



Divine Intervention

Regional Reconciliation Through Faith

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Religion historically has been a major source of international conflict, and its role as such has been reinforced in recent years. Hans Kung has asserted that the “most fanatical and cruelest political struggles are those that have been colored, inspired, and legitimized by religion.” In his famous essay, “Clash of Civilizations,” Samuel Huntington went so far as to argue that the great divisions among humankind and the dominating sources of conflict in global politics are based on culture, which is primarily differentiated by religion. Huntington’s opinion, however, is an exaggeration of the importance of religion in international conflict. In fact, most assessments of religion in international affairs tend to oversimplify the causal interconnections between religion and conflict and often disregard important alternate variables.

While much has been made of religion as a source of international conflict, considerably less attention has been given to religion as a source of international peacemaking. There are two principal varieties of religious peacemaking. The first involves religious and faith-based organizations engaging in peacemaking activities. Probably the most illustrative case of this type of peacemaking was the mediation by the Catholic organization Sant’Egidio that ended the 1992 civil war in Mozambique. The second type of religious peacemaking promotes understanding between religious groups that are in conflict. Inter-faith reconciliation in a post-conflict period also falls in this category. This article will analyze both types of religious peacemaking and will explore country case studies from the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East.

Bosnia and the Promise of Faith-Based NGOs

Recognizing that many faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have attempted to promote post-conflict reconciliation in Bosnia, the US Institute of Peace commissioned a study measuring the success of these efforts. The guiding research questions were: How effectively can faith-based NGOs advance reconciliation in Bosnia? Can faith-based NGOs be effective agents of inter-faith reconciliation, particularly when they share a religious identity with one party involved in the conflict? Are these NGOs more likely to be agents of reconciliation or contributors to additional division? The research was undertaken over a 15-month period by Branka Peuraca, who studied the work of Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Muslim and Jewish organizations (including Catholic Relief Services, World Vision, United Methodist Committee on Relief, Islamic Relief Worldwide, and local NGOs such as Abraham).

The number of international and local faith-based organizations operating in Bosnia is impressive, as is the number contributing to ethno-religious reconciliation. Some of the early efforts at reconciliation proved to be ineffective, and in some cases, counterproductive. Some Muslim organizations were even suspected of having ties to Islamic terrorist groups in Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan. Despite these few

stumbling blocks, the overall assessment was positive. Many faith-based NGOs have made a significant contribution to ethno-religious reconciliation in Bosnia. This has included the formation of Bosnia's Inter-Religious Council, composed of leaders from the four religious communities. NGOs like Catholic Relief Services, World Vision, and the United Methodist Committee on Relief encourage inter-faith collaboration in planning local, educational, and infrastructural projects. In the course of planning and implementing local development projects, ethno-religious enemies end up cooperating with each other. Other projects like the Pontanima Choir, initiated by the Order of Franciscans in Sarajevo, have directly aimed at interpersonal reconciliation.

The inter-faith dialogue work in Bosnia organized by Reverend David Steele of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is worthy of mention. While not a faith-based organization itself, CSIS effectively facilitated many inter-faith dialogues and helped to found the local Center for Religious Dialogue to continue this work. Steele developed an approach to organizing dialogues that has proved effective over several years in Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, and Macedonia. His methods are based heavily upon personal storytelling, which uses the participants' experiences to help them relate to members of other faith communities. In addition to employing personal testimony, his approach emphasizes the importance of acknowledging responsibility for wrongs committed against the other group, forgiving injuries inflicted by the other group, and developing strategies to address the issues of justice that have generated and sustained intergroup conflict.

The CSIS cases in Bosnia demonstrate that enlightened action by faith-based NGOs can contribute to inter-religious reconciliation in places where religion is a source of conflict. These NGOs can bridge religious divisions, diminish the level of animosity, and focus attention on the shared responsibility to rebuild society.

Inter-faith Dialogue in Macedonia

In the spring of 2001, President Boris Trajkovski of Macedonia gave a public address at the US Institute of Peace. As he was departing, he asked the President of the Institute to support inter-faith dialogue in Macedonia, particularly between leaders of the two largest ethno-religious communities, the Macedonian Orthodox Christians and the Albanian Muslims. The 2000 and 2001 armed conflict in Macedonia between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians was not caused by religious differences, but the polarized, inflammatory rhetoric of religious leaders did exacerbate the conflict. Trajkovski saw the need to dampen the escalating inter-religious animosity.

Knowing their familiarity with both Macedonia and inter-faith dialogue, I approached Professors Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler of the International Scholars Annual Dialogue (ISAT), a division of the Global Dialogue Institute, to sponsor an inter-faith project in Macedonia with financial support from the US Institute of Peace. In May 2002, ISAT organized a five-day dialogue project in Skopje for 50 Macedonian religious scholars and leaders along with 40 international scholars. The Macedonian participants included Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Roman Catholics, Methodists, and Jews.

At the beginning of the five-day dialogue, the atmosphere was tense and the exchanges acrimonious, particularly between Orthodox Christians and Muslims. But as the dialogue progressed, the participants began to recognize their shared interests as people of faith. Since Macedonia was recently emancipated from anti-religious Communist rule, the various religious communities shared desires to offer religious education in public schools, to return properties confiscated by the Communist government, and to have the media respectfully cover religious activities. The participants in the dialogue also began to understand the pain and

suffering each side had inflicted on the other, and reconnected with the warrants for peace and reconciliation in each of their faith traditions.

At a meeting held in conjunction with this dialogue, heads of the Orthodox, Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Methodist communities committed themselves to creating an inter-religious council. The council would meet every three months to explore and to hopefully resolve disputes that might arise among the communities. They also agreed to cross-register several courses in order to hold student exchanges between the Orthodox Christian Seminary and the Islamic Theological Seminary. While unrest within the hierarchy of the Orthodox Christian Seminary has delayed the full implementation of these agreements, the commitments remain concrete outcomes of the Macedonian dialogue. ISAT representatives have continued to visit Macedonia and facilitate additional inter-faith interaction.

The experience in Macedonia proves how top religious leaders can be persuaded to meet and work together on a regular basis to lower the volume of inter-religious animosity and to recognize the interests that their various religious communities share.

Mozambique and Religious Mediation

The most dramatic example of religious peacemaking over the past two decades is the mediation orchestrated between 1989 and 1992 by the Community of Sant'Egidio, which brought an end to the civil war that had ravaged Mozambique for more than a decade. Sant'Egidio is an international movement composed of Catholic laity whose principal focus prior to the Mozambique mediation was to serve the needs of the urban poor. Don Jaime Goncalves, Catholic Archbishop of Beira, was familiar with Sant'Egidio from the time he had spent in Rome. Although all other parties had failed, he thought Sant'Egidio might succeed in bringing the governing Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) together with the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) insurgents. After many months of patient probing, Sant'Egidio succeeded in making contact with the RENAMO leadership and encouraging Mozambican government officials to meet with them.

Both RENAMO and the FRELIMO government viewed Sant'Egidio as a neutral and compassionate organization whose sole interest was to promote peace. Sant'Egidio had no political or economic agenda and successfully maintained a position of strict even-handedness and neutrality. In the eyes of the Mozambican government, Sant'Egidio, as an NGO, could convene a meeting between RENAMO and the government without conferring official status on the RENAMO rebels. Another one of Sant'Egidio's assets was its humble awareness of its own shortcomings in orchestrating international diplomacy, which caused it to seek out the special expertise of governments and international organizations. The core mediation team was comprised of the Mozambican archbishop, an Italian socialist parliamentarian and former diplomat, and two key leaders of Sant'Egidio. The effort was also assisted by the United Nations and 10 different governments, of which the United States and Italy were the most active, along with Zimbabwe and Kenya. The peace negotiations were completed in 1992, after which the United Nations assumed responsibility for the implementation of the peace agreement. For the past decade Mozambique has been peaceful, with RENAMO serving as the political opposition to the FRELIMO government.

The mediation work of Sant'Egidio in Mozambique illustrates how savvy religious organizations, building on their neutrality and compassion and utilizing the skills of other institutions, can bring feuding parties together and perhaps help end civil wars.

The Promise of Nigeria

In 1992, Evangelist James Movel Wuye lost his right arm, and Imam Muhammed Nurayn Ashafa lost two of his brothers and his teacher in the same Muslim-Christian clash in Zangon Kataf. Wuye and Ashafa were on opposing sides as militant youth leaders. In 1995, they both converted to religious peacemaking and committed themselves to collaborative efforts to promote inter-faith accommodation. In 1999, they co-authored a book entitled *The Pastor and the Imam: Responding to Conflict*, which describes their experiences and illustrates the Bible and the Quran's commitments to peace. Nigeria has a level of ethno-religious violence that has claimed 10,000 lives over the past four years, and Wuye and Ashafa's home city of Kaduna is the principal killing field.

Ashafa and Wuye wrote in their book that, "Religion today, instead of serving as a source of healing sickness, hunger, and poverty, and stimulating tranquility and peaceful co-existence among human beings, is used to cause sadness. It is bringing pain instead of relief, hatred instead of love, division instead of unity, sadness instead of joy, discrimination and destruction instead of accommodation and development. This is especially true between some adherents of Islam and Christianity. Nigeria has its own share of this negative phenomenon. Its ethnic-religious conflict has become a matter so serious and devastating that it can now be seen as a harbinger of the danger of a crisis such as those that have engulfed the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Liberia."

To help address these issues, in March 2003, the Inter-Faith Mediation Centre directed by Ashafa and Wuye along with the US Institute of Peace, co-sponsored a five-day dialogue workshop in Kaduna for Christian and Muslim youth leaders. One Muslim and one Christian youth leader were selected to participate from 30 of Nigeria's states, creating an evenly divided forum between Christians and Muslims. The focus on youth leaders complemented the work of the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council for senior religious leaders and focused attention on the age group that has been responsible for much of Nigeria's religious violence.

At the beginning of the workshop, Christians attributed all the blame for religious violence in Nigeria to the Muslim community and vice versa. By the conclusion of the workshop, the participants issued a declaration containing 17 consensus recommendations including resolutions for both Christians and Muslims to see and love each other unconditionally as brothers and sisters, to show good will at all times, to educate and enlighten the respective adherents about the true tenets of their faiths, and to cooperate with government to checkmate perpetrators of religious violence for punishment according to the due process of law. This national workshop is to be followed by similar inter-faith workshops organized at regional and state levels.

The Nigerian case shows how skillfully organized interfaith dialogue can help turn religious enemies, including those who have engaged in religious warfare, toward peaceful accommodation.

Religious Peacebuilding in the Holy Land

While the international press focuses on hatred and violence between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims, this microcosmic picture does not accurately reflect the full spectrum of their relations. The US Institute of Peace commissioned an Israeli religious peacemaker, Yehezkel Landau, to prepare a report on religious peacebuilding in Israel. Landau's account reports on initiatives such as the Alexandria Declaration, signed by Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders from Israel and the Palestinian Territories, including Israel's chief rabbi and the chief sheikh of the West Bank. The Declaration calls for a religious ceasefire and the end of all

violence. Each month, with financial support from the US Institute of Peace, religious leaders meet in Jerusalem to strategize about how to promote their vision of peace.

At a meeting in October 2002, the Alexandria signatories adopted a 10-point agenda for action, including goals to sustain a close working relationships with the political leadership of both the government of Israel and the Palestinian National Authority, to engage in dialogue with religious leaders who seem to be instrumental in the violence, establish clear channels of communication with nations and organizations involved in the peace process, develop a program of education that will foster and encourage an environment of tolerance and eventual reconciliation, and engage with other nations of the Middle East region.

Religious peacebuilding is a positive alternative to the religious polarization that contributes to conflict violence. Rabbi Michael Melchior, Israel's former Deputy Foreign Minister and the chief Israeli architect of the Alexandria process, said, "The religious dimension of the struggle for peace transcends the specific issues of holy sites, even Jerusalem. Without a religious foundation to the whole process, the Prince of Death takes over and eclipses the Tree of Life which is in every tradition. Demonization grows, and murderers like Barukh Goldstein, who led the attack on the Tomb of the Patriarchs mosque, and Yigal Amir, who killed Yitzhak Rabin, become heroes to sections of the alienated religious community."

Other examples of religious peacebuilding in the region include the grassroots dialogues organized by the Inter-religious Coordinating Council in Israel and the Inter-faith Encounter Association. Under the sponsorship of the Yesodot Center for the Study of Torah and Democracy, 24 religious educators—Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Druze—have participated in a program called "Religion, Democracy, and Coexistence" aimed at building inter-religious tolerance among schoolchildren. The Peacemaker Community brings together Jews, Christians, and Muslims in both social actions and spiritual disciplines. The Parents' Circle—Bereaved Parents for Tolerance, Democracy, Peace, and Judaism joins those of all faiths who have lost family members in political violence between Israel and Palestine for mutual support and joint opposition to violence. The Israeli-Palestinian experience indicates that even in the most religiously volatile situations, religious leaders who are committed to peace can work on an inter-faith basis to promote an agenda of peace with justice.

Religion as a Solution unto Itself

While the religious causes of conflict receive plenty of public attention, the role of religious peacemakers tends to be neglected. Most faiths call on their members to be peacemakers, and increasing numbers of religious organizations are identifying opportunities to promote peace, even in situations where religion contributes to conflict. Hopefully, through increased public recognition and support and through the development of more effective peacemaking strategies, religious organizations can start to reach their full potential as international peacemakers.

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