policies of most European states during the 300 years following the Peace of Westphalia normally involved some form of exploitation, aggression or even full-scale war. This appears to suggest that the exiling of religion made little difference to the behaviour of European leaders towards countries they wanted to conquer. Secular authority, as history shows, is also potentially prone to bouts of constructing policies that minimise human rights and in some cases destroy not only these rights but also innocent human life. Such authority in its more extreme expressions of power has oppressed religions; has failed to see that religion has the ability and capacity to contribute to the building of a more just and

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peaceable world; and has certainly not understood or misunderstood that ignoring religious leaders and their communities either in domestic or foreign policies assists in feeding the extremist elements in all religions.

The return of religion into IR was inevitable partly because of the points raised above but also because of the role that aspects of globalisation have played in assisting religious communities to connect more efficiently and on a greater scale. The growth in the transnational activity of religious actors (individuals groups and organisations), both negative and positive, has woken up the political leaders and their establishments to the reality that religion is a serious player in the affairs of states. The resurgence of religion and intensification of its presence in many parts of the world is a characteristic of postmodernism. For many people, modernity with its scientific rationalism, emphasis on meta-narratives and rejection of absolute unquestioning ways of speaking truth has caused a search for the transcendent, for new ways of understanding the human condition and for ways to change and improve human existence. Haynes states, 'Overall the postmodern condition offers opportunities for various religious actors to pursue a public role in a variety of areas.'[4] This activity expresses the spectrum of religious adherents and their interpretation of religious teachings—from conservative to liberal to fundamentalist—which then are translated in words and actions that seek either to nurture or destroy human societies. The return of religion to international relations reflects the view that 'religion is older than the state, and its aims encompass not just politics but all of life',[5] and this return reminds us that 'religion pre-dates the field of international relations, it has been and will always be integral to human identity'.[6]

## Religion: The Dynamics of Co-operation and Conflict

Religion for many is considered authoritarian, parochial, exclusivist and intolerant. In the past decade, this one-sided view of religion has undergone some change as a more open-minded approach has been applied on the part of those working in the political and social sciences. Turner is one such individual who has done this in his work, which shows that religion can operate in ways that do not promote the difference of others in a negative and confrontational way. He gives examples where religion has promoted concern, empathy and a sense of responsibility for others and seen every person as worthy of equal moral concern. For Turner, globalisation has challenged change within 'these traditional (religious) systems of inclusion and exclusion through hybridisation'.[7]

Arguing the case that indeed religion can promote and support pluralism and democratic values is explored through the paradigm of the dual nature of religion. Boulding speaks of 'the holy war and peaceable garden culture' in religion[8], while Galtung says, 'every religion contains, in varying degrees, elements of the soft and the hard'.[9] This dual nature of religion is described by Scott Appleby: 'Religion is a source not only of intolerance, human rights violations and extremist violence, but also of non-violent conflict transformation, the defence of human rights, integrity in government, and reconciliation and stability in divided societies.'[10] This presents religion as having a dual potential. This is argued by Appleby to result from the fact that most religions are by nature internally pluralistic.[11] For many people across the globe religion is a means of trying to understand life and the human condition and, for many, religion becomes the inspiration and a tool for peace-building. But, returning to the dual nature of religion argument, what must be recognised is that religions, 'while providing many valuable tools for peacebuilding, can also contribute to perpetuating cultures of violence.'[12] Religion has the capacity and power to create and promote various worldviews, but fundamentally these express variations on one or other of two main models: (i) closed and exclusivist; or (ii) open and inclusivist/pluralist. Many religions, because of their claim to a universal truth, are naturally constructed in their ethos and approach to work across territorial boundaries and state borders. The interaction of religion with globalisation can be experienced negatively and positively.

## Case Study: Religions for Peace

The transnational, inter-religious organisation Religions for Peace (RfP) was set up in 1970. The global organisation consists of a world council made up of senior religious leaders from all regions of the world, four regional bodies, over seventy national bodies and the Global Youth and Global Women of Faith networks. RfP's origins are in the 1960s when a meeting took place between religious leaders from the major religious traditions who believed there was an urgent need to have an international religious summit for people of faith to focus their efforts of working towards achieving world peace. The first meeting of RfP took place in Kyoto, Japan in October 1970 and produced *The Kyoto Declaration of the First World Assembly*. Its opening statement sets out clearly the role of the meeting as 'an historic

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attempt to bring together men and women of all major religions to 'discuss the urgent issue of peace'.<sup>[13]</sup> In grave terms it identifies the challenge as humanity being faced with 'cruel and inhuman wars and by racial, social and economic violence', as well as the threat of nuclear extinction.<sup>[14]</sup> What then follows in the Declaration is an identification of seven principles of belief that can unite the world religions in action for world peace. These seven principles provide a starting point for a perspective that sees all of humanity as one family, thereby articulating the equality and dignity of all human beings. An explicit challenge to those who abuse and sometimes destroy the lives of people and a counter way of behaving in the world is then clearly established with the statement that 'love, compassion, selflessness, and the force of inner truthfulness and of the spirit have ultimately greater power than hate, enmity, and self-interest'.<sup>[15]</sup> Evident from the Declaration is the fact that RfP is not just a discussion forum but has an ethos of praxis, presenting religions as providing a meta framework to challenge both in word and action those ideologies and their adherents that deny rights, needs and life to people. The Declaration makes clear that RfP aims to be an organisation that transcends religious and political differences and challenges governments and other organisations that violate human dignity and life. This is evidenced on the final page of the *Kyoto Declaration*:

We pledge ourselves to warn the nations who citizens we are that the effort to achieve and maintain military power is the road to disaster. It creates a climate of terror and mistrust; it demands resources for the meetings of the needs of health, housing and welfare; it fosters the escalation of the arms race; it sharpens differences among nations into military and economic blocs; it regards peace as a truce or a balance of terror; it dismisses as utopian a truly universal concern for the welfare of all humankind. To all this we say 'No!'<sup>[16]</sup>

The work advocated in this statement operates on three levels: nationally, regionally and internationally.

RfP is a transnational religious actor but has the added advantage of being specifically inter-religious in its membership and model of working. The organisation is thus truly 'global' in terms of the mixing and sharing of cultures, practices, ideas and values which certain aspects of globalisation, in particular communication via technology and travel, have helped to facilitate. Its practical and policy work shows that while its principles are rooted in the concept of a global human family underpinned by a fundamental unity, the organisation recognises that work undertaken has to be contextualised. In order to explore this we will look at RfP's work with women on community and peace-building. This involves multi-religious partnerships that support and mobilise the social and moral resources of people to work together on specific issues. This is certainly an area of RfP development work significantly enhanced by those aspects of globalisation that expedite inter-personal and inter-group communication.

## Women, Community Development and Peace-building

In 2001, under the auspices of RfP, the Global Women of Faith Network (GWFN) was established. At the time of writing, this network consists of over a thousand local and national religious women's organisations and also regional networks in Africa, Asia, Europe, South America and the Caribbean and North America. All regional networks are inter-religious, led by representatives of religions within each region. These networks aim 'to provide a platform for cooperative action throughout the different levels of religious communities, from grassroots to the most senior level'.<sup>[17]</sup> Based on the recognition that many women of faith across the world are involved in activities of community development and peace-building, GWFN's role is to support such women in their work whether through small grants, micro-finance and economic enterprise services, training in leadership and advocacy, or educational services. This support is also intended to increase the visibility of these women as agents of building sustainable and peaceful localities and thus as role models within their communities and societies. The work of the African Women of Faith Regional Network (AWFRN) is explored to show the approaches and methods used.

The AWFRN'S plan of action for 2007–2012 gives special attention to conflict transformation, peace-building and sustainable development. It states that this plan is grounded in women's experiences not only in Africa but across the world and that

It is woven around women's aspirations and desire for an African continent and global family that cherishes and enjoys equality of women and men, enjoyment of human rights for all; and a world safe and secure, free from poverty,

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violence and disease.[18]

It also makes clear that this work seeks to push forward the commitment made by African government leaders in their adoption in 2003 of the *Protocol to the Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on Women's Rights in Africa* and in 2004 of the *Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality by African Heads of States*.

The priority is to facilitate the work of women in Africa, with support from women in other parts of the globe, 'to coordinate strategies and pool resources and capabilities for interfaith action to achieve results that would be difficult for any single member to accomplish alone on the issues of: network building; peace and security; conflict transformation; and gender, poverty and health'. [19] The methods and approaches of the AWRN is illustrated in the case of Uganda, where it is working with women on issues of sustainable development in small towns and villages to provide and/or improve health and care services for HIV/AIDS sufferers and their family members; to review the appropriateness of educational policies with regard to orphans and vulnerable children having access to primary education; and to support the development of local economic services through setting up village loan associations and micro-finance initiatives in villages. The work with women involves capacity-based training on such things as psychosocial support for vulnerable people; leadership and advocacy; understanding and reviewing government policy and law concerned with child protection, rights of the child in terms of education and employment of children; and economic and business skills to run small enterprises designed to benefit individuals and their communities. The work relating to the rights and protection of orphans and vulnerable children and access to primary education involves both practical and policy work. On the practical side, the AWRN worked 2006–2011 with local women in three districts (Kamuli, Luwero and Tororo) to support access to formal education for 6,782 orphans and vulnerable children. Regarding advocacy for change in government policy, this involved working with religious leaders in Uganda on a review of educational policy and legislation to identify the barriers to orphans and vulnerable children accessing education. These advocacy initiatives are reported as having 'resulted in the enactment of bylaws and follow-up mechanisms for accountability and reporting, government banning of employment of children, and school visits by government officials and religious leaders to monitor implementation of education'. [20]

As the AWRN shows, the GWFN and its member organisations have a transnational role which aims to build bridges and partnerships in all areas of its work 'between faith-based women's organisations, secular partners, international agencies and the United Nations'. [21] It is clear that the central aim is threefold: (i) for women to be supported and further enabled to work on the practical realities of the issues they face; (ii) to build networks and form strategic multi-stakeholder partnerships and alliances; (iii) to educate and raise awareness throughout their localities of ways to respond to issues in a way that can make changes and provide choices for women and men with regard to living with a sense of worth and dignity. And underpinning this is articulated the right for people to freely organise, discuss and take action on issues that government and other official bodies are seen not to be making sufficient progress in rectifying.

## Conclusion

The work of the GWFN reflects the overall work of RfP, which emphasises the importance of civil society and the expression of collective action representing shared interests, concerns, purposes and values. RfP therefore operates in the intermediate space between the individual and government, providing the opportunity for communities to find ways to improve situations. However, RfP is not only helping to develop civil society within localities but is also a catalyst for this development across immediate and regional borders and from one side of the world to the other. In this case, as Haynes argues, globalisation is facilitating 'the growth of transnational network of religious actors which, feeding of each other's ideas and perhaps aiding each other with funds, form bodies whose main priority is the well-being and advance of their transnational religious community'. [22] While Haynes is making this argument in his research on religions working transnationally on issues within their own religious communities, his argument of globalisation facilitating such work also appertains to these inter-religious transnational actors.

RfP, from its world council to its regional, national and local organisations, is made up of people from different religions and different social, cultural and political contexts, and it is the sharing of experience, strategies and

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practice which has the ability to transplant expressions of civil society and help shape new models. In the process of this transplantation, a more globalised or transnational civil society is shaped, as the building of social capital, trust and shared values transcends borders and boundaries. According to Lipschutz, transnational civil society is 'the self-conscious constructions of knowledge and action, by decentred, local actors that cross the reified boundaries of space as though they were not there'.<sup>[23]</sup> The interconnectedness of peoples and their societies then becomes more explicit and the potential becomes greater for religions working in an inter-religious framework to influence national and international government policies. In this sense RfP is assisting in the creation of global civil society. If civil society within nation-states is an essential aspect of a functioning democracy, even more than is global civil society central to the global politics of peace.

## Notes

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- [4] Jeffrey Haynes, *An Introduction to International Relations and Religion* (2nd edition, Harrow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2013), 3.
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- [7] Bryan S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory* (CA: Sage, 1991), 148.
- [8] Elise Boulding, 'Two Cultures of Religion as Obstacles to Peace', *Zygon* 21:4 (December 1986), 508.
- [9] Johan Galtung, 'Religions, Hard and Soft', *Cross Currents* 47:4 (Winter 1997-98), 3.
- [10] R Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 821.
- [11] Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, 30-32.
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- [13] Religions for Peace, The Kyoto Declaration of the First World Assembly. Accessed at: <http://religionsforpeace.org> (March 25, 2014), 1.
- [14] Religions for Peace, The Kyoto Declaration of the First World Assembly, 1.
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[19] African Women of Faith Network, National Women of Faith Networks, 2.

[20] African Women of Faith Network, National Women of Faith Networks, 2.

[21] Katherine Clark, Rori Picker Neiss, Angela Oliver, Elisa Levy and Valeri Getti, *A Guide for Building Women of Faith Networks* (New York: Religions for Peace Publications, 2009), 29.

[22] Haynes, 'Transnational Religious Actors and International Politics', 144.

[23] Ronnie D. Lipschutz, 'Reconstructing World Politics: The Emergence of Global Civil Society', *Millennium Journals of International Studies* 21:3 (1992), 390.

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