
RELIGION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

— DOUGLAS M. JOHNSTON —

Religion as it relates to conflict is a double-edged sword. It can cause conflict or abate it. The divisive influence that religion represents in the affairs of humankind has been widely recognized and documented. Its obverse contribution to the advancement of social change on a nonviolent basis, however, is less well known. Under the right circumstances religious or spiritual factors can effectively contribute to the prevention, amelioration, or resolution of conflict.¹

The Age of Enlightenment brought with it an assumption that religion would become an increasingly marginal influence in international affairs. To some extent, religion has, in fact, been squeezed out of the policymaking equation in the affairs of state—at least in the West. One reflection of this is the fact that the existing paradigm for international relations that has prevailed for the past four and a half decades (as reflected in Hans Morgenthau's classic work *Politics Among Nations*) barely mentions religion, and then only in passing. Nowhere in this nation-state model is credence given to the passions that religion generates either on a personal level or in international politics.

The anticipated triumph of secularism and scientific rationality has proven rather short-lived, however, as a major resurgence of religious traditions has begun to take hold in virtually every part of the globe. Although much of this resurgence is identified with ethnic hostilities and extensive bloodshed, religion, for the most part, has been a complicating factor rather than an underlying cause of conflict. More often than not, religion is co-opted by the forces of nationalism and has little, if any, leverage of its own over the political process—witness the futility of the joint pronouncements by the leaders of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim faiths in the former Yugoslavia condemning ethnic cleansing and calling for a halt to the violence. Whatever its contribution, though, religion is clearly seen by most analysts to be a part of the problem rather than the solution.

In examining the positive potential that religion offers for preventing or

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resolving conflict, an assessment will be undertaken of those precepts that support peacemaking within the theologies of the world's four largest religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.²

Hinduism

Hinduism encompasses a diversity of sects that in varying degrees are affiliated with the major Indian religious traditions of Vaishnava and Shaiva. This diversity, in turn, gives rise to a host of contradictory images. There is the paradox of Hinduism's long-standing image of tolerance toward, and assimilation of, other religious doctrines as contrasted with the brutality of the riots several years ago between Hindus and Muslims in the wake of the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya in northern India. There is the articulation of a broad inclusiveness versus the seemingly opposite quality reflected in the rigidities of the caste system. Finally, there is the passive other-worldly image dominated by internal spiritual concerns juxtaposed with the fervent nationalism of India's Bharatiya Janata Party. Despite these inherent contradictions, some of Hinduism's philosophical concepts and beliefs do lend themselves to the art and practice of conflict resolution.

Weighing heavily in Hindu thought is the concept of *rita*, a pervasive notion of cosmic design or a right ordering of life (for men and gods) that derives from the primal sources of Hinduism of the Vedic period (1500-500 B.C.E.). Socially, *rita* manifests itself in the distribution of responsibilities among the various strata of society: priests, warriors, scholars, merchants, farmers, and others. It is noteworthy that the warriors' responsibility is to maintain *rita*.³

Following the Vedic period, the next major stage of Hindu religious history is identified with the Upanishads (800-500 B.C.E.) from which "classical Hinduism" or the "high tradition" derives. Here the critical notion is that of *dharma*, meaning law or duty, which is socially and morally binding for all human beings according to their *jita*, or birth.⁴ Another key concept of the Upanishads is that of oneness between self and the universe. This, in turn, encompasses an ultimate oneness of all that appears to be separate or in conflict.

It is from these concepts that Hindus derive their rules of conduct and ultimately their approach to conflict resolution. At one level, ordinary people are expected to minimize social antagonism through following their *dharma*. More informed people are expected to pursue a spiritual discipline (*yoga*) that ultimately results in the elimination of all selfish actions. Both of these paths lead ultimately to the One.⁵

As indicated earlier, Hindus have historically displayed a remarkable capacity for absorbing important aspects of other religions into their own theological framework. The famous Hindu scholar Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884) captured this concept in the following quotation:

How the Hindu absorbs the Christian; how the Christian assimilates the Hindu! Cultivate this communion, my brethren, and

continually absorb all that is good and noble in each other. Do not hate, do not exclude others, as the sectarians do, but include and absorb all humanity and all truth.⁶

This tolerant diversity was maintained less by total absorption than by insulating the religious communities from one another. Relations between these communities were facilitated by a tradition of universalism in which all religious forms were seen as leading to the same divine Truth. This universalism gradually gave way, however, to a communalism that emphasized the confessional community within a given territorial area. On this basis, India eventually divided into a Hindu and a Muslim nation, each with its separate culture and social structure.

It is difficult for the monotheistic religions such as Christianity and Islam to accept Hinduism's flexibility in absorbing insights from other religious traditions. Yet, the Hindu notion—that what on the surface appears to be divided is at some higher level essentially one and that conflict is often attributable to differences in perception rather than reality—can sometimes serve as a valuable bridge for resolving seemingly intractable differences.

Synonymous with the term conflict resolution is the figure of Mahatma Gandhi, who personified the Hindu conviction that even the bitterest of enemies can be reconciled if they can be led to perceive the situation differently. Gandhi's fundamental approach was one of making friends out of enemies through acknowledging respect for the dignity of their positions. His belief that hostilities arose from a mistaken perception of what was ultimately best for all parties essentially merged the Vedic emphasis on order with the Upanishadic notion of ultimate oneness, characteristics that can provide strong anchors for resolving conflict. As Gandhi expressed in 1924:

If we consider them to be in the wrong, we can hope to win them over only by friendliness and patient reasoning, never by abusing. Indeed, we want to regard Englishmen too as our friends and not misunderstand them by treating them as our enemies.⁷

Gandhi's brand of nonviolence significantly influenced the life and approach of Martin Luther King, Jr. The fact that both Gandhi and King met death at the hands of assassins suggests the high price that often goes with applying religious ethics to social conflict.

Buddhism

Gautama, the Buddha (c. 563 to c. 483 B.C.E.), was born in India into a Hindu society beset with a cacophony of religious teachings. In response to the general confusion, the Buddha advocated an approach to religion and life based on three simple principles: compassion, "critical tolerance," and the wisdom that comes from experience.

"Critical tolerance" is an attitude shaped by compassion that requires one

to give those with whom one differs the benefit of the doubt. It is the experiential principle, however, that provides the basis for resolving fundamental disagreements. This principle suggests that no teaching or idea should be accepted simply because it is endorsed by authority or is said to be "revealed." Rather, it should be empirically tested in life and made the subject of rigorous meditation.

The Buddha himself lived a life of balance, sobriety, and gentleness. His teachings suggest that a stubborn desire to win the argument, to shape the other person according to one's own preferences, and to be in control all "spring from an ego that has not yet learned the disciplines of nonattachment and nonaggression."⁸

Buddhist doctrine has as its principal focus emancipation of the individual. Accordingly, its approach to social conflict is primarily based on "analysis of conflict at the level of the inner self."⁹ The root of all conflict is seen as relating to internal obsessions. The person who achieves inner peace thus eliminates the causes of conflict and conflict behavior.¹⁰

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The central Buddhist insight that reality is freedom from identity suggests that Buddhism is inherently pacifistic in nature. Yet Buddhism, like any religious belief, can be perverted when it is used to serve political ends. Today's situation in Sri Lanka represents a glaring case in point. The conflict there illustrates the negative effects of using religion to reinforce a national or ethnic identity. This misuse of religion raises two important questions relating to public policy. First, how can religious values inform the actual policymaking of a state without losing vital aspects of their spiritual essence? Second, how can a government draw on a religious tradition without imposing its values on religious or cultural minorities?

More than its monotheistic counterparts and perhaps even more than Hinduism, Buddhism is uniquely able to fuse with other religious traditions. Its all-but-total interaction with Shintoism is a strong case in point.

The Buddhist concept of "critical tolerance" could become an increasingly important touchstone in a highly disordered and religiously pluralistic world. Implicit in the Buddhist definition of tolerance is the idea of "space" from within which its own doctrines, and those of other traditions, can be examined without prejudice on the basis of their inherent truth or value. Such a concept

could prove highly valuable in promoting interfaith dialogue and resolving disputes between religions.

Christianity

The mandate for conflict resolution in Christian theology is clearly set forth in Matthew 5:9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God." The key to facilitating its implementation is equally straightforward:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. [Matthew 5:43-45]

This radical exhortation to love one's enemy is unique to the teachings of Jesus and represents a challenge that few ever fully meet, Christians and non-Christians alike. St. Francis of Assisi, who sought to live his life according to this precept, once attempted to mediate hostilities between opposing sides during one of the Crusades. Following a hazardous trek through the front lines of battle, he was able to persuade the sultan to accept a plan that would halt the conflict. The plan itself was subsequently rejected by the commanders of the Christian armies, however, and St. Francis returned home disillusioned, declaring that it was the Christians, not the infidels, who needed conversion.¹¹

There are numerous examples, however, in which Christian precepts have been the basis for the resolution of disputes. The role of Cardinal Sin in the peaceful transition from the Marcos to the Aquino regime in the Philippines is one example. The role of churches in the revolution in East Germany in 1989 is another. And the more recent role of the lay Catholic community of St. Egidio in resolving the civil conflict in Mozambique is yet another.

Islam

Perhaps more than any other religious tradition, Islam is undergoing profound revival on a global scale. As a once powerful religious, political, and cultural phenomenon, Islam's resurgence is taking place largely in reaction to the failings of secular ideologies. In some respects, its seventh-century origins were similarly motivated. Muhammad, who was both a prophet and a statesman, initiated a series of reforms that, in effect, created a religious community that could respond to the social inequities and injustices of a tribal society dominated by a few powerful and self-centered chiefs. Islam thus represented an effort to create an ethical public order embodying divine justice and mercy—all based on a monotheistic faith.¹²

The central tenets of Islam are captured in the Qur'an, which Muslims believe to have been personally revealed to Muhammad by God. The Qur'an itself is based on the assumption that men and women are both moral and spiritual and that they are endowed with an inherent ability to distinguish between good and evil. More importantly, they are by their nature inclined toward God, regardless of their particular spiritual persuasion.

There is, however, a tension between Islam's unqualified affirmation of the spiritual integrity of all human beings and its sharp criticism against "distortions of religion."¹³ From the latter has emanated the popular Western depiction of Islam as inherently one-sided and irrational. Yet, it is difficult to reconcile this attitude with the fact that the Qur'an specifically affirms religious pluralism as being willed by God:

If God had willed He would have made you one nation. But He did not do so, that He may try you in what has come to you [as guidance].

So, compete with one another in good works; unto God shall you return; altogether; and He will tell you the Truth about what you have been disputing. [The Qur'an 5:48]

Although the Qur'an seemingly excludes coercion in matters of faith ("No compulsion is there in religion," the Qur'an 2:258), Muslims believe they have a mandate to create a public order on earth that reflects the divine will. In this context, compliance with the social norms of their sacred law, the *shari'a*, is often expected of everyone living under Islamic rule. It is this requirement that constitutes the principal source of conflict in areas where religious minorities are not granted the same civil and political rights as Muslims.

In recent times, the Muslim political figure who best exemplified Islamic teachings on the common moral wisdom of the human race was the late President Anwar Sadat of Egypt. His political courage and sense of vision led to the breakthrough to peace between his country and Israel. As President Jimmy Carter stated, "The Camp David accords would never have materialized had it not been for the spirituality of Anwar Sadat."¹⁴

As Sadat's actions demonstrated and as the Qur'an suggests, Islam represents a significant resource, albeit largely untapped at the national and international levels, for adjudicating differences between peoples and between religions. In this regard, it may be useful to examine the specific approaches and techniques employed within Islamic culture for mediating disputes and compare these with approaches used in the West.

In contrast to the West, where conflict resolution has achieved the status of a separate discipline, in Islam it exists as an integral part of community and personal life. Islamic conflict resolution is fundamentally a social phenomenon, authoritative in form and group-oriented in emphasis. It leans heavily on arbitration emanating from hierarchical structures and procedures (older males and powerful officials) as the principle mechanism for resolving personal and communal differences. Its focus is more on relationships than

on formal agreements. This differs from the Western approach in which the rights of the individual are accorded priority and where the emphasis is on rationalism and cooperation leading to specific legally binding agreements. Islamic culture, on the other hand, stresses communal values such as honor, shame, respect for elders, and forgiveness. It is also the case that many Arabs treat Western approaches to conflict resolution with suspicion, viewing them as yet another colonial imposition.¹⁵

Conclusion

In treating the subject of conflict prevention and resolution in a religious context, it becomes important to consider the cultural nuances relating to human rights. Western observers, for example, have trouble accepting the Islamic approach to human rights with its differentiated treatment of women and non-Muslims. In the West, a level playing field is assumed for all people, regardless of gender or religious orientation. Similarly, the Hindu view also lacks the Western emphasis on individualism. Whereas rights in the West are typically imputed to all persons at all times and places, *dharmic* obligations are particular, varying from one stage of life to the next and from one social group to another.¹⁶

The tension between individual versus group rights, as manifested in the assumptions of different religious traditions, is unlikely to disappear any time soon. To the extent that it does not, different cultures and religions are likely to continue talking past one another as they seek common ground for resolving their differences.

Despite the gaps, however, there are important points at which the different religious traditions intersect. For example, each incorporates significant elements of universalism as well as some variation of the golden rule.¹⁷ These are important touchstones upon which one can build in enhancing interfaith dialogue and developing an effective framework for the prevention and resolution of violence. With respect to the latter, there are at least two types of situations in which religious mediation can be effective. First, it can offer the opportunity for a breakthrough to peace at a higher level of trust once sufficient progress has been made on the political, economic, and security fronts. Second, it can provide a face-saving way out when the situation is stalemated and there is no progress on any front.

A good illustration is the role played by the Catholic church in the 1970s when Chile and Argentina were about to go to war over their mutual claims to the Beagle Islands. The situation had deteriorated to the point where an invasion order had been given and the warships of the two countries were only hours apart. It was in that emotionally charged context that the Pope was asked for assistance. A Vatican envoy was dispatched immediately. Once he appeared on the scene, passions subsided and war was avoided. It took the envoy six years to work out a permanent solution, but his mere presence provided a face-saving way out for these two Catholic countries.

Beyond employing the temporal power of religious institutions themselves, there are the efforts of spiritually motivated laypersons and others who are only loosely affiliated with a religious denomination. Quakers and Mennonites, who are sometimes seen as falling into this latter category, are generally very proactive in their pursuit of peace, often serving as third-party mediators or conciliators. Devoid of any political agenda of their own, these peacemakers operate out of personal conviction and a faith-based commitment to persevere even under the most trying of circumstances. The psychology underlying their effectiveness is perhaps best captured by Joseph Montville, director of the Preventive Diplomacy program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies:

If one single quality has to be chosen to account for the influence that religiously identified third parties have, it would be their ability to inspire trust. One might think that is an obvious answer and, indeed, an easy quality to find in, say, any gentleman or well-bred lawyer or diplomat. But ethnic or sectarian conflict has a special aspect in that people have endured aggression and loss simply because of their membership in an identity group. They are dehumanized, despised, raped, pillaged and murdered for no other reason than who they are, not for anything they have done. . . .

Into the lives of these victimized people come religious outsiders, who in varying ways convey a sense of understanding and empathy for their fears and who have established reputations for honesty, discretion and integrity. They are disinterested in the conflict except for their sadness over the human losses associated with it. And even the religiously motivated third parties have to work "on site" with their new friends to prove through daily interaction that their reputations are justified and that they can be trusted to care about the life and death and future of the group they hope to help.¹⁸

The instances where religious mediation has helped to heal differences have been sufficiently frequent and effective that they should command the attention and support of those who seek new approaches to the current world disorder. The challenge is twofold. First, religious communities should bring their considerable, but largely underutilized, assets to bear in the task of conflict prevention and peacemaking. Second, policymakers should encourage and reinforce, but not seek to own, such efforts wherever possible.

Clearly, a spiritual dimension will be required if the cycle of revenge that typically accompanies ethnic hostilities and other conflicts is ever to be broken. Without some element of forgiveness and reconciliation, the pattern of responding in kind will continue unabated. In the looming context of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the stakes will only grow higher over time.

Notes

1. Religion and conflict resolution has been the subject of a recent and extensive examination by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC. The results of the Center's study are the subject of a book published in 1994 by Oxford University Press entitled *Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, edited by Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson.
2. Harvey Cox with Abdulaziz Sachedina, Arvind Sharma, Moshe Idel, and Masao Abe, "World Religions and Conflict Resolution" (Paper produced for the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Program on Religion and Conflict Resolution, August 31, 1992), 4.
3. *Ibid.*, 6.
4. Mark Juergensmeyer, "Hinduism and Human Rights" (Paper presented at Fundamentalism Project seminar on "Fundamentalisms, Human Rights, and Conflict Resolution," Washington, DC, February 4, 1993), 2-3.
5. Cox, Sachedina, Sharma, Idel, and Abe, 7-8.
6. *Ibid.*, 8.
7. Publications Division, Government of India, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, v. XXIII (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust, 1967), 202.
8. Cox, Sachedina, Sharma, Idel, and Abe, 13-14.
9. P.D. Premasiri, "The Buddhist Analysis of the Nature of Social Conflict," as quoted in S.W.R. de A. Samarasinghe, "Buddhism and Conflict Resolution: A Public Policy Perspective" (Paper produced for the Fundamentalism Project seminar on "Fundamentalisms, Human Rights, and Conflict Resolution," Washington, DC, February 4, 1993), 2.
10. S.W.R. de A. Samarasinghe, 2-3.
11. Cox, "World Religions and Conflict Resolution" (Earlier draft, August 30, 1992), 26.
12. Cox, Sachedina, Sharma, Idel, and Abe, 19.
13. *Ibid.*, 20.
14. Interview with President Carter, Washington, DC, March 27, 1990.
15. Mohammed Abu-Nimer, "Conflict Resolution and Islam: Some Conceptual Questions" (Paper presented at Fundamentalism Project seminar on "Fundamentalisms, Human Rights, and Conflict Resolution," Washington, DC, February 4, 1993), 5-7.
16. Juergensmeyer, 2.
17. Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper Collins, 1958), 310.
18. Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds., *Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 332.



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