

**BELIEF AND CULTURE
FUELLING OR RESOLVING CONFLICT?**

Introduction

Religion is often viewed today as having a negative role in world politics. After decades during which religion seemed to be largely and effectively relegated to the private realm, religious believers all over the world are staking out a new claim for religion as a central feature of public life. The wish to restore religion to what is considered its rightful place at the heart of society is the most notable common denominator of religiously inspired political movements. In order to achieve their aim, members of such movements may employ various tactics, including violent ones. They justify their use of violence by reason, often referring to a perception that we are not living in normal times, and that exceptional circumstances require exceptional measures. As a result, an unusual alliance has been forged in many cases between religion and politics.

The emergence of certain interest groups that do not shun violence and seem to be inspired by a particular religious ideology has tempted many observers, notably in the West, to assume an intrinsic connection between religion and violence. Hence, it is common today to consider religion as a source of conflict rather than a resource for peace. The logical conclusion is then to try and reduce the influence of the religious factor in the political arena. Typically in such a view, religion is deemed to be a private affair, something between individual believers and their god(s), a relation that should not spill over into the public domain. Whereas religion is expected to limit itself exclusively to regulating humans' relations between the visible (material) and invisible (spiritual) worlds, it is politics, on the other hand, which is deemed solely responsible for regulating their relations with the state that they live in. The formal separation between the fields of religion and politics has been the hallmark of Western democracies for centuries and was also introduced to other parts of the world, notably those which were colonised by Europe, and, by extension, countries that were long under the influence of Western Europe and North America and were expected to follow more or less the same political path. The world-wide resurgence of religion is increasingly seen as challenging the basis of the secular state. In view of this development it is important to analyse the relation between religion and politics before considering how religion or belief may contribute to the promotion of peace.

Analysing religion

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Religion and politics are always in an uneasy relationship because they are rival powers. In fact, they constitute two alternative sources of power, based in the spiritual and material spheres respectively, or, spiritual power and material power. Although secularists often find this difficult to understand, spiritual power is *real* power for those who believe in it. In many non-Western countries, where a majority of people are religious in the sense that they believe in an invisible world inhabited by spiritual forces, power derived from the spirit world can be employed for mundane purposes and is legitimately used that way. In most countries in the South, religion historically had a role to play in the governance of their societies, while in most countries in the northern hemisphere, notably Western Europe and North America, religion has long been denied such a role. In most parts of the world, however, religion remains a social and political force of great importance. Most current religious revivals in the world have a historical basis in the - often postcolonial - societies where they emerge, to the extent that these may be said to represent a form of decolonisation of the mind by reconnecting with the past: the precolonial past. The denial of religious realities in many parts of the world is further based on two misconceptions that are contradictory but nevertheless often expressed: first that religion in itself, that is by its very nature, is an obstacle to peace, as is deemed evident from all the conflicts in the world today; and, second, that when religion becomes a significant factor in a particular conflict, that it is in fact being used contrary to its essential nature which is deemed to be intrinsically good. As one can see, these are in fact two incompatible positions: while the former opinion (religion is a negative force) is based on what people may experience in practice, the latter view (religion is basically good) is based on what some commentators believe it ought to be. These contrasting positions are in fact a reflection of a common discrepancy between theory and practice.

Religious ideologies have their own - theological - justifications for the use of violence, which is part and parcel of religious history. Christianity, for example, boasts a history in which the notion of a just war is not only accepted, but also provides justification for current right-wing Christian revivalist groups to declare war on both their religious and secular enemies. It should not be left unmentioned, in this context, that Christian liberation theology, as frequently embraced by the political left, is in fact a modern elaboration of the just war theory, resulting in another form of 'exceptionalism'. Similarly, in Islam the concept of *jihad*, a spiritual idea that may be carried over on to the material plane under particular conditions, notably for the purpose of self-defence, has proved helpful in justifying and rationalising the use of violence in modern times. Founders of Hamas, for example, have expanded the notion of self-defence beyond individuals' physical well-being to include the defence of their dignity and pride. In Judaism too, allowance is made for the need to fight a just war in certain circumstances, but in a similar manner a reinterpretation of historical sources takes place in such a way as to justify, for example, the current violence against Palestinians. In fact, it

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appears that all major religious traditions, notably the book religions, make allowance for the use of violence.

In other words, if it is true that a widespread theoretical assumption (that religion is something good) contradicts a widespread experience (that religion is in actual fact usually bad), then this reflects the ambiguous nature of religion itself. For religion is neither inherently peaceful, nor does it automatically or inevitably lead to conflict. From a social science perspective - which, I should emphasise, is different from the theological perspective of individual believers - religion is a human construct, something which has grown among human communities and serves human interests, which are in many cases conflicting ones. As such it becomes a tool in the hands of human beings that can be used for good or not-so-good purposes, for constructive or for destructive aims and objectives.

Religion, culture and peace

It is important to realise that the association of religion with international peace and social harmony is a historically recent development in theology. If we look at the so-called book religions - those that base themselves on a written authority such as the Torah, Bible, or Qur'an - it is apparent that the humane worldview on which many believers strive to base their actions today did not exist at the time that these books were written. In those days the use of violence was commonly accepted and even encouraged in certain circumstances, while peace and tolerance were usually limited to a particular circle of people. Those falling outside that category of belonging could be dealt with differently, and usually harshly. In other words, there was a limited understanding of the common good, which was often restricted to one's own family or clan. In the course of history this exclusive trend in religion has proved extremely harmful, and so it is today when self-perceived 'true' believers legitimise the use of violence towards other human beings considered to be different and therefore liable to different treatment. Hence the importance of an exploration of the positive potential of religion and the need to explore religious resources for the sake of peace, not only by religious believers but also by secular policy makers and state actors. Both from a practical and intellectual perspective it seems obvious to argue that all the human resources in a given society may be employed for political purposes - not only material and intellectual resources, but also religious and spiritual ones. Exploring religious resources for peace seems to me one of the most urgent tasks of our time. Religious resources, I have argued at other occasions, are contained in the four main elements of which religions consist: religious ideas (content of belief), religious practices (ritual behaviour), social organisation (religious community), and religious experiences (psychic attitudes).

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For an effective mobilisation of religious or spiritual resources, consideration of the cultural context is of crucial importance. Due to the fact that in many societies religion continues to play a role in governance, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms often have a religious component, containing notions of forgiveness and reconciliation, of reparation and restoration. Restoring broken relations in the widest sense - not only between victim and perpetrator, but with the wider community as represented in both the visible *and* the invisible world, including ancestors and other spirit entities - becomes the ultimate objective, which often clashes with more secular expressions of justice and peace.

A topical example of this is the way in which the Acholi people of northern Uganda try to facilitate reconciliation between the Ugandan government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). An Acholi delegation recently visiting the International Criminal Court in The Hague, which has issued indictments of leaders of the LRA, returned frustrated and empty-handed, since it found no openness for traditional views of resolving the conflict. In this case, conflict-resolution techniques include use of a ritual that is traditionally performed after successful mediation in a conflict between two families or clans after a case of homicide. In the ritual, the offender accepts responsibility for the offence, asks forgiveness and must subsequently make reparation to the victims. The two parties involved then share a bitter drink, known as *mato oput*, from a calabash, to recall the bitterness of the conflict and the soured relations, and then bury the calabash, as the ritual climax of a judicial process. Not only does the Amnesty Act of Uganda provide a legal framework for incorporating traditional justice mechanisms, but the reconciliation ceremony itself was placed on the agenda of the peace talks held in Juba in southern Sudan. It appears, however, that such local options for peace are jeopardised by the demands inherent in the international legal framework of justice. It is only one example that expresses the tension between international law and local perceptions of justice.

We may compare this to the well-known example of South Africa, where the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), in spite of its shortcomings, has made history in the way it has handled the political transition in the country. The Afrikaner poet and writer Antjie Krog, who has written extensively about the TRC, has pointed to what she considers to be a fundamental difference in this respect between an African and a Western worldview. According to her, this is located in the different perspective on how and where one's moral compass is shaped. In the West, this is primarily done within the individual ego, in communication with oneself; in an African consciousness, morality is also formed within the individual ego but in constant communication with others. She illustrates the way in which the individual moral condition was shaped through its relations with others by means of testimonies that were given to the TRC by some of the perpetrators of the horrendous crimes committed under the apartheid regime. Typically, perpetrators were haunted by the face of the

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person they had tortured to death. This, she says, was what burdened their consciousness, not the (abstract) moral commandment 'Thou shall not kill'. She relates the story of a black South African woman by the name of Cynthia Ngewu, whose son Christopher Piet had been killed by the security police. When the man responsible for the act begged for forgiveness, she answered saying: "That so-called reconciliation... if I understand it correctly... if it means that this perpetrator, the man who killed Christopher Piet, if it means that he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that we all regain our humanity... then I agree, then I am totally in favour." In Antjie Krog's analysis, this mother showed the astonishing insight that the murderer of her son had been capable of killing her child precisely because he had lost his humanity and that forgiveness was the only possibility for him to regain his humanity. Her culturally defined consciousness enabled her to understand that this step would at the same time open the way for her to recover her own humanity that had been harmed by the cruel murder of her son. According to Antjie Krog, it is this intuitive awareness of mutual relations that formed the basis for most of the TRC testimonies and the lack of revenge. A sense of interconnectedness, widespread in Africa, not only made it possible to forgive on behalf of those who had died but also demonstrated that full humanity is only possible in a society that has been healed. In the case quoted it is the victim who takes the initiative, and it is up to the perpetrator to confirm the act of forgiveness by transforming his life in such a way as to regain his humanity. The aspect of transformation, in my view, and the belief in the possibility thereof, is one of the most potent instruments for peace that religious believers have at their disposal.

Conclusion

The TRC, as described by Antjie Krog, is a telling example, in my view, of the religious potential for resolving conflict. It is a potential that takes different cultural forms and which may not always be in conformity with standard ways and methods of resolving conflict, such as by international law. Often, peace and justice are seen as mutually exclusive imperatives. The challenge is, it seems to me, to find ways and means of reconciling culture-specific and international approaches in resolving conflict or, in other words, to adopt an inclusive rather than an exclusive approach to conflict resolution.

Religious potential, we should be reminded, is not by definition geared towards peace but can also be used to fuel conflict, due to the ambiguous nature of religion and dependence on the religious actor. The real challenge here is to keep the destructive side of religion in check by consciously developing - or helping develop - its constructive and positive potential. This also requires a conscious consideration of cultural resources, rather than an easy dismissal of these, such as by the acclaimed human rights lawyer and judge of the Sierra Leone tribunal, Geoffrey Robertson, who described the Acholi peace rituals as 'nonsense', arguing that the

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crimes that had been committed are so barbaric that they diminish all of us as human beings and that therefore they cannot be forgiven by anybody but require punishment.

This brings me to a concern that I have often expressed as a scholar of religion concerned with human rights: the juridification of human rights. By this I mean the exclusively juridical approach to questions of human rights that reduces the discussion to 'rights talk', at the expense of considering the 'human' dimension of the concept. Though central to the human rights debate, the question of 'what is a human being' is often ignored or neglected, but has been given a remarkable and encouraging answer in the case of Cynthia Ngewu, the mother of Christopher Piet.

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