

Peacebuilding Between Religion and Politics

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This paper seeks to introduce the new sub-discipline of ‘religious peacebuilding’ in the field of conflict and peace studies, which is at the center of my own doctoral research.¹ Religious peacebuilding, as a field of study and practice, has grown over the last decade out of the current interaction between peace efforts and faith, primarily in relation to violent conflict and peacebuilding. It can be defined as a “comprehensive, theoretically sophisticated, and systematic process performed by religious and secular actors working in collaboration at different levels and at various proximities to conflict zones.”² As such, it is a natural meeting point for religious and political actors because they seek a mutual goal: peace between religious groups. From a political point of view, inter-religious peace is a good for the sake of political relations and social solidarity whereas for religious actors, improved relations between communities may have particular religious significance, like the achievement of social justice or reconciliation. Furthermore, religious peacebuilding scholars and practitioners point out that the very relevance and effectiveness of peacebuilding is at stake if religion is marginalized from this process, particularly in conflict zones where religion is a factor. Religious peacebuilding therefore presumes the interaction of religion and politics via contemporary conflicts. However, the variety of cooperative potential for peacebuilding, which makes this a rich field of study and practice, has been underestimated and insufficiently engaged.³

Two ‘cultures’ of religion

Any talk of religion and peace today begs the question: but isn’t religion inherently violent? This is one common oversimplification that may lead to the conclusion that less religion means more peace while more religion means more violence.⁴ In fact, religion has a much more complex relationship with both these elements. Elise Boulding, a founder of peace research, suggests two ‘cultures’ of religion: the culture of holy war and the culture of utopian peaceableness.⁵ Every religion, according to her findings, has both of these archetypes built into their interpretive frameworks of the world. The holy war archetype refers to divinely legitimated violence, and is easily politicized, while the peaceable utopia refers to a vision of “mystic oneness of humankind with the creator or cosmos,” such as might be sought in intentional community or a monastery (EB 502). Boulding applies these two archetypes to two opposing ways of responding to conflict, mapped along a continuum where total, violent destruction falls on one end and absolute union (perfect peace) is on the other.

¹ J. Funk Deckard, “Religion and Peacebuilding in Post War Bosnia-Herzegovina,” doctoral dissertation, KU Leuven, in progress.

² R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred. Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 20 (henceforth abbreviated SA in the text).

³ Although a full accounting for this lacuna is beyond the scope of this paper, we mention the frameworks of secularism, liberalism, and *realpolitik* (among others) whose general move away from religion weakened their adherents’s ability to understand religions’s inner rationalities and motivations. Consequently, western responses to religious engagement in international politics have been lacking insight and effectiveness.

⁴ David Little, “Religion, Violent Conflict, and Peacemaking” in *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution*, ed. David Little (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 429–448.

⁵ Elise Boulding, “Two Cultures of Religion as Obstacles to Peace,” *Zygon* 21, no. 4 (1986): 501–518 (henceforth abbreviated EB in the text).

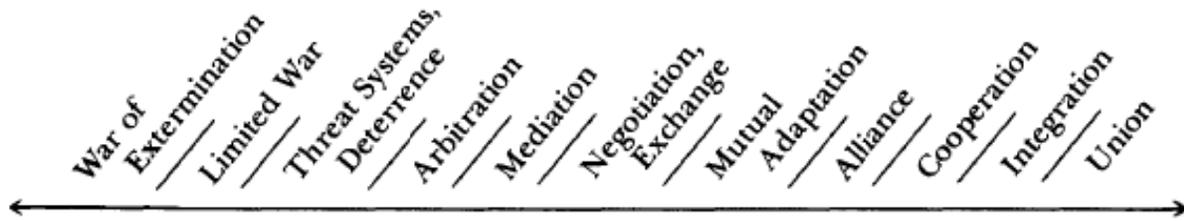


Figure: Boulding's conflict continuum

The tendency in most religions is to embrace these two extremes and fail to address the middle zone, the moderate responses to the more usual, daily conflicts. Here, I will consider both extremes—utter violence and peace as holistic union—before addressing the middle zone, which is the primary area of religious peacebuilding.

On the side of violence, we can recall examples of recent destructive acts by or in the name of religions in places like Kashmir, Iraq, Sri Lanka, or Sudan. In these cases, religion may be implicated at the root of the violence, but more often it is co-opted for justifying and even upholding the sanctity of parties's purposes. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, nationalists from each of the three ethnic groups managed to use historic religious rhetoric and symbols to legitimize their political agendas. Ethnic cleansing, for example, was framed as a sacred act of group purification. Less destructive, but still on the violent end of the continuum, is a tendency in religions to treat difference and otherness with exclusivity (mentalities of 'us versus them'). The holy war culture, says Boulding, "is a male warrior culture headed by patriarchal warrior God (or the gods)" (EB 503). It perpetuates itself in societies today through the subjugation of women, children and minorities and through legitimating the use of force to solve conflict.

At the other end of the continuum, nonviolent integration and union, Boulding cites two kinds of religious subcultures—pacifists and mystics. Pacifists focus on nonviolent action in the practical sphere, while mystics strive for mystic union in the spiritual realm.⁶ Boulding appreciates in these subcultures the powerful spiritual connection felt between self and the rest of God's creation as well as the commitment to participate in God's nonviolent work (EB 510). However, these 'radical' mystics and pacifists are hard for most people, even the religious, to identify with, which means their extreme 'peace culture' is not generally accessible from promoting religious peacebuilding. This culture also tends to be smaller and less visible than the holy war culture, which is why most people associate public expressions of religion with violence rather than peace.

Exploring the middle ground

The rather utopic peaceable culture of religion has the capacity to inspire nonviolent responses in the more moderate center of the continuum—cooperation and alliance and even mutual adaptation and change. Historically, most religions have not embraced these more common nonviolent responses to conflict, but are increasingly doing so.⁷ Religious peacebuilding is tapping into the "spiritual energy and charismatic legitimation" (EB 510) of religion to develop the moderate middle spectrum through (among many activities) training in nonviolent conflict resolution, intra- and inter-religious dialogue, and religious formation/education. Today, we even see that religious actors have contributed new, innovative strategies and methods of peacebuilding that, however, remain underappreciated and unengaged by political actors.⁸ "Indeed," as religious peacebuilding scholar-practitioner Cynthia Sampson claims, "some aspects of peacebuilding are *best* understood using concepts and approaches found in religion. In particular, the processes associated with reconciliation—confession, repentance, forgiveness, mercy, and conversion

⁶ Boulding refers here to: Jewish Hasidim mystics and zionist pacifist (along the lines of Martin Buber), Muslim Sufi mystics and Baha'i pacifists, and Christian ancient mystic desert fathers and the Anabaptist pacifists.

⁷ Note that there has been plenty of peacebuilding done in the religious subcultures of pacifism and mystics.

⁸ See the discussion in Douglas Johnston's "Religion and Foreign Policy," in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation. Religion, Public Policy and Transformation*, eds. Raymond G. Helmick, S.J. and Rodney L. Petersen (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001), 117–128.

based on self-reflection and acceptance of personal responsibility—have emerged from religious, not secular, contexts.”⁹ International relations specialists and political decision-makers are beginning to recognize the limitations of traditional, rational-actor and state-centric methods of diplomacy and to seek the unconventional approaches of religious peacebuilding.¹⁰

Many assert that since religion is often an instigator of violence, it should be sidelined, rather than engaged in the peacebuilding process. In a way, this is logical: it may seem easiest and best to (if possible) remove the offending element of the conflict. However, ignoring or avoiding a difficult party in a conflict often simplifies the immediate peace process, but in the long term, the unrecognized party’s concerns will resurface because they have not been addressed. Conflict transformation necessitates deep, often painful and unpleasant work that produces something new, changed. Only transformed relations between parties in conflict have the potential for sustainable peace. As we are currently witnessing and as the increasing rebuttals of the secularization thesis demonstrate, suppressing the needs of religious actors seems to encourage so-called terrorist acts.

Therefore, what do religious peacebuilding experts recommend as the best response to such violence? Religious peacebuilders—actors who are often themselves religious adherents who work in the (secular) public sector—propose strengthening religion, with the condition that this include a focus on the religious priority for peace as the most effective response, rather than eradicating religion or undermining its influence.¹¹ If this recommendation is truly the most effective approach, it is a place where the interests of political leaders and the religious faithful can overlap.

Religious peacebuilding leadership

Building ‘strong’ (SA) or ‘grounded’¹² peace-focused religions as a shared political and religious goal should be a key agenda for religious peacebuilding. According to Appleby of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, this can be done through (1) efforts to reverse religious ‘illiteracy’—a lack of training in one’s religion’s “doctrinal and moral teaching and [un]practiced in its devotional, ritual and spiritual traditions” (SA 77)—and (2) by expanding ‘folk religion’—a form of religion that can be so disconnected from its broader faith community, its institutions and traditions, that adherents may mistake cultural habits for religious ones. The religiously illiterate and members of folk religions may struggle to separate the essence of their religious beliefs and practices from the ‘superstitions’ of their ancestors or the exploitation of religion by political ideologues (e.g. nationalists). While all religions are internally diverse and engage in discussions on the evolving contradictions between religious understandings and contemporary culture as well as how to negotiate internal pluralism, adherents to folk religions and the religiously illiterate commonly miss this debate and the development of religious conclusions. They may be isolated from their own religious institutions worldwide and their shared beliefs and practices because they are stuck in a context where religion and ethnic culture have become indistinguishable (SA 76-77).

Therefore, anyone with authority can manipulate religion to legitimate exclusive attitudes and violent behavior that might be rejected by co-religious adherents elsewhere. Conversely, religious peacebuilding leadership can exert great influence for re-humanizing the ‘other,’ for forgiveness, and reconciliation.¹³

⁹ Cynthia Sampson, “Religion and Peacebuilding,” in *Peacemaking in International Conflict: Methods and Techniques*, eds. I. William Zartman and J. Lewis Rasmussen (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997), 273–316, 276; emphasis added.

¹⁰ See Douglas Johnston’s address to the U.S. State Department’s Secretary’s Open Forum, “Faith-based Diplomacy: Bridging the Religious Divide,” of December 8, 2006.

¹¹ According to the Fundamentalism Project, strong religion can equally be violent. For this reason, strengthening religion should be conditioned by a sacred priority of peace and reconciliation (i.e. Boulding’s peaceable culture of religion). See Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

¹² Joseph Bock, *Sharpening Conflict Management: Religious Leadership and the Double-Edged Sword* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001).

¹³ Some obvious examples of religious peacebuilding leaders are Mahatma Ghandi, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Theresa, Bishop Desmond Tutu, and the Dalai Lama, but there are many other less famous religious peacebuilding leaders.

To address the problems of religious illiteracy and folk religion, religious peacebuilding leaders can strengthen the connection of local religious communities with their global religious networks as one way of building grounded religion. The peacebuilding religious leader can also provide religious education and oversee spiritual formation, explaining the foundations of beliefs and the meaning behind morality in a way that “reinforce[s] and contextualize[s] the priority given to peace and reconciliation” (SA 119). (In)Formed, conscious religious communities are less susceptible to manipulated messages, ‘mob thinking,’ and the overwhelming emotions of fear, resentment, etc., while they are more capable of managing their religious grievances nonviolently. These peacebuilding activities ideally create a strong, moderate civil society where dissenting opinions can be openly voiced and extremists questioned (SA 76).

To take the example of Bosnia-Herzegovina, many in the religious establishment joined the nationalist movements during the recent war (1992–1995) and now have positions of political influence. As a result, religious peacebuilding leaders in Bosnia-Herzegovina are scarce, often operating with very poor funding or on a voluntary basis. Vahidin Omanović, a young imam and co-founder of the Center for Peacebuilding,¹⁴ is one of these inspiring leaders who trains other to be religious peacebuilders through acknowledging personal trauma in order to face one’s neighbor of another religion and ethnicity and establish relationships again. Evidence shows that such exceptional leaders can have a great impact because they interpret and voice the religious tradition about how to deal with conflict, when it is legitimate to pursue violence, and the religious priority of peace. Directly against the efforts of ‘violence engineers,’ they “channel the militancy of religion in the direction of the disciplined pursuit of justice and nonviolent resistance to extremism” (SA 183). These leaders, as compared with the military, external ‘experts,’ or others employed in peacemaking, are: indigenous and invested, legitimate and trusted, uniquely insightful, persistent, diligent, and morally authoritative.¹⁵ Consequently, they are “better equipped than their political counterparts to deal with religious issues.”¹⁶

However, since their efforts and views are often contrary to those in positions of power, which decreases their visibility and the scope of their effectiveness, these leaders need support. Religious peacebuilding leadership requires: a commitment to and training in nonviolence, a religious education and spiritual formation, as well as a connection with the religious community beyond state borders that can inspire and guide others down that path. External religious institutions and individuals can expand these networks and support these leaders with finances, personnel, and training. The political establishment can encourage religious peacebuilding by not hindering this work and by making policies that enhance diversity, including a diversity of religious opinions. For Bosnia-Herzegovina, this latter element continues to challenge religious voices for peace both at the level of laws promoting religious freedom and at the level of religious leadership upholding nationalist agendas.

Concluding remarks

Like Douglas Johnston of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, I am convinced that political decision-makers “will have to begin treating religion as a serious variable in the conduct of international relations.”¹⁷ They can no longer excuse their ignorance of and lack of engagement with religious motivations in conflict. The emerging literature on religious peacebuilding can provide support to this new endeavor by persistently addressing the issue of religion in violent conflict as valid and necessary for peacebuilding.¹⁸ The growing body of case studies helps peace and conflict scholars to systematize the field of religious peacebuilding with the goal of developing theory and methods for future

¹⁴ Centar za Izgradnu Mira, located in Sanski Most, Bosnia-Herzegovina: <http://www.unvocim.net/>

¹⁵ See Bock, *Sharpening Conflict Management*; “Introduction” and the contributions of Holbrooke and Little in *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution*, ed. David Little (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, “For Political Leaders,” http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=26&Itemid=69.

¹⁷ Douglas Johnston, “Foreword,” in *Religion and Security: The New Nexus in International Relations*, ed. Robert A. Seiple and Dennis R. Hoover (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), ix–xi, x.

¹⁸ Little, “Religion, Violent Conflict, and Peacemaking,” 441–442.

religious peacebuilding leaders.¹⁹ Through continued attention to religions' interactions with conflict, in the directions of both violence and peace, the secular sphere of politics and international relations may be enhanced and become more effective in the intricacies of conflicts involving religion. However, the test is whether decision- and policy-makers choose to adopt strategies to better understand religious perspectives and encourage their peacebuilding potential. This would mean a change from responding to the *violence* of religious adherents to making political initiatives to "get to the *ideas* behind the guns."²⁰

¹⁹ For example, we can discern sets of actors, key personal qualities, commonly used, effective techniques, types of religious peacebuilding activities, and unique contributions to the field of conflict and peace studies. However, these details go beyond the scope of this article.

²⁰ Douglas M. Johnston, "Faith-based Diplomacy: Bridging the Religious Divide," presentation to the Secretary's Open Forum, U.S. Department of State (8 December 2006), 5, my emphasis.