

Editorial

Introductory Thoughts about Peace, Politics and Religion

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Abstract: Recent years have seen a growing literature on the interactions between peace, politics and religion, including their diverse and often complex relationships. Underpinning this literature is an increase, more generally, in scholarly and policy interest in connections between religion and politics. The context is that over the last three decades, religion has made a remarkable return to prominence in various academic literatures, including sociology, political science and international relations. This was a surprise to many social scientists and confounded the expectations of both secularization theorists and secularists. In addition, religion retained a strong, some say growing, significance as a core source of identity for billions of people around the world. Numerous religious leaders and faith-based organizations are important carriers and focal points of religious ideas, playing an important role in many countries, both developed and developing, as well as internationally, including at the United Nations and to a lesser, although still notable extent, in the European Union and other regional organizations. This introductory article examines interactions between religious entities in relation to peace and conflict and sets the scene for the articles comprising this volume.

Keywords: peace; politics; conflict; religion; faith; faith-based organizations

Recent years have seen a growing literature on the interactions between peace, politics and religion, including their diverse and often complex relationships. Underpinning this literature is an increase, more generally, in scholarly and policy interest in connections between religion and politics. Since the 1980s, there has been renewed scholarly interest in the social sciences regarding how religion affects outcomes in the discipline's various sub-disciplines, including the study of politics. Many social scientists were very surprised by this development; most at this time were adherents of the secularization thesis. This maintained that as societies modernized they would inevitably secularize. Things turned out differently: instead, religion has retained a strong, some say growing, significance as a core source of identity for billions of people around the world. In addition, numerous religious individuals and faith-based organizations (FBOs) are important carriers and focal points of religious ideas. They play an important role not only in numerous countries around the world, but also in some of the world's major international organizations, including the United Nations, the European Union and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Why does social science now pay more attention to what religion does in terms of outcomes? It is often suggested that religion has an important, sometimes pivotal role, in conflict. Religion can either be a cause of conflict, or a key component in helping resolve conflict. In addition, once religion has established a key role in ending conflict, it may then play a role in helping build sustained peace. That being said, it is certainly the case that when someone is asked how they regard the role of religion in various aspects of conflict, then many would suggest that it is notable primarily for causing or exacerbating conflict, not helping resolve it. In this respect, there is much empirical evidence amassed over the last few decades to substantiate the notion that religion is more the problem than the solution to many of the world's more enduring conflicts, both within countries and between them. In the West, for example, religious hatred characterized the recently quelled conflict in Northern Ireland, while

in the USA, culture wars between religionists and secularists have widened and deepening during the controversial presidency of Donald Trump. On the other hand, there is growing evidence that religious leaders and FBOs can, if so minded, play highly constructive roles in helping end societal violence and interstate conflicts. How might they do this? They can alert their followers and others to the dangers that an emerging conflict poses for societal harmony, they can do their best to help resolve conflicts when they have begun, and they can be advocates for peace and conflict resolution. They can offer to be mediators between conflicting parties and can seek to bring them together once peace is won. In short, contemporary discussions about the relationship between peace, politics and religion necessarily highlight that religion can both encourage conflict *and* peace, through the activities of people individually and collectively, imbued with faith-based ideas and ideals.

Given the often-messy nature of religiously-informed conflict, it is no surprise that we do not have a sole, sophisticated theoretical model enabling us to understand clearly all the applicable cases of religion's relationship with peace and politics. We can, however, note that often the involvement of religion in conflict comes in the context of what might be called "good governance" issues, which are in turn often linked to the multiple impacts of globalization both within and between countries. The impact of post-Cold War globalization—which I characterize as having four main, interactive dimensions: economic, political, cultural and technological—may highlight or exacerbate previously dormant religious tensions, often by undermining or dismantling traditional value systems, which cannot cope with the changes which globalization brings. It is often suggested that, as a result, numerous people feel increasingly bewildered and distressed, and their attentions may turn to religion to help them recover their equilibrium and sense of wellbeing. Put another way, numerous (re)turn to faith to (re)discover a lost sense of comfort, serenity, stability, as well as to uplift themselves spiritually. There is however another potential impact: (re)discovering faith may also encourage believers to experience novel or changed feelings of identity. On the one hand, this can lead to helping provide them with renewed meaning and purpose. On the other hand, it can encourage them to regard others with disfavour or distaste and the outcome can be new or heightened interreligious competition and conflict, making pursuit of peace especially problematic.

It is widely noted that post-Cold War globalization has led to greatly increased global interactions between people and communities. As a result, over the last three decades encounters between people of differing religious traditions have become increasingly common—although, sadly, this has not always led to increasingly harmonious outcomes. Such conflicts, involve, variously, small groups or larger sections of people, who self-identify by their and others' racial, ethnic or religious characteristics, and find reasons for tensions or conflict as a result. Such conflicts can become all-consuming and very difficult to resolve, as they appear to many as existential struggles between "good" against "evil", with religion as a dependent variable. This development is played out in some countries, for example, in Iran and the USA, and characterized by the outbreak of "culture wars" between strongly religious and stridently secular people. Such culture wars can be seemingly endless; there may seem no room for compromise between two polarised worldviews, which encourage very different allegiances and standards in certain fundamental aspects of life, including: family, law, education and politics.

We have noted that societal and political conflicts may have significant religious dimensions, whereby real or perceived related differences between people can drive both hatred and violence. The implication is that religious actors, including religious leaders and FBOs, can be characterized, albeit generally, predominantly as those who pursue peace avidly and those who are more concerned with triumphing in a conflict, if necessary by the sustained use of force. Religion's inconsistency in this respect stems from the fact that the world religions—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism,—all have ambivalent views about peace, cooperation, violence and conflict. Such inconsistency is made clear when we think about various manifestations of religious involvement in large-scale conflicts. For example, large-scale violence in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and other parts of the world is often associated with serious social conflicts, many of which significantly involve levels of religious, cultural and/or civilizational tensions (Haynes 2019a). Yet, in virtually all such cases, what

appear to be religious tensions that erupt into conflict and violence are also intimately linked to other, non-religious, issues, including: ethnicity, gender, culture, class, power and wealth. Such strains and stresses may be played out both within countries in recent years, in, for example, Northern Ireland, Egypt, Nigeria, Fiji, Cyprus, Sri Lanka, or between them, for example, India and Pakistan, and Israel and Palestine (Haynes 2019b).

Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that religion's involvement in societal or political interactions always leads to conflict or even challenges to peace or the status quo. What I am suggesting is that religion's inconsistency in this regard is reflected in the fact that it *can* play a significant role in attempts to resolve inter- and intra-group clashes and help build peace, or it can stimulate or exacerbate a decline of the peace. This also underlines how the traditions underpinning and informing many religious expressions, including the five world religions, contain often multiple references to conflict and division and their consequences in terms of group harmony. The world religions also have a lot to say about how their followers *should* behave in order to achieve greater intersocietal harmony and peace not only among fellow believers but also in relation to those of a different religion. These issues have provided the stimulus to numerous books, book chapters, journal articles, blogs and reports since the 1980s. Many valuable sources in relation to religion, conflict and peace are noted or analysed in the articles which make up the special issue, so I will not provide a comprehensive list here. The key point to note is that, while often differing greatly in terms of subject matter and conclusions, collectively they focus on how sundry religious actors can play a role in stimulating, exacerbating or helping arrive at the termination of conflicts. Seeking to summarize a huge set of findings regarding religious peacebuilding and what is often referred to as "faith-based diplomacy", we can note the following, derived from Appleby's (2006) thought provoking and influential work on this topic:

- Religious leaders and FBOs are uniquely positioned to foster nonviolent conflict transformation through the building of constructive, collaborative relationships within and across ethnic, religious, cultural or civilizational groups, for the common good of a country or region's entire population.
- In many conflict settings around the world, the social location and cultural power of religious leaders and FBOs can make them potentially critical players in efforts to build sustainable peace among conflicting groups.
- The multigenerational local or regional communities that religious leaders are connected to are often singular repositories of local knowledge and wisdom, custodians of culture and/or civilization, and privileged sites of significant moral, psychological and spiritual formation.

These communities are symbolically charged sources of personal as well as collective identity, which typically establish, maintain and help embed essential educational and welfare institutions, often serving the entire community and not just specified followers of a particular religious tradition (Appleby 2000, 2006).

Societal and Political Conflicts: Religion as a Potential Bridge towards Peace

As we have already noted, the premise of religious involvement in both conflict and peacemaking and peacebuilding points to all five world religions. We also took in to account that interactive processes of globalization lead to greatly increased interactions between people, including those who are widely separated geographically and culturally. Finally, we have seen that as a consequence of enhanced globalization over the last 30 years, encounters between followers of various religious traditions have also increased greatly. That they are not always harmonious is obvious; we have seen that religion is often regarded by social scientists as a key cause of tensions and conflict in many parts of the world, both within and between countries. This is the case with, for examples, the decades-long Israel/Palestinians culture wars and that involving Kashmir, consistently squabbled over by successive governments in Pakistan and India, as well as in the United States today, during the Trump presidency in relation to, for example, abortion, education, and LGBTQ and women's rights (Haynes 2019b). What causes such culture-based conflicts? According to Kurtz, they surface, develop and consolidate

because of conflicting cultural worldviews, very often with a pronounced religious dimension. Such issues tend to exacerbate already-present areas of tension, leading them into various fundamental areas, typically linked to societal, gender, state, territorial, and/or political topics. A result is that they “take on ‘larger-than-life’ proportions as the struggle of good against evil” (Kurtz 1995, p. 170). According to the eminent Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Kung,

[T]he most fanatical, the cruelest political struggles are those that have been colored, inspired, and legitimized by religion. To say this is not to reduce all political conflicts to religious ones, but to take seriously the fact that religions share in the responsibility for bringing peace to our torn and warring world.

(Kung cited in Smock 2004)

In short, many contemporary conflicts have religious and/or cultural roots, increasing both hatred and violence and driving communities apart.

As already noted, religious leaders and FBOs can function either as core actors in the benign pursuit of peace or in the tragic development of serious and sustained conflict. What Scott Appleby (Appleby 2000) calls the *ambivalence of the sacred* is intimately linked to the fact that the relationship of the world religions to violence is itself indecisive. As Holenstein (2005, p. 10) reminds us

All great God-narratives are familiar with traditions that legitimise force in certain circumstances, claim victims in the battle for their own beliefs and demonise people of other religions. However, at the same time there are sources that proclaim the incompatibility of violence with religion, demand sacrifices for peace and insist on respect for people of other religions. If we are to assume that, for the foreseeable future, the religions of the world will continue to be a factor in political conflicts, then it is high time that we strengthened the “civilising” side of the sacred and made it more difficult for it cynically to be taken over by political interests. What is said here about the relationship of world religions to violence can be considered generally valid for religions overall.

The problem is that while most religious believers would no doubt believe that their faith is both compassionate and inspirational, the ideas underpinning a particular faith-driven view of the world are also often implicated in the eruption of violence and conflict both between and within religious groups (or at least entities with a religious component to their guiding ideology). In recent years, a massive literature has appeared on religious contributions to conflict and violence (see, for example, National Commission on Terrorist Attacks 2004). Various armed groups, such as al-Qaida, Islamic State, Boko Haram, and Al Shabaab, claim religious justification for their murderous activities (For a discussion, see Haynes 2013).

Such extremist Islamist groups are collectively informed by similar jihadi ideologies. A key component of the development of today’s jihadi ideologies was the epochal event of 11 September 2001 (9/11). The al-Qaida attacks on the United States was an issue of fundamental importance to continuing jihadi conflicts with Western—especially Christian—countries. Put another way, it seems likely that without 9/11 the world would not have devoted many years and trillions of dollars fruitlessly to fighting “jihadi terrorism”.

One of the tragic outcomes of 9/11 and its aftermath was that globalization clearly increased both the potential and the actualization of violence from extremist non-state actors with religious ideologies—who might be physically located almost anywhere—against states. Before 9/11, governments of powerful countries like the USA believed that their national territories were largely impervious to external attack because of their high-cost militaries and national defence plans. What the 9/11 attacks made crystal clear, at a stroke, was that geographical space—until then believed to be an impenetrable barrier to attacks from external actors except from those from nuclear weapons—no longer mattered. Having said that, al-Qaida’s attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on 9/11 made the task much more difficult of seeking to understand what role religion can play in

reducing conflicts and building peace. What was clear was that henceforward there was a sudden, urgent new challenge to our understanding of global politics, including its relationship to domestic politics. Now, the state's "hard shell" was forever breached. According to [Smith \(2002, p. 177\)](#), this suggested an important connotation for future chances of world order, because states were "no longer, if they ever were, the key actors in major international arenas". Thus, the kind of international terrorism exemplified by al-Qaida in relation to 9/11 and more recently from the so-called Islamic State does not 'map onto state structures', but 'works in the spaces between them'. What 9/11 also illustrated regarding the relationship between peace, politics and religion was that some of the most dangerous and committed of international threats to peace—such as, from al-Qaida, Islamic State, Boko Haram, and Al Shabaab—are not inevitably focused on acquiring territory *per se*. Instead, what they want to achieve is primarily defined by their desire to spread their values and beliefs via ideologically driven methods. The obvious implication of this is that today's jihadi groups are very different types of organization compared to the conventional notion of the state, both in terms of identity and structure. Their structures are the reverse of the modern state, characterized by a hierarchy of power and authority, while its identity is nebulous ([Haynes 2013](#)).

More generally, in recent years various religious expressions have been centrally implicated in many domestic and international conflicts. This is because sustained and implacable religious conviction contains within it at least four discrete sources of danger:

- *"Religion is focused on the absolute and unconditional and as a result can adopt totalitarian characteristics"*. Christianity, Islam and Judaism are the three Abrahamic religious faiths. It is sometimes suggested that these three religions in particular may sometimes find it rather problematic to tell the essential differences between, on the one hand, what God states to be true, and, on the other, what humans actually do and say.
- *"When claiming both absolute and exclusive validity, religious conviction can lead to intolerance, over-zealous proselytization and religious fragmentation"*. This suggests that if one believes everything that a religion asserts is true, then this can lead to doubts about the veracity and viability of pluralism and liberal democracy.
- *"Religion can increase aggressiveness and the willingness to use violence"*. Religious convictions have great symbolic value. This can lead to what initially start as irreligious motivations or goals taking on the aspect over time of "holy" objectives.
- *"Leaders within faith-based organizations may seek to legitimize abuses of power and violation of human rights in the name of religious zeal"*. It is often noted that many religious faiths regard females as subservient to men, domestically, socially, politically and economically. Because religious leaders are nearly always men, then the subservient faith-derived roles of women in these respects may not receive the attention it deserves ([Haynes 2019a](#), pp. 656–57).

In addition, those who hold religious power may also adopt the following tactics in order to bolster or strengthen their positions:

- A political focus on "identity" is likely to raise and perhaps exploit differences with others characterized by "ethnic-cultural" and/or "cultural-religious" dimensions.
- Jihad groups among other, almost invariably led by men, use claimed religious motivations to conduct their activities.
- Heads of fundamentalist religious groups "lay claim to a single and absolutist religious interpretation at the cost of all others, and they link their interpretation to political power objectives" ([Holenstein 2005](#), p. 11).

Kurtz refers to the last point as "exclusive accounts of the nature of reality". What he means by this is that followers of fundamentalist religious expressions only accept the religious beliefs that they claim are the solely *true* dogmas ([Kurtz 1995](#), p. 238). Once again, the three Abrahamic religions are noted in this regard. This is the case because fundamentalist expressions of each of the three religions

base their truth claims on each faith's recognized holy books. Such readings lead to exclusivist truth claims which are not only undeniable but also can lead to conflict with those who do not accept their "truths". It is obvious that engaging with religious ideas without a mindset that can accept the need for compromise will likely lead to unremitting conflict with those with different beliefs. This is especially the case in today's highly globalized world. "On the other hand, many religious traditions have within them beliefs that can help develop a peaceful, multicultural world. For example, from within Christianity comes the idea of nonviolence, a key attribute of Jesus, the religion's founder, who insisted that all people are children of God, and that the test of one's relationship with God is whether one loves one's enemies and brings good news to the poor. As St. Paul said, 'There is no Jew or Greek, servant or free, male or female: because you are all one in Jesus Christ' (Galatians 3: 28)" (Haynes 2013, p. 657).

It is suggested that "all religious traditions contain references in the form of didactical stories, teaching or even direct recommendation as to how the faithful should act in order to achieve harmony and peace within him/herself in the first place" (Bartoli 2005, pp. 5–6). As Bouta et al. (2005) note, when it comes to seeking to resolve inter-societal conflicts then religions—variously individuals and groups—often are notable by their attempts to make things better. Note that such attempts are not only a product of current times. Over the last half century or so, there have been examples, albeit sometimes intermittent rather than necessarily sustained, which point to a consistent involvement of religious individuals and/or representatives of various FBOs in many such efforts. "Examples include intermediation undertaken by the Quakers and financed by the Ford foundation in the Nigerian Civil War in 1967–1970, the work of the World Council of Churches and the All Africa Conference of Churches in mediating a cessation to the Sudan conflict in 1972, efforts made by John Paul Lederach, Professor of International Peacebuilding at the University of Notre Dame, in Nicaragua in the 1980s, and the more recent work of the Imam of Timbuktu in seeking to end various conflicts in West Africa (Conflict and Resolution Forum 2001)" (Haynes 2013, p. 658). The conclusion to draw from this is that it is not appropriate or necessary to assess the role of religion in conflicts and draw the conclusion that religions always makes things worse. On the contrary, this would overlook the many attempts over the years of religious entities to improve conflicts and help build peace. Sadly, however, conflicts are much more newsworthy than religious leaders' often problematic attempts to end conflicts and build peace. But this does not mean that they should be summarily disregarded or dismissed. Even unsuccessful attempts can be important components in the eventual building of peace, even if in the short term such efforts do not seem to meet with obvious success.

Appleby (2006) claims that religious peacemakers are most likely to contribute usefully to ending conflict when they: (1) seek to work internationally or transnationally, (2) consistently highlight the importance and desirability of peace and point to the obvious and clear costs of conflict, and (3) pursue good inter-religious relations—even when a conflict is ongoing, as this will be an important builder of trust when trying to develop peace after conflict the key to a positive input from them. It is often noted that the three Abrahamic religions share a broadly similar set of theological and spiritual values and views and this potentially underpins their ability to provide positive contributions to conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

In conclusion, contributors to Smock's (2006) edited volume identify the following of importance when examining often complex issue of religious involvement in conflict, conflict resolution and peacebuilding:

- Although often involved in conflict it is important not to overlook the often constructive efforts of religious leaders and FBOs in attempts to curtail conflict and build peace. Religious leaders and FBOs typically have important roles trying to resolve religious conflicts. In addition, such entities are often called upon by non-religious combatants to try to address their conflicts. This is because religious leaders may be highly trusted by both sides in a conflict.
- Attempt to build peace undertaken under religious leadership may not differ that much from those undertaken by secular actors, such as governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

On the other hand, their religious emphasis nearly always informs their specific approaches to peacebuilding agendas and programmes.

- Faith attempts to end conflict and build peace are various, varying between high-level mediation to training and peacebuilding-through-development focused on communities.
- Peace is often promoted most efficiently by including overt peacebuilding components into associated but different relief and development activities (Smock 2006).

Finally, faith-based peacebuilding initiatives “have contributed positively to peacebuilding” in four main ways. They can provide (1) “emotional and spiritual support to war-affected communities”, (2) effective mobilization for “their communities and others for peace”, (3) mediation “between conflicting parties”, and (4) a conduit in pursuit of “reconciliation, dialogue, and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration” (Bouta et al. 2005, p. ix). We can also note the promise that religious peacemakers offer, while also pointing to two problems: (1) “there is often a failure of religious leaders to understand and/or enact their potential peace-building roles within the local community”, and (2) many religious leaders lack the ability to “exploit their strategic capacity as transnational actors” (Appleby 2006, p. 2). Such concerns arise in a global region of apparently growing political and societal tensions: the Middle East. Escalating tensions following the Arab Uprisings of 2011 serve to underscore both the potential importance of interreligious dialogue while also highlighting the roles of local and international actors to aggravate existing tensions—for example, in relation to Israel and the Palestinians or Iran and Saudi Arabia—and makes finding common ground even harder to achieve and, by extension, pursuit of peace in the region is (even) more problematic.

Conclusions

This Special Issue of *Religions*, focusing on ‘Peace, Politics and Religion’, incorporates theoretical, comparative and case studies to examine these and other issues.

What do we now know about the crucial relationships between peace, politics and religion? The issue, it seems clear, is not generally about religion *per se*, or even about religious differences that necessarily cause irresolvable conflicts. Instead, such conflicts develop, due to a number of causes, which are typically as much about material concerns as they are about differing views of the world deriving from their religious interpretations. But when we add religion to the issues which are causing conflict, then they tend to be harder to resolve. This is because, it seems, religious differences often seem particularly unamenable to compromise and can lead to various sets of believers coming to the conclusion that it is better to fight to the bitter end than ‘betraying’ God by appearing to “give in” to the enemy.

A second concluding point is that those individuals, groups and communities motivated by their religious worldviews may find it much harder to build durable peace as the foundation of better harmonious relations, without drawing on the helpfulness and recognition of significant non-religious people, that is, those who are especially affected by the conflict and have a significant stake in resolving it. Put another way, this is to underline that notwithstanding the often sincere intentions of those seeking to diminish religious disagreements through discourse and improved understanding, such a process is only likely to include those who agree that such an approach is likely to be beneficial to all in the long run. On the other hand, such an approach is likely to fail if it does not convince those who are especially willing to use violence as a key strategy in pursuit of an unachievable goal, whether it be a global Islamic State or an ethnically-cleansed Northern Ireland.

Finally, religion can end up being a relatively marginal issue in wider conflict scenarios, some of which are analysed in the Special Issue’s constituent articles. What they emphasise is that while of course religion is ‘important’ in a scholarly sense, it is absolutely vital to many millions of “ordinary” people and to tiny numbers of extremists who are willing to use prolonged violence to try to achieve their goals. But a wider point may warrant repetition: serious conflicts involving religion nearly always involve not only the impact of religious difference as such, but also other equally important

material and existential issues: such as, territory, employment, security, culture, civilization, ethnic group, fear and hope.

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