

# **The Role of Religion in Leadership for Conflict Resolution and Peace-building**

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## **Introduction**

Research findings reveal that for many centuries, religion has been involved in both inter-communal and international conflicts. It is in fact broadly accepted that religion is a cause rather than a solution to many of the conflicts in the world today.<sup>1</sup> Conflicts and violence have occurred between social groups with complex relations in different communities. Reflecting on their causes however, religion is undeniably victimized. Ethnicity, nationalism, colonialism, economic struggles, terrorism, political insurgencies have put religion at the front-doors of violence and sometimes conflict theories may not thoroughly be able to analyze these factors. Perry Schmidt-Leukel (2009:42) argues that: “If religion instigates or justifies the opposite, the motives are not genuinely religious: they are of a non-religious nature and religion is misused”.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes it just seems making a ‘mountain out of a molehill’. Speaking at the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (Wednesday, 18<sup>th</sup> February, 2015), President Barack Obama insisted that violent extremism is not Islamic. He stated that “We are at war with people who have perverted Islam.” “They are not religious leaders; they are terrorists,”<sup>3</sup> Certainly, religion as most activists have expressed is not the perpetrator of violence. Religion is in many cases used as a curtain; behind that drape are people with intentions which are non-religious. And these range from greed for economic power, political power as well as ‘absolute’ confusion. Conflicts have not begun with religion; rather, conflicts and violence have existed long before.

Rumination on the role of religion in peace-building as well as conflict resolution has been debated on for a very long time, but the very fact that such debates have persisted may suggest that though they are impossible on the one hand, they are unavoidable on the other. And the reason lies in the very fact that we forget the answers in the very questions. Such debates in many occasions may dissociate us to focus on established guidelines and assumptions as well as settled beliefs in building an ethical society. As a result, ‘skepticism’ on the role of religion in building a society based on justice, equality and inter-being has also recurred. Immanuel Kant commented that “skepticism is a resting place for human reason, where it can reflect upon its

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<sup>1</sup> Peace Makers in Action: *Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution* edited by David Little, a Professor at Harvard Divinity School. p.3. (See:

[http://books.google.lk/books?id=WTuZJxwYltEC&pg=PA3&source=gbs\\_toc\\_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.lk/books?id=WTuZJxwYltEC&pg=PA3&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false))

<sup>2</sup> Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Buddhism, Dialogue and Peace*, 2009, p.42

<sup>3</sup> See, <http://unitedwithisrael.org/obama-insists-violent-extremism-is-not-islamic/>

dogmatic wanderings, but it is no dwelling place for permanent settlement”<sup>4</sup>. Conversely, skepticism adversely creates obstructions which distance us from mapping peace-building procedures and reflecting upon moral values. To express lasting solutions however, we need to establish and emphasize the verity that religion counts. The role religion has played in conflict resolution and peace-building is indeed beyond the scope of this paper. It has given a moral reflection as well as a moral obligation on the other hand. What matter now, is to fulsomely (re)locate the morality of the action in the consequences and the shape of the world it creates.

Since conflicts have recurred for over centuries, it is holistically imperative to revisit some of the historical bloody conflicts in human civilization. This will give a concretized platform in mapping ways to build peace in post-conflict communities and the world. Additionally, central to this study is an emphasis that much as religion has been dominant in the emergent conflicts in the world, religion has capably (re)-establishing peace and resolved conflicts through the reconciliation and constructive mediation programmes represented by religious leaders and inter-faith mobilizations or groups. What mostly needed is a joint action of all ‘peace desirers’ be it politicians, judicial systems, academicians, individuals and all sort of social institutions as this will imply that peace matters.

The word ‘conflict’ in this context is used to refer to verbal and physical violent activities that may cause injuries, loss of life and property, and all aspects that destabilize united and friendly groups amid social institutions.

### **Historical cases of Religious Conflicts**

Looking back in history, religion has systematically been attached to numerous genocides and dehumanization in various civilizations. One may argue that religion cannot exist without bloodshed while violence may be credited for readily and intimately being available at the heart of religion. The question why religion openly permits/supports violence and destructions actually still baffles. However, the history invariably shows various narratives of genocides in the ancient world.

The most popular religious conflicts usually referred to as the ‘holy wars’ began with the Islamic expansion missions within the 7<sup>th</sup> century and the emergent Crusades of the 11<sup>th</sup> century as well as the restoration wars in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Roman Church.<sup>5</sup> It is often revealed that Muslims mistreated and pressed their religious beliefs upon Christians in the Holy Land. In retaliation, the Roman Christians started to persecute the Jews and Muslims, pagans and Protestants (Mc Bride J: 2002). The Roman Catholic Church also grew zeal to (re)capture the ‘sacred’ territories, extend its influence and explicitly condemn the growing spirit of liberalism,

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. also Kant, Prolegomena Ak 4: 262, translation by Hatfield, p.12

<sup>5</sup> Wooldridge, M. 2004. *Can religion be blamed for war?*, (BBC News, 24<sup>th</sup> February, 2004), available online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/wtwtgod/3513709.stm>



religious pluralism, and take over democratic platforms. It is worth keeping in mind that the democratic thoughts of the Catholic Church were not bearable at all, because it granted discriminations against other religious faiths. While such platforms were being sought by the Christian Church, the Muslims were fighting for space to spread their doctrines something which inflamed brutalities and violence. Such cases are still very fresh in the minds of fundamentalists, Muslims, Protestants and thus, acts of terrorism have been inevitable even today.

In 1095, Pope Urban II started what historians have named 'Crusades' against Muslims to capture the holy places and restore Christianity (Snell, M. 2009 ). Speaking at the Council of Clermont, he claimed that the war would have God's mercy and support as he pronounced that wars could not only be justified as "just wars" but also "holy wars"<sup>6</sup>. Christians inhumanely invaded and seized Jerusalem and massacred its residents. J. Denny Weaver (2001) noted that: "the crusades, the multiple blessings of wars, warrior popes, support for capital punishment, corporal punishment under the guise of 'spare the rod and spoil the child,' justifications of slavery, world-wide colonialism in the name of conversion to Christianity, the systemic violence of women subjected to men, and more"<sup>7</sup> This infringement is still engraved among Islamic fundamentalists, and this has been a driving force in the Islamic invasions of Christianity in many parts of the world. The late 1500's Crusades and the modern religious conflicts, violence and wars are a serialization of the so-called Crusades of 1095. The number of Crusades held however is not clear. Some scholars contend they were seven while others diverge on the figures that they were eight Crusades. Nonetheless what should be of more concern indeed is not the number of Crusades, but the devastations of life and property. Sadly, these Crusades sowed seeds for the modern terrorist attacks in many parts of the globe. The terrorist attacks on the twin tower buildings which most scholars have branded '9/11 attacks' is a classic example of such terrorist activities.

The Israel-Arab wars from 1947 to the present day are often seen as a war fought along religious lines although sometimes seen through the angles of nationalism, self-defense and liberation of territory (Wooldridge, M. 2004). The conflict has lasted for over six decades. It started after the United Nations General Assembly divided Palestine, a Muslim state into two parts. The western part was given to the Jews (modern Israel), while the Western subdivision left to the Muslims an idea that Muslims did not welcome.<sup>8</sup> Since then, the Arabs vowed to fight against the Jews and on 30<sup>th</sup> November, 1947, a bus carrying Jewish passengers was attacked by the Arabs leaving five Jewish casualties. The Jews (Israel) retaliated by taking up arms against the Arabs, and thus sparking off a war between Israel and Palestine. One could ascertain that the partitioning of Palestine was a factor that triggered the Israel-Arab war a sign of inhumanity.

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<sup>6</sup> Craig von Buseck, *Christian Jihad: The Crusades and Killing in the Name of Christ* (see: [http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/ChurchAndMinistry/ChurchHistory/Crusades\\_CanerChristianJihad0505.aspx](http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/ChurchAndMinistry/ChurchHistory/Crusades_CanerChristianJihad0505.aspx) accessed on 17th. Feb.2015

<sup>7</sup> J. Denny Weaver (2001). *Violence in Christian Theology*, Cross Currents, <http://www.crosscurrents.org/weaver0701.htm#TEXT1> (Accessed 19<sup>th</sup>.Feb.2015)

<sup>8</sup> Herzog, C. 2004. *The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East*. New York: Vintage Books. p. 11

The September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks on Washington D.C, USA can actually be counted as an extension of the Israel-Arab conflict. In 2004, the terrorists (Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden) claimed and defined their reasons for the attack on USA. The source indicates that terrorists accused USA for its continued support to Israel.<sup>9</sup>

### **Causes of Religious Conflicts**

Jeffrey Haynes (2009: 53) notes that: “Religion can increase aggressiveness and the willingness to use violence. The very fact that most of the wars in the world have been instigated by religion, though they are impossible, they are inevitable. What is more important is to justify such causes and bring them to light. These factors may be seen in two angles; external forces and psychological confusion or what may be termed as “illusion of truth”.

From the external angle, religion is inseparably attached to politics a well-recognized agent of violence. Religion is often put at the forefront in mobilizing people to enrich support of politicians to take over resourceful regions or even states. Supporting this view, Wooldridge M (2004) remarks that: “leaders use differences over faith as a way of sowing hatred and mobilizing support for political wars.” Saira Yamin (2008:9) approaches this idea with an identification of group mobilizations. She maintains that, ‘the “grouping” instinct will emerge in conditions that politically and economically discriminate against and marginalize religious communities; promote conflict along ideological lines, when the threat perception is high and when competition for scarce resources is intense’. She further argues that “it sometimes emerges as a response to aggression through group mobilization, and functions as a defense mechanism for the individuals involved. It is the teaming impulse. Comparison and the consciousness of the “self” and “the other” is the logical consequence of group identification. It also creates the required distance and boundaries to dehumanize the other.”<sup>10</sup> The Sudanese war which has stayed for decades is a classic example. Although the conflict is rooted in the struggle for ownership of oil territories (David Blair: 2009), religion has been at the forefront and has consistently mobilized people to fight alongside politics. And the war has been seen in three major angles as (a); religious, economic and political conflict. Perhaps to resolve this issue, religion has to divorce politics and from the struggle for economic power as the word itself implies spirituality.

All religious traditions claim to have the most supreme stipulations of beliefs, practices and culture. And most notably, any deviation is often seen as a breach upon that religious tradition, and the victim sometimes may be subjected to punishments of any sort. As a result of

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<sup>9</sup> *September 11 attacks*, see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September\\_11\\_attacks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks) (accessed 2nd January, 2015)

<sup>10</sup> Saira Yamin: *Understanding Religious Identity and the Causes of Religious Violence* (Peace Prints: South Asian Journal of Peacebuilding, Vol. 1, No. 1: Spring 2008), p.9. Available from <http://www.wiscomp.org/peaceprints.htm>, accessed 10<sup>th</sup> January, 2015



this, it causes intolerances and fragmentations within that particular religion which may instigate religious radicalism. Secondly, when one religious tradition tries to impose its beliefs on another religion, what can be seen are two mounds fighting for space. Reflect on the wars in the 'holy land', Crusades were unavoidable when Muslims attempted to force their beliefs onto Christians. It does not only create rigors but also intolerances and religious disintegrations, thus activating religious conflicts and violence.

The 'illusion of truth' is characterized by misinterpretations and misrepresentations of religious scriptures. Since dogmatism and religious texts are open to everyone, it is very likely that one aspect may be conceived in many different angles. Dogmatism is the most striking disease where false views are bred. This creates incompatibilities in views and as a result, it motivates unwholesome actions as two or more religious groups may claim 'this is the only truth, everything else is wrong'. The incidences of genocides that occur in most religious scriptures have indeed instigated religious conflicts. It is very likely that the extremist attacks from Al-Qaeda and other Muslim extremist groups are results of the misinterpretation of a religious text claiming they are killing in the name of Allah, that Islam is the 'only true religion'. The descriptions and 'commands' of genocides in the Koran and the Bible which are indeed hyperboles and metaphors have been misinterpreted by individuals with non-religious motives. It is more of psychological confusions and lack of peace in the mind of such individuals. They are not religious followers. Thus, mankind needs to keenly reflect on the world such confusions would possibly create. It then becomes the act of 'humanistic reasoning' where one consciously and internally debates on the effects of the actions he certainly takes as well as featuring the religious values of forgiveness, and tolerance when confronted by views of prejudice.

### **The Role of Religion in Conflict Resolution and Peace-Building**

Though religion is implicated in many conflicts, it has played a significant part in peace-building as well as resolving conflicts in different societies. One would imagine a world without religion, how more evil and violent it would be, or the world would have vanished centuries ago. In this context however, religion includes a multiplex of positive activities that cannot be confined to one aspect of human knowledge and encounters. It is part of individual's life because it includes behavior, attitude, beliefs and culture. Simply to put it, religion is; love, compassion, reconciliation, rehabilitation, interconnectedness, and spirituality. In fact, religion has various experiences and behavioral retrospectivities on humanity; it is of great vitality therefore to underline its role in conflict resolution and peace-building.

Empirical study convey that individuals and faith-based groups from a variety of religious traditions have actively made attempts to end conflicts and foster reconciliation and rehabilitations among conflicting groups in different parts of the world (Boutaet al., 2005; Smock, 2006 & Jeffrey Haynes, 2009). This is a high-profile approach where religion has been

represented by faith-based organizations in demonstrating its capacities in resolving conflicts. Jeffrey Haynes (2009:60) clears a skeptical mind with illustrations of faith-based organizations which have carried out peace dialogues and immensely contributed to peace-building both in conflicting and post-conflicting communities. The Quakers financed by the Ford foundation in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–70; 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. The Bosnian peacemaker Friar Ivo Markovic founded an interreligious group ‘Face to Face’ and has tried to heal the wounds of the conflict in the Balkans through music (Damien Keown: 2009). Music has acted as a dais where multi-religious and multi-ethnic groups have shared their experiences as well as applying the spiritual values of forgiveness and moral beliefs. Religion has united people and through such groups, dialogues have been enriched. The work of religious peacemakers is increasingly being effective as Jeffrey Hanes (2009) demonstrates.

1. Faith-based organisations are increasingly active and increasingly effective in attempts at peace-building.
2. Faith-based organisations have a special role to play in zones of religious conflict, but their peace-building programmes do not need to be confined to addressing religious conflict only.
3. Although in some cases peace-building projects of faith-based organisations resemble very closely peace-building by secular non-governmental organisations, the various religious orientations of these faith-based organisations typically shape the peace-building they undertake.
4. These organisations’ peace-building agendas are diverse, ranging from high-level mediation to training and peace-building-through-development at the grassroots.
5. Peace can be often promoted most efficiently by introducing peace-building components into more traditional relief and development activities (Hanes, 2009:61, Smock, 2001: 1; also see Smock, 2006).

The uniqueness of these groups as well as political figures is that they have engaged non-violence propagandas which have acted as a strong platform to condemn dehumanization in societies. These have emphasized religion’s inimitable characters of cohesiveness and collaborations which have positive transformative and contributions to conflict resolution and peace-building. As Maiko (2008) asserts, ‘the more aware a person is of the sanctity of the web of life, the more prosocial the person become’. It increasingly strengthens moral conduct and one becomes aware of one’s being as one’s existence depends on the other. This awareness is very likely to push people towards the path of forgiveness, mutual trust for rehabilitations. Secondly, all the world religions have a shared vision of spirituality and this can pushed people together positively towards conflict resolutions as well as peace-building. Religious peace activists such His Holiness Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, have empirically drawn resources to meet the needs for peace in their respective societies and beyond. Their woks have in fact been a great contribution to world peace and social justice. In Vietnam, the massive sufferings caused by the



wars did not spare the Buddhist monastics to enthusiastically engage in peace struggles of their country. Thich Nhat Hanh actively drew resources of the Buddhist teachings of nondualism to meet the need for peace by empirically introducing “Engaged Buddhism”. He campaigned against the American oppression and explained the purpose of the Buddhist protests and offered a peace proposal to the Americans in 1966.<sup>11</sup>

Further, religion has used the power of its scriptures to condemn the acts of terrorism, fundamentalism, conflicts and all forms of violence. These in many instances act as inspirations for mostly religious people and peace actors to deal with inter-communal conflicts. Drawing such “stories about how similar situations of conflict were dealt with by a religious founder, elder or prophet can usually be located in the texts, and these parallels can often be adapted to sketch a way forward in a contemporary context.”<sup>12</sup> Damien K (2009) goes on to note that “concepts of forgiveness, empowerment, justice and compassion can be found in the Bible, the Qur’an, throughout Buddhist literature, and in the scriptures of all religions.” The only challenge is to emphasize these values. The New Testament Bible for example condemns all violent actions. The discussions in Matthew 5:43-48 is a classic commitment to love, peace and harmony among people. “But I tell you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father in Heaven.” The Ephesians 4:32 emphasizes the value of compassion, kindness and forgiveness among individuals. “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” *Dhammapada* 131 emphasizes that: “One who, while himself seeking happiness oppresses with violence other beings who also desire happiness, will not attain happiness hereafter.”

### **Concluding Remarks**

This paper attempted to highlight the role of religion in leadership for conflict resolution and peace-building. While religion has been seen in various conflicts, it has been at the center of fostering reconciliations through constructive dialogues and emphasizing its vision. As discussed, faith-based organizations and religious individuals have acted positively by initiating non-violence propagandas and emphasized similar values among world religions. But it would be very supplemental if civil organizations, religious, and government leaders could pull resources together to support the fight against inter-communal and international conflicts as this would accentuate commitment to peace-building in the world. However, let’s not forget that peace is built in the mind of an individual then shared in communities. Suggestively, the world to

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<sup>11</sup> Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia: *Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam: Nondualism in Action*, edited by Christopher S. Queen, Sallie B. King Sallie B. King, p.324 available online: [http://books.google.lk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=6ZsTgY1INNsC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=engaged+buddhism&ots=O2xi8I3Cpi&sig=7UEsM\\_j9yIVLRrF7-Bm6cHNTzVg&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=engaged%20buddhism&f=false](http://books.google.lk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=6ZsTgY1INNsC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=engaged+buddhism&ots=O2xi8I3Cpi&sig=7UEsM_j9yIVLRrF7-Bm6cHNTzVg&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=engaged%20buddhism&f=false) retrieved 5th December, 2014

<sup>12</sup> Buddhist Approach to Political Conflict and Peace Development UNDV Conference Volume ,2009, *Learning from Religious Peacemakers*, Damien Keown, p.4

be at peace we have to look inside ourselves because every good and evil arises from one individual.

Given the fact that conflicts are very rampant, there has been a great need for peacemakers. 'Peacemakers' are individuals, representatives of a faith-based organization or groups that attempt to help resolve inter-group conflicts and build peace (Appleby, 2000, 2006; Gopin, 2000, 2005; Ellis & Hanes 2009). In this complex society, mediating a conflict is not an easy task. Building peacemakers may need to start from high school education as this would help them acquire experience in training. The training will develop a pure mind (a mind free from dogmatism), creativity in modeling new attitudes and behaviors, decision making abilities and commitment to facilitate reconciliations and assess the differences among the parties involved in a conflict. Thus, underscoring that behavior of conflicting individuals or groups will move in the intended direction. Secondly, it will develop skills to inspire the conflicting groups to understand the adverse effects of violence as well as underlining the value of forgiveness and trust. Most individuals transform under cooperative and intense guide that is able to mold the behaviors and the mind of such conflicting groups.

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