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Editorial

Editorial Introduction, *Religions* Special Issue, Peace, Politics, and Religion: Volume II

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In recent years, a burgeoning body of literature on the relationship between peace, politics and religion has emerged. Generally, this reflects how religion has made a remarkable return to prominence in the literature on sociology, political science and international relations. Confounding the expectations of secularisation theorists and secularists, religion is a core source of identity for billions of people around the world. Religion's increased prominence can be seen both in the context of conflict and as a tool of conflict resolution, peace-making and peacebuilding. Recent years have seen various kinds of religious hatred and differences become central to many political conflicts, especially, but not only, in the Global South. Evidence suggests that religious leaders and faith-based organisations (FBOs) can play constructive roles in helping to end violence and, in some cases, build peace via early warnings of conflict and proper action once conflict has erupted, as well as through advocacy, mediation and reconciliation. In short, contemporary discussions about the relationship between peace, politics and religion highlight that religion can encourage both conflict and peace through the activities of people individually and collectively imbued with religious ideas and ideals.

There is no single, elegant theoretical model that enables us to deal adequately with all relevant cases of religion's relationship with politics, conflict and peace. Religion should not be seen in isolation, as issues that attract religious intervention are normally linked to what can be referred to as "good governance" issues, that is, ways to improve people's lives politically, economically and socially.

Many people find religion a key source of comfort, serenity, stability and spiritual uplift. Some may also experience new or renewed feelings of identity that not only help to imbue believers' lives with meaning and purpose but can also, in some cases, contribute to interreligious competition and conflict and make the pursuit of peace problematic. Post-Cold War globalisation has led to greatly increased global interactions between people and communities. As a result, encounters between different religious traditions are increasingly common—although sadly not always harmonious. Increasingly, it appears that conflicts between people, ethnic groups, classes and nations are framed in religious terms. Religious conflicts can assume "larger-than-life" proportions, appearing as existential struggles between "good" and "evil". This development plays out in some countries, for example, in the USA and Israel, via "culture wars" involving strongly religious and stridently secular people. The reasons for such conflicts are both varied and complex, but it seems clear that religious and secular worldviews can encourage notably different allegiances and standards in relation to various areas, including the family, law, education and politics.

What is clear is that conflicts can have religious dimensions, whereby real or perceived differences drive hatred and violence. Religion is ambivalent in this respect, characterised by both "angels of peace" and "warmongers" (Appleby 2000). Religion's ambivalence in this respect is linked to the fact that around the world, the relationship of religions to violence and conflict is unclear and can be expressed in different ways, at different times and in different contexts. The inconsistency of the relationship of religion to conflict is made clear when we think about religious involvement in political violence in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and other parts of the world (Haynes 2019a). Yet when tensions erupt in violence and conflict, there are also nonreligious issues to take into account, including ethnicity, gender,

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culture, class and power and wealth. Such tensions can be played out both within countries, for example, in Northern Ireland, Egypt, Nigeria, Fiji, Cyprus and Sri Lanka, and between them, for example, between India and Pakistan and Israel and Palestine (Haynes 2019b).

Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that religion's involvement in politics necessarily leads to conflict or even challenges to peace. Religion's ambivalence in this regard is reflected by the fact that religion can play a significant role in attempts to resolve inter- and intragroup clashes and help to build peace. This underlines how the traditions underpinning and informing many religious expressions contain references not only to conflict and division but also to how the faithful should behave so as to try to achieve harmony and peace, not only within themselves in the first place but also in relation to those who are not included within an individual's religious community. These issues have provided the stimulus to numerous books and journal articles over the last two decades or so, which, while often differing greatly in subject matter and conclusions, often assess how religious leaders can play a role in ending conflicts and building peace. Seeking to summarise a huge set of findings regarding religious peacebuilding and what is often referred to as "faith-based diplomacy", we note the following:

- Religious leaders are uniquely positioned to foster nonviolent conflict transformation through the building of constructive, collaborative relationships within and across ethnic and religious groups for the common good of the entire population of a country or region;
- In many conflict settings around the world, the social location and cultural power of religious leaders make them potentially critical players in many efforts to build sustainable peace;
- The multigenerational local or regional communities they oversee are repositories of local knowledge and wisdom, custodians of culture and privileged sites of moral, psychological and spiritual formation (Appleby 2006).

Religion and Culture Wars

Encounters between different religious traditions are common but not always harmonious, sometimes leading to what Kurtz (1995, p. 168) calls "culture wars". The reason for culture wars, Kurtz contends, is because religious worldviews, compared to those held by secular people, can encourage particular allegiances and standards in relation to various fundamental areas, including society, gender, the state, territory and politics. Such conflicts can "take on 'larger-than-life' proportions as the struggle of good against evil" (Kurtz 1995, p. 170). Eminent Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kung states the following:

[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, fuelling both hatred and violence.

To counter this, religious leaders and faith communities are increasingly called upon to act as "angels of peace" rather than "warmongers". According to Appleby (2000), the ambivalence of the sacred is intimately linked to the fact that the relationship of world religions to violence is itself ambivalent. Holenstein (2005, p. 10) reminds us that

"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.

While most religious believers would regard their chosen religious expressions as both benevolent and inspiring, faith actors are sometimes linked to violence and conflict both between and within religious groups (or at least entities with a religious component to their guiding ideology). This is because sustained and implacable religious conviction may contain four discrete sources of danger:

- *Religion is focused on the absolute and unconditional and as a result can adopt totalitarian characteristics*. The Abrahamic monotheistic religions—Christianity, Islam and Judaism—may have special difficulty in trying to distinguish between, on the one hand, claims of the absolutely divine and, on the other, the traditions and history of human existence. Then there, of course, non-monotheistic religions, including Daoism, Hinduism and Buddhism, which constitute the religions of the majority of humankind (that is, in China and India). Hinduism rejects violence and thus has a large potential for peace. Yet as Silvestri and Mayall (2015, p. 20) note, both Hinduism and Buddhism are "less than explicit about rejecting direct (physical) violence", while Hinduism "tolerates and promotes structural (cultural) violence through its caste system".
- *When claiming both absolute and exclusive validity, religious conviction can lead to intolerance, overzealous proselytisation and religious fragmentation.* Religious exclusiveness is also typically hostile to both pluralism and liberal democracy.
- *Religion can increase aggressiveness and the willingness to use violence*. Added symbolic value can be an aspect of religious conviction, deriving from profane motivation and aims that become "holy" objectives.
- *Leaders within faith-based organisations may seek to legitimise abuses of power and violation of human rights in the name of religious zeal*. Because such leaders are nearly always men, there can also in addition be specific gender issues and women's human rights concerns.

In addition, religious power interests may try to make use of the following susceptibilities:

- Domination strategies of identity politics seeking to harness real or perceived "ethnic–cultural" and "cultural–religious" differences;
- "Misused" religious motivations informing terrorist activities;
- Leaders of religious fundamentalist movements who "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).

The last point relates to what Kurtz (1995, p. 238) calls "exclusive accounts of the nature of reality", that is, when religious followers only accept beliefs that they regard as true beliefs. Examples include the "religions of the book"—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—because each faith claims authority that emanates principally from sacred texts, similar texts actually. Exclusivist truth claims can be a serious challenge to religious toleration and diversity and make conflict more likely. On the other hand, many religious traditions have beliefs that theoretically could help to develop a more peaceful 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).

Bartoli (2005, pp. 5–6) notes 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". Religious individuals and faith-based organisations from a variety of religious traditions are actively involved in attempts to end conflicts and foster post-conflict reconciliation between warring parties in the developing world. "Religious peacemakers" are religious individuals or representatives of faith-based organisations who attempt to help resolve intergroup conflicts and build peace (Appleby 2000, 2006; Gopin 2000, 2005; ter Haar and Busutill 2005). According to Appleby (2006), religious peacemakers are most likely to be successful,

when they (1) have international or transnational reach, (2) consistently emphasise peace and the avoidance of the use of force in resolving conflict and (3) have good relations between different religions in conflict situations, as this is 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 of values and views, and this potentially underpins their ability to provide positive contributions to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Practical effects in this regard have increased in recent years, with growing numbers and types of religious peacemakers working to try to build peaceful coexistence in multi-faith societies, while advocating reconciliation and fairness in a world that often seems characterised by social and political strife and economic disparity (Bartoli 2005).

In conclusion, there is significant agreement around the following:

- Many religious leaders and faith-based organisations are active in conflict resolution and attempts at peacebuilding;
- Religious leaders and FBOs have a special role to play in zones of religious conflict, but associated peacebuilding programs do not need to be confined only to addressing "religious" conflicts;
- Although in some cases, religious peacebuilding projects resemble peacebuilding by secular nongovernmental organisations very closely, the religious orientations of the former significantly mould their peacebuilding agendas and programs;
- Faith organisations' peacebuilding agendas are diverse, ranging from high-level mediation to training and peacebuilding-through-development at the grassroots;
- Peace can be often promoted most efficiently by introducing peacebuilding components into more traditional relief and development activities (Smock 2001, p. 1; 2004).

Finally, faith-based peacebuilding initiatives contribute "positively to peacebuilding" in four main ways. They can provide (1) "emotional and spiritual support to war-affected communities", (2) effective mobilisation of "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 note the promise that religious peacemakers offer, while adding 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 are especially apparent in the Middle East and North Africa, a region beset by apparently growing political and societal tensions following the Arab Uprisings of 2011. This serves to underscore the potential importance of interreligious dialogue while also highlighting the roles of local and international actors in aggravating 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, the pursuit of peace in these regions (even) more problematic.

This Special Issue, "Peace, Politics and Religion", presents theoretical, comparative and case study papers that examine these issues, among others.

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