CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Faith Matters

Religion as a Third Side for Peace

Bridget Moix

*The God of peace is never glorified by human violence.*
Thomas Merton

The role of religion in conflict and conflict resolution is a growing area of academic inquiry, policy interest, and practical initiative. Once a relatively marginal area of interest in foreign policy and conflict resolution circles, religion is increasingly a central topic of concern for all those seeking to understand and contribute to the positive transformation of today’s conflicts. This chapter examines the potential for religion to act as a positive “third side”, or part of the broader community at work in a conflict situation, (Ury, 1999) in peacefully transforming destructive conflict. Specifically, I consider four roles religion can play within conflict dynamics: (1) beliefs and values, (2) leaders and their followers, (3) social structures and networks, and (4) identity. It then proposes developing a simple framework for analysis and action to help incorporate religion more directly into the study of conflict, with hopes of providing policymakers and practitioners with a useful tool in developing interventions. The significant growth in attention, both positive and negative, to the role religion plays in the world today suggests new opportunity for refining the questions posed in this chapter and improving efforts to harness the positive peace potential of religion.

RELIGIOUS AWAKENINGS

Since the first appearance of this chapter in the second edition of *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (2006), the role of religion in both fueling and helping peacefully prevent and end violent conflict has become an issue of active exploration by policymakers, practitioners, and academics.
Peace and conflict resolution programs in universities are offering new courses of study on the role of religion. Interfaith groups dedicated to preventing and resolving deadly conflict are active in places like Colombia, Israel-Palestine, Kenya, Nigeria, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Sudan–South Sudan, and many other conflict areas around the world. Governments and policymakers are also undertaking new initiatives to better understand the role of religion in today’s conflicts and how it affects policy choices. In 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton launched a new high-level working group on religion that included experts and early pioneers in the consideration of religion’s role in war and peace, including Douglas Johnston, Marc Gopin, and Andrea Bartoli. This increased attention to the role religion can play as both driver of conflict and potential resource for peace is both welcome and necessary.

A brief survey of the most entrenched, deadly conflicts around the world suggests an urgent need for increased understanding of the role religion plays in human disputes. From the Middle East to Sri Lanka, the Balkans to Nigeria, Sudan to Syria, the destructive power of religiously motivated violence has been a stark, horrific reality for people around the world. Witnessing such a worldwide scourge of human life along religious divisions, some might conclude that religion itself is a dangerous cause of conflict—something the world would be better off without. Indeed, for a good portion of the last century, many scholars predicted the demise of religion as scientific inquiry and the more logical, less volatile age of reason would come to the fore. Such predictions have not come to pass, however, and in the early years of the twenty-first century, religion appears to be gaining, not losing, influence.

As of 2010, the Pew Research Center estimates that 84 percent of the earth’s 6.9 billion people identify as religiously affiliated. Major groups are Christians (31.5 percent), Muslims (23.2 percent), Hindu (15 percent), Buddhist (7 percent), and Jewish (0.2 percent). Of the 16.3 percent who do not identify with a particular religious group, many hold some kind of personal religious or spiritual beliefs. At the same time, fundamentalism, characterized across faith traditions by regressive interpretations of doctrine, strict adherence to conservative (often repressive) social rules, and harsh rejection of outsiders, has been on the rise globally over the past two decades as people struggle to make sense of a rapidly changing world. Whatever the predictions of the past, the current reality is that religion is in fact alive and well in some form in the lives of most people in most of the world (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, 2003).

Given that reality and given the large number of cases where religion has become somehow intertwined with violent conflict, incorporating religion into the theory and practice of conflict resolution has become an imperative.
Unfortunately, the role of religion in situations of conflict and in peacemaking efforts has only recently begun to be systematically explored by those working to address situations of violent conflict, practitioners and policymakers alike (Appleby, 2000; Gopin, 2000; Bartoli, 2004). In addition, theory to help explain the relationships of religion, conflict, and peacemaking has not yet been well developed or effectively incorporated into conflict resolution and international affairs studies. While a number of notable scholars and practitioners are pioneering in the field, any definitive understanding of the nexus of religion, war, and peace remains elusive.

This chapter proposes that a more integrated and practical approach to understanding the role of religion in conflict and its resolution is needed within the theory and practice of conflict resolution, among foreign policymakers, and for anyone interested in helping the diverse human family coexist with less bloodshed and more compassion. The inclusion of this chapter in this Handbook represents an important effort to ensure that such integration in theory and practice occurs. Religion can play critical roles in the deeply rooted conflict systems of intractable conflicts, as examined by Peter Coleman in chapter 30, and represents a fundamental dimension in many, though certainly not all, of what others in this Handbook describe as moral conflicts. Culture and multicultural conflict resolution can also shed further light on the role of religion in both fueling and helping to resolve destructive disputes. By better understanding the influences religion can exert in conflict situations, negative and positive, and by examining religion as part of what William Ury (1999) has described as the third side, we may begin to fill a gap in our knowledge and treatment of human conflict. More important, we may be able to help tip the balance for the future and reduce the destructive use of religion in the cause of killing and strengthen its power as a healing force in the world.

**RELIGIONS BETWEEN WAR AND PEACE**

Any effort to demonstrate the constructive contributions religion has made in the field of conflict resolution and peacemaking inevitably encounters skeptics. Particularly in the context of an ongoing global war on terror, the prevailing conclusion of many is that the negative impact of religion on human relations far outweighs any positive contributions it might make. In 2012, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found 65 percent of people surveyed in the United States believed religion contributed to war either a great deal or fair amount. Given the wealth of historical and current examples of religiously motivated violence, it is perhaps not surprising that so many people find it difficult to think of religion as a positive force.
for peace. Religion has been used to launch crusades, oppress and conquer, and justify violence and war. To disregard its role in fueling conflict would be to disregard numerous chapters in human history.

However, religion can also undeniably claim a significant role in helping communities resolve differences, advancing international human rights, overcoming great injustices, and encouraging peaceful management of conflicts. Faith-based peacemaking is most often associated with well-known names like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Bishop Tutu, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Dalai Lama, or with the pacifist traditions of Quakers and Mennonites. However, a rich history of less recognized examples also exists: the courageous witness of Vietnamese Buddhists against the US-Vietnam war, the dedicated coexistence work of Jewish and Muslim religious leaders in the Middle East through years of violence, the active leadership of Catholic clergy in the people power movement in the Philippines. This less recognized but equally relevant side of religion’s role in human affairs includes countless individuals and communities spanning the globe who have drawn on their faith to help prevent violence and rebuild broken relationships and countless more who are continuing this work today. Their contributions confirm that reducing the study of religion’s role in human relations to the negative would also be a mistake.

How then should students and practitioners of conflict resolution approach religion? Is it part of the problem or part of the solution? Or both? Much may depend on how religion interacts with other social, cultural, political, and economic dynamics in response to problems. Religion exists in relation to, is affected by, and influences the broader sociopolitical context of conflict situations and ultimately needs to be understood as part of a complex human system. A clearer understanding of how religion is often used to fuel political violence and when conflicts are susceptible to such exploitation could help save lives and prevent the escalation of disputes. Those working to address situations of conflict, particularly conflicts drawn along faith lines, have a responsibility to acknowledge when religion is being used for destructive purposes and seek ways to reduce the harm. At the same time, the long history and ongoing practice of faith-based peacemaking that is increasingly being recognized suggests that religion provides a significant resource for conflict resolution that remains largely underexamined and untapped. Thus, practitioners, scholars, and policymakers working to address entrenched conflicts should also be striving to understand the conditions that best support religious contributions to conflict resolution and actively seeking out such peace-building resources—resources that exist in some form in nearly every conflict situation.
RELIGION AS THIRD SIDE

Given the widespread and persistent appeal of religion, the diversity of spiritual traditions across the human experience, and the powerful influence of faith in people’s lives, religion and conflict can hardly avoid one another. While religion does not play an active role in every dispute or provide a resource for peacemaking in every situation, wherever violent conflict erupts, religion is likely to form part of the social and cultural context surrounding the dispute. Participants may be believers or members of certain religious groups. Faith communities in the surrounding society will likely be affected and may seek to respond in some way—taking sides, providing humanitarian relief, or seeking to help end the conflict peacefully. Thus, religion can often form part of the third side.

According to Ury (1999), the third side is “the surrounding community, which serves as a container for any escalating conflict” (p. 7). A traditional conflict resolution model presents conflict as a clash of positions, interests, or needs between two (or sometimes more) parties who must find a means of resolving the dispute, ideally on their own but perhaps with the help of some outside intervention. Incorporating the third side broadens the lens on the conflict to include not just the parties directly involved, but also the broader community surrounding the conflict. It takes individual disputes out of a vacuum and places them back in the societies and communities in which they occur, where a wide range of psychological, political, economic, social, and cultural dynamics is at play. Within the community surrounding a conflict exists a wide range of potential actors and resources that can, when mobilized effectively, become a positive third force in the dispute, a force that can help reduce suffering, push the parties toward peace, and reweave the social fabric. Ury describes the third side as “the emergent will of the community” to organize itself to help end the conflict constructively. It involves the contributions of many and can encompass many roles (prevent, resolve, contain, educate, provide, mediate, heal, witness, and so on). It consists of the wide range of potential actors in the surrounding community as well as social norms and personal values—what Ury calls the “inner third side”—which can help move people caught in cycles of conflict away from violence and toward peaceful settlement. Thus, the third side is not composed of only one action or one individual, but the collective will and influence that arise from the broader community in mobilizing for peace.

Of course, not all parts of the community that surrounds a conflict situation are always motivated toward such positive ends. Some individuals or aspects of the surrounding community, including religious elements, will be indifferent or actively seek to escalate the conflict for their own gain.
However, in most conflicts, the surrounding communities are directly affected by the violence, and in most cases, the majority of people at least want peace and many are ready to work for it. It is that pooled energy and activity that creates the third side. The challenge of envisioning and empowering this third side, then, is to find and encourage the resources that are motivated toward peace within the surrounding community and context of a conflict situation and to limit or restrain the impact of negative influences from further inflaming tensions.

In most situations, religion is an important part of the surrounding community, which could—if mobilized toward peace—be an active part of a strong third side. We now take a brief look at four ways in which religion exists on the third side and how those dynamics might contribute to the third side: (1) beliefs and values, (2) leaders and their followers, (3) social structures and networks, and (4) identity. While these four aspects of religion as third side overlap, they are presented separately in order to develop a framework for analysis when considering the role of religion in conflict and conflict resolution. For each, I offer a set of questions that conflict resolution practitioners and policymakers might use to better understand the role religion plays within particular situations and identify openings for supporting religious peace-building efforts and constraining the negative manipulation of religion.

**Religion as Beliefs and Values**

Muslim-Christian violence has wracked Nigeria in recent years. Thousands of people have been killed and churches and mosques burned to the ground. In the midst of ongoing tensions between their communities, two Nigerian religious leaders are using the values of their faith traditions to help replace interfaith conflict with interfaith cooperation. As youths, Mohammed Ashafa and James Wuye were personally involved in and affected by Christian-Muslim violence in their communities. Ashafa lost a beloved mentor and family member, and Wuye lost one of his arms in the fighting. As each became youth leaders in their communities, the two men developed a deeper understanding of the teachings of their religious traditions. Separately, they underwent their own personal transformations away from violence and began spreading the teachings of tolerance, respect, compassion, and peacemaking found within each of their traditions. Convinced that the core teachings of both Christianity and Islam share common values that can serve as a foundation for interfaith peace, Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye began an interfaith dialogue initiative and wrote a book together that uses seventy verses from the Bible and seventy from the Quran to teach respect, tolerance, compassion, and cooperation
between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Emphasizing these religious values, they have brought thousands of Muslim and Christian youth together in workshops to learn about each other’s faith traditions, engage in interfaith dialogue, and work together to reconstruct mosques and churches destroyed by interreligious violence.

Ashafa and Wuye’s use of scripture as a basis for their interfaith peace-building work, as well as their own personal transformations, demonstrate one way in which religion can function as part of the inner third side: “The [inner] third side manifests itself as a kind of conscience within the single individual engaged in conflict. It is the voice that urges us to heal old grievances; it is the capacity to listen to the other side and show empathy; it is the impulse to respect the basic human needs of all” (Ury, 1999, p. 21).

Religion is most often discussed in terms of beliefs and values, doctrines and dogma. The spiritual teachings of a faith tradition provide a narrative that helps believers make sense of the world and locate themselves in it. Religious values set guidelines for one’s own behavior and treatment of others. Religious doctrine can lay out rules for managing human relations and even specific instructions for what to do when conflicts arise. While religious teachings on issues of war and peace vary widely across traditions, a number of common values have been recognized across the world’s major faiths: compassion, love, tolerance, respect for human dignity, sacredness of human life. Despite differences across traditions and with the interpretation of teachings within any particular faith, these shared values form a common ground and have contributed significantly to the development of international human rights standards, ethical norms, humanitarian law, and the philosophy and practice of peacemaking.

In addition, every religion includes its own particular teachings that can serve as resources for the peaceful management of conflict. Buddhism emphasizes compassion toward all and nonviolent living. Islam teaches tolerance of other faiths, a commitment to justice, and care for the poor. Christianity has articulated clear rules for limiting the use of violence through the just war tradition and lifts up Jesus’s teachings of forgiveness and peacemaking. Judaism promotes social justice and protection of minority rights, and it encourages reconciliation through processes like teshuva, a Jewish concept and practice of repentance and new beginnings. Hinduism encourages transcending selfishness and has a long history of tolerance toward other religions.

Of course, religious leaders and followers do not always focus on or consistently live up to the best values and teachings of their faiths. Religious texts include language and teachings that can be, and often are, interpreted in destructive ways, just as they can be interpreted constructively. For example, Christianity’s emphasis on Jesus as savior can help lead people to follow
the examples of forgiveness, nonviolence, and social justice demonstrated through the biblical stories of Jesus’s life. But an emphasis that only those who believe in Jesus are saved can lead to rigid dichotomies between in-group and out-group and the dehumanization of non-Christians. Jewish theology regarding the idea of a chosen people similarly can be used to encourage a high ethical standard for behavior in the world, or as a source of division and dehumanization of the other. Considerable debate is underway within Islam today as varying interpretations of teachings on the treatment of non-Muslims, the role of women, and the relationship between government and religion play out in difficult, often painful ways across the global faith community. Ultimately it is not necessarily the words of a sacred text that determine whether religious beliefs and values will promote cooperation or conflict, but how they are interpreted and the hermeneutic employed to explain them—factors that change over time and across social and cultural contexts.

Whether religious beliefs and values are contributing negatively or positively to a conflict situation will be an important indicator as to whether and how religion might be part of a positive third side. These questions are worth considering in trying to understand the role of religious beliefs and values in particular conflict situations:

- What are the most salient religious traditions or belief systems at work in the society or community? What is the history of religious teachings in the community?
- How overtly are religious values and teachings expressed by those involved in the conflict and the surrounding community? Even if beliefs and values are not overtly expressed, how do they appear to influence the decisions and behavior of those in the conflict, of the surrounding community?
- Does the conflict include a religious or spiritual narrative? Are there specific religious teachings or narratives that are particularly relevant to the conflict? If so, do they serve to escalate or mitigate the conflict?
- What religious values and beliefs respected in the society encourage more constructive conflict management? Are there religious narratives or teachings that might help build bridges between the parties, move them away from violence, or provide a framework for peaceful settlement?

**Religion as Leaders and Followers**

While Gandhi, King, Tutu, and the Dalai Lama are well known for their instrumental roles in nonviolent struggles against oppression, countless other religious leaders throughout history and today have stood
courageously against injustice and for a more peaceful world. One such leader worthy of recalling is Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Born in 1890 to a family of Pathan farmers and raised in the Peshawar valley of British India, Khan grew up in the midst of conflict and turmoil as the Indian people struggled under the yoke of colonial rule and amid their own tribal and religious conflicts. Pathans themselves were known for their violent history, and Khan’s close friendship with Gandhi was an oddity to many of his people. Yet Khan became convinced that active nonviolence was the best way to confront oppression and the proper path for faithful Muslims.

Khan began working across the Peshawar valley to promote education, social development, forgiveness, and active nonviolence for India’s freedom. He became a leader among Pathans, was called Badshah Khan, the king of khans, and was respected as a committed Muslim teacher. As conflict boiled in India, he called on his followers to renounce violence and commit to service, freedom, and active nonviolent living. He soon led more than 100,000 Muslim men to join what became history’s first professional nonviolent army, calling themselves Khudai Khidmatgars, or Servants of God. He explained to his followers, “There is nothing surprising in a Muslim or a Pathan like me subscribing to the creed of nonviolence. It is not a new creed. It was followed fourteen hundred years ago by the Prophet all the time he was in Mecca, and it has since been followed by all those who wanted to throw off an oppressor’s yoke” (Easwaran, 1984, p. 103). Although Khan and his followers helped free India of colonial rule, they could not prevent the eventual breakup of the region into separate Hindu and Muslim states. Still, they contributed significantly to helping quell bloodshed at critical moments. In 1945, when violence spread to Punjab and local Muslims threatened the Hindu community, Khan called in ten thousand Khudai Khidmatgars, all Muslims themselves, to protect the Hindu and Sikh communities and restore peace to the city.

Khan’s authority with the Pathan people stemmed from his own courageous witness and strong leadership skills and, perhaps more important, his religious standing in the community. He used his moral authority as a respected Muslim leader to call on others to reject violence and engage in active nonviolence in the face of oppression and conflict. His followers formed a large movement that could intervene to help prevent violence and protect lives. In this way, he helped develop an active third side in the Peshawar valley.

Religious leaders can strengthen a third side for peace in conflict situations by using their moral authority within the community to help lead others away from violence and toward constructive conflict management. As respected voices in the community, they can lift up spiritual teachings that draw on the best of their own faith tradition and reach out to faith leaders in
other communities to strengthen ties between groups and counter interreligious violence. They can often serve as social and political motivators to wide constituencies throughout a society—constituencies with which they share a language, culture, and social reality. They can help mobilize their followers to more actively engage in peacemaking activities, while also representing grassroots concerns to governing authorities—acting as a bridge between decision makers and the broader community (Lederach, 1997). As respected leaders and people of faith, they can also engage in advocacy that may be risky to help address injustices and other root causes of conflict. In addition, religious leaders are often part of transnational faith networks, which include resources outside the context of the conflict that can be drawn on for constructive interventions—what might be called an “outer third side.”

To better understand the role of religious leaders and their followers when examining conflict situations and exploring potential resources for resolution, we might ask:

- Who are the prominent religious leaders in the community or society? Who are their followers? Are religious leaders or their followers actively engaged in the conflict or efforts to resolve it? If so, how?
- Are there particular leaders within the conflict using religion to fuel violence and division? If so, how? Who is their audience?
- How might religious leaders and faith communities help counter or limit the negative use of religion in the conflict? How might they contribute to more peaceful management or resolution of the situation?
- What external or transnational resources do local religious leaders and communities have access to or need that might contribute positively to helping mitigate and resolve the conflict?

**Religion as Social Institutions and Networks**

In Buddhism, the *sangha*, or community, is one of the three jewels of faith, a critical element along with Buddha (enlightenment) and dharma (doctrine or truth). The sangha, whether monastic or the broader Buddhist lay community, plays important roles in both the spiritual life of individual Buddhists and the social and political life of Buddhist societies. During the brutal regime of Pol Pot in Cambodia and during the war in Vietnam, the Buddhist sangha, represented through monasteries, temples, community organizations, and national networks, was often targeted because of its powerful social organizing role and the peaceful resistance it promoted among its members. In Cambodia and Vietnam, Buddhism expressed through its institutions and social structures became a force of resistance to the war and violence raging throughout the country.
The sangha, though affected heavily by the conflict, represented a social space that sought to transcend divisions and violence in the country. Thousands of monks and lay Buddhists sought refuge in the sangha and resisted the war through personal witness and acts of civil disobedience. In addition, Buddhist networks helped maintain family and community ties across the lines of conflict and provided a link outside the country to the international community. Buddhists resisting the war in Vietnam connected with Buddhist and other civil society groups in the United States to undertake humanitarian and antiwar campaigns. Buddhists in Cambodia embarked on long peace marches that drew international attention and mobilized people across the country. In the aftermath of the wars in Vietnam and Cambodia, as state structures had to be rebuilt and transformed, Buddhist organizations stepped in to lead economic and social reconstruction programs. In the absence of functioning government and social services, the Buddhist sangha organized to provide humanitarian aid, educate children, support community development, reunite families, care for widows and orphans, and create opportunities for reconciliation and healing to rebuild their societies. These efforts helped reweave social networks destroyed by the war, revive local economies, and build a community base for lasting peace between former enemies. In this way, religion as a set of social institutions and networks surrounding a conflict can be part of and help mobilize a strong third side for peace.

While churches, mosques, and temples have periodically been the site of violence during conflicts, more often they have provided refuge and become sites for humanitarian efforts and peacemaking initiatives. Faith communities provide an established network for mobilizing civil society to respond to conflict—networks that often may cross the lines of the dispute and create opportunities for bridging divisions. In most conflict situations, local religious groups will have an awareness of the dispute early on as it affects the communities they serve. Religious networks may provide early warnings of escalating conflict to warn others of danger and extend regionally and internationally to help mobilize outside attention and resources. They are also often some of the first responders to crises, working to help those affected by the conflict and mobilize others in the community to respond. Religious organizations also often play an important advocacy role, bringing moral arguments into public policy debates and speaking out for underrepresented or underserved groups (e.g., poor, immigrant, and marginalized communities).

In many ways, religion as a social organizer is even more durable as part of the third side than the state is, giving it significant lasting power throughout conflicts. Religion helped organize society through its institutions and structures long before the rise of the nation-state, and it
continues to be a powerful force for organizing communities within and across nations. During conflicts, particularly where divisions are drawn on faith lines, religious institutions are often directly affected and challenged to respond in some way. When conflict leads to the breakdown or collapse of the state and civic organizations, often religious structures and networks survive, becoming important arenas within the third side for reconstruction and reconciliation efforts.

Like other ways in which religion functions in society, religious institutions and networks can and have been used for ill as well as good. Thus, understanding their role in particular situations is important. Questions to consider include these:

- What religious institutions, organizations, and social structures operate actively within the community or society? What parts of the population do they serve or engage?
- Are there particular faith-based organizations and institutions that relate directly to the conflict, the parties involved, or their political agendas? Are their religious institutions and structures directly affected by the conflict?
- If certain religious institutions and faith-based groups are directly involved in contributing to the conflict in some way, what is their role, and how might their impact be mitigated or reduced?
- Are there faith-based organizations or religious institutions already engaged or that might be tapped in peacemaking and conflict resolution initiatives? What roles are they playing? How might their efforts be supported, strengthened, or expanded?

**Religion as Identity**

Perhaps nowhere else are the connections among religion, identity, and conflict more volatile than in the Middle East. The lines separating Jews, Muslims, and Christians are drawn deeply in societies in the region and who you are is very much defined by your religious group. Religious narratives tell the history of the region, its land and peoples, and create a frame for explaining where one fits in the world and in relation to ongoing conflicts in the region. National and religious identities overlap, feed into each other, and sometimes conflict. Mixing with those of other faiths can be difficult, shunned, even dangerous. It is difficult to escape religion in defining identity in the Middle East, and perhaps more difficult to express religious identity in ways that bridge rather than deepen the divides. Yet in the midst of ongoing violence, interfaith dialogue efforts among Jews, Muslims, and Christians have continued. Mohammed Abu-Nimer, a conflict resolution
scholar and practitioner who leads interfaith dialogue in the Middle East, has noted that often the experience of interfaith dialogue is not as much about learning and understanding others’ religious traditions as it is about deepening the exploration of one’s own faith. Through interfaith dialogue, individuals gain a deeper understanding of their own religious identity and how it shapes their worldview and behavior toward others. Respect and tolerance grow for people of different traditions as personal relationships develop and barriers of misunderstanding are broken down.

Religious identity forms from a mixture of beliefs and values, the influence of leaders and sense of belonging to a community, and membership in or relationship to religious institutions and networks. It thus intersects with the other three ways in which religion functions on the third side and includes both inner and outer third-side influences. Religion is only one identity factor that contributes to a sense of self and helps define individuals and groups in society; however, it can be a particularly powerful influence in moving people toward or away from violent conflict. Because religion provides answers to the most fundamental questions of life for many people, religious identity can often overcome other identity factors in making difficult decisions. Religious identity can also draw the most extreme lines between in- and out-groups: sacred and profane, human and divine, saved and unsaved, good and evil. Because it can pose such stark divisions, it does have a high potential for contributing to the formation of what Herb Kelman (1987) calls zero-sum identities: collective identities that rely on the negation of other groups to increase their own validity and present particular challenges to conflict resolution efforts. Lines of religious identity are unfortunately often exploited by those engaged in conflict because they can be so powerful.

Religious identity can also take a different form. When being faithful means extending compassion, respect, tolerance, and justice to others, one’s religious identity can lead people to contribute to preventing violence and building peace. When religious diversity is respected and celebrated as something that strengthens rather than threatens one’s own faith experience, religious identity becomes not a zero-sum force but an opening for shared understanding and cooperation. Religious identity can also provide an access point for connecting with parties in conflict to build trust and open dialogue. In this sense, religious identity can contribute to what has been called faith-based diplomacy: conflict resolution strategies that integrate faith into diplomacy and seek to tap into religious identities as tools for promoting peace and reconciliation (Johnston, 2003).

Including an examination of religious identity within conflict analysis can help make sense of underlying dynamics beyond rational-based needs and interests that may be driving a conflict and can suggest unique avenues
for engaging people toward more constructive ends. Questions to consider in conflict situations include these:

- How religious is the society? Is religious identity a significant factor in the personal sense of self and group belonging for those engaged in the conflict? For the surrounding community?

- Is the conflict drawn along lines of religious identity? Are all religious groups in the society involved, or are there groups that are outliers or somehow bridge the divisions? Are there divisions along other identity lines as well? How do the different identity factors relate to each other and to the conflict?

- How does religious identity relate to the root causes of the conflict? How should these religious identity factors be taken into account in developing conflict resolution strategies?

- Are there shared religious identities that bridge the groups in conflict? How might shared group identities be tapped in the service of peaceful resolution of the conflict?

**Integrating Religion into Conflict Resolution**

These questions on religious identity, religious beliefs and values, leaders and followers, and social institutions and networks offer a basic starting point for incorporating religion into conflict and conflict resolution analysis. They are presented together here as a framework for analysis that peace practitioners, policymakers, and students of conflict resolution might use when seeking to understand the role of religion in particular conflicts and the potential for faith-based peacemaking. Such questions might be incorporated into a broader conflict analysis and used when working to develop constructive conflict prevention or response policies or programs that can support or strengthen the third side.

Although these questions are only a beginning, systematically asking them may help bring to light both negative and positive roles religion is playing in conflict situations and provoke deeper analysis into ways of reducing the destructive influences and enhancing the constructive third-side potential of religion. Asking these questions may help identify key religious actors that could be supported or engaged in peacemaking activities with resources and technical support. It may help those engaged in government or secular peacemaking efforts better understand potential obstacles they might face and opportunities they may have overlooked. It might also suggest whether faith-based diplomacy would be worthwhile and help identify the potential problems that might arise from such efforts. Ultimately, finding practical ways of integrating religion more effectively into our analysis and conflict resolution efforts will lay the basis for
developing stronger theory to help explain the role of religious dynamics and more successful practice to support the peaceful prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS AND ACTION

Religion can play both positive and negative roles in situations of conflict. The following questions provide a starting point for better understanding religion’s role in any context, mitigating against the destructive manipulation of religion, and empowering constructive faith resources to manage and resolve disputes peacefully. This framework for analysis is offered as an initial reference point to be adapted and expanded as it is applied to particular situations.

Religion as Beliefs and Values

• What are the most salient religious traditions or belief systems at work in the society or community? What is the history of religious teachings in the community?
• How overtly are religious values and teachings expressed by those involved in the conflict and in the surrounding community? Even if beliefs and values are not overtly expressed, how do they appear to influence the decisions and behavior of those in the conflict of the surrounding community?
• Does the conflict include a religious or spiritual narrative? Are specific religious teachings or narratives particularly relevant to the conflict? If so, do they serve to escalate or mitigate the conflict?
• What religious values and beliefs respected in the society encourage more constructive conflict management? Are there religious narratives or teachings that might help build bridges between the parties, move them away from violence, or provide a framework for peaceful settlement?

Religion as Leaders and Followers

• Who are the prominent religious leaders in the community or society? Who are their followers? Are religious leaders or their followers actively engaged in the conflict or efforts to resolve it? If so, how?

(continued)
• Are particular leaders within the conflict using religion to fuel violence and division? If so, how? Who is their audience?
• How might religious leaders and faith communities help counter or limit the negative use of religion in the conflict? How might they contribute to more peaceful management or resolution of the situation?
• What external or transnational resources do local religious leaders and communities have access to or need that might contribute positively to helping mitigate and resolve the conflict?

Religion as Social Institution and Networks

• What religious institutions, organizations, and social structures operate actively within the community or society? What parts of the population do they serve or engage?
• Are there particular faith-based organizations and institutions that relate directly to the conflict, the parties involved, or their political agendas? Are their religious institutions and structures directly affected by the conflict?
• If certain religious institutions and faith-based groups are directly involved in contributing to the conflict in some way, what is their role, and how might their impact be mitigated or reduced?
• Are there faith-based organizations or religious institutions already engaged or that might be tapped in peacemaking and conflict resolution initiatives? What roles are they playing? How might their efforts be supported, strengthened, or expanded?

Religion as Identity

• How religious is the society? Is religious identity a significant factor in personal sense of self and group belonging for those engaged in the conflict? For the surrounding community?
• Is the conflict drawn along lines of religious identity? Are all religious groups in the society involved, or are there groups that are outliers or somehow bridge the divisions? Are there divisions along other identity lines as well? How do the different identity factors relate to each other and to the conflict?
• How does religious identity relate to the root causes of the conflict? How should these religious identity factors be taken into account in developing conflict resolution strategies?
• Are there shared religious identities that bridge the groups in conflict? How might shared group identities be tapped in the service of peaceful resolution of the conflict?

CHALLENGES TO A RELIGIOUS THIRD SIDE

Strengthening religion’s role as part of a strong third side for peace ultimately must include both supporting conditions that contribute to faith-based peacemaking and reducing the conditions that give rise to violent religious extremism. While there will rarely be clear and definitive answers as to whether religion’s role in a conflict situation is wholly positive or negative, certain factors may contribute to religion being more or less susceptible to manipulation for destructive purposes. Pluralist societies where social, economic, and political ties extend across and help link different religious communities may be less prone to religiously motivated violence. An active culture of interfaith communication and cooperation can provide a strong counter to attempts to draw conflict along religious lines. The promotion of religious tolerance and respect for diversity by faith leaders, as well as social, legal, and political institutions, can go far in preventing violence. A clear separation of church and state also appears to help reduce the space for manipulating religion for political purposes (though experiments in more democratic Islamic political systems may find new ways of merging religion and politics while still balancing tensions).

Ultimately religion is a living human expression that must respond and adapt to ongoing processes of human change. When change sparks conflict or poses actual or perceived threats to individuals and communities, they can adapt new ways of managing a constructive relationship between their faith and the world, or they can react and resist with negative force.

Extremist Fundamentalism

The recent growth in extremist fundamentalism across many religious traditions represents a powerful negative reaction to rapid modernization and the secularization of many societies over the past fifty years. Fundamentalism is not unique to any one religious tradition, although...
recent global attention has focused on the rise of extremist Islamist groups. In fact, the term *fundamentalist* was first used in the 1920s by conservative evangelical Protestants in the United States who sought to protect their faith from evolutionists. Fundamentalist movements can now be found across the world’s major faith traditions and are often a factor in intrareligious conflicts within traditions. They usually claim to offer a return to a core or original form or tradition of the religion, and often reject all other expressions as illegitimate or unfaithful. At their most extreme, they are characterized by a rejection of modernization and secularization; strong, sometimes glorified leadership; rigid, often repressive social rules; apocalyptic predictions; and high intolerance toward outsiders and moderates of their own faith tradition. Fundamentalist movements often have both a religious and a political agenda that is designed to thwart the threats they perceive from modernization. While fundamentalists claim to be preserving and reviving the core truths of their religious tradition, in reality they usually pick and choose language from sacred texts and manipulate teachings to serve a particular agenda. While they claim to be returning to the fundamentals of their faith, in fact they are reacting to a changing world around them (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, 2003).

Fundamentalism itself may not be a problem: people do need ways of coping with the rapid changes of globalization and modern life, and some forms of fundamentalism can serve individuals and communities in their search for meaning and security amid a world of uncertainty. If fundamentalism remains nonviolent in its approach to other groups and provides space for coexistence, if not full tolerance, with other beliefs, then it can be part of the ebb and flow of a colorful and ever-changing religious landscape that includes enormous diversity both across and within the world’s faith traditions. However, fundamentalist movements clearly become dangerous to human relations when they use religion to deny the rights of others, justify violence, and adopt extremist militant agendas. In this way a critical distinction is needed between fundamentalism and extremist or violent fundamentalism. This distinction is important to avoid labeling all fundamentalists as violent and to understand clearly the relationship between extremist religious agendas and violent conflict.

Why are some drawn to fundamentalist expressions of religion and even extremist fundamentalism? The rapid pace of modernization and globalization can lead to uncertainty and fear about the future for individuals and groups. In the context of unsettling global change, old social systems—traditions, relationships, power structures, even beliefs and values—are challenged and sometimes discarded for new ways. For some, such change offers new freedoms and opportunities, but for others, the change can be unsettling and threatening. Basic human needs for predictability and
belonging may be shaken. A fundamentalist agenda that proposes a simpler way of understanding a complex and constantly changing world, one that offers the appeal of returning to and defending a tradition that may otherwise be lost, can offer a way of regaining a sense of control and belonging. When threatened, people often resort to simpler boundaries of identity and in-group and out-group constructs, and fundamentalism can feel like a refuge against a threatening world. In addition, as Almond, Appleby, and Sivan (2003) explain, demographic, economic, political, international, and historical contexts play an important role in the growth or fall of fundamentalist movements. In situations of rising conflict, weak government, economic deprivation, or international threats, fundamentalist movements may gain greater appeal as a source of perceived security or protection from an outside threat. Most fundamentalist groups recruit from the economic and politically marginalized groups in society (though this may not be true for leadership), and international events, such as the attacks of 9/11 and the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan that followed, can have a direct impact on the appeal of extremist fundamentalism. The roles of leaders and networks within fundamentalist movements, as within any other religious group, can also play a role in particular times and places.

Almond, Appleby, and Sivan (2003) suggest that fundamentalist groups have a significantly higher risk of becoming violent because they “are distinct from other religious movements in that they are inherently interactive, reactive, and oppositional—that is, they are inexorably drawn to some form of antagonistic engagement with the world outside the enclave” (p. 218). They should, then, demand a higher proportion of our attention if we hope to reduce the potential for religiously motivated violence. As Jewish rabbi and religious peace builder Marc Gopin (2009) explains, the power of religion as a motivator of human emotion and behavior—beyond rational calculation—coupled with the cycles of fear and anger that accompany escalating conflict situations means that “religious zealots need not be anywhere near the majority to catalyze violence . . . This is why religion can affect conflict all out of proportion to the actual number of religious extremists” (p. 13).

Mitigating against extremist fundamentalism is not easy and appears to be even more difficult in the current international context, as extremist fundamentalism has made a new rise on the global agenda in some of the major faith traditions, including Christianity and Islam. Restraining the violence of religious extremists requires both engaged effort from more moderate members of the same faith tradition to open dialogue, reduce intrareligious conflict, and constructively manage perceived threats from modernization, as well as secular approaches that can address underlying economic, social, and political problems. These religious and secular
efforts at violence reduction and prevention also need to better understand and engage each other to be effective. Gopin advocates a much stronger role for religious peace builders in the realm of global peace and security as a counter to religious militancy and extremism. While fundamentalism may appear to be a purely irrational and extremist reaction to modernization, the very real problems of global economic and power disparities, marginalization, and environmental and cultural degradation contribute to the appeal of extreme religious responses and need to be directly addressed.

**Prevention and Reconciliation**

One final challenge worth considering is when, during a conflict cycle, religion might be more or less suited to contribute positively. While religious values, actors, institutions, and identity may be present throughout the duration of a conflict, their potential third-side contributions will not be the same at all points in time or under all circumstances. In some cases, religion may be perceived as such a volatile part of the problem that trying to incorporate it overtly into a solution would be like pouring fuel on a fire. In any case, choosing the right strategy at the right moment to maximize religious resources for peacemaking will no doubt be a challenge.

In Burundi, after hundreds of thousands were killed in interethnic violence, local Quaker communities teamed up with fellow Quakers from the United States to find ways of restoring relationships and breaking the cycle of conflict. The experience of decades of conflict led Burundian Quakers to recapture a largely unexplored religious testimony of peace and non-violence in their faith tradition and respond to the violence around them with innovative peacemaking initiatives. To help rebuild their country, they identified two particularly acute needs: dealing with the widespread trauma that they saw across all groups from years of ethnic violence and providing people with skills and training that would help them manage conflict without resort to violence in the future. They developed innovative workshops in trauma healing and alternatives to violence that brought Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa together, often for the first time in many communities. As their country struggles to stabilize a fragile peace, Burundian Quakers continue to train thousands of people across Burundi in the vital skills of rebuilding relationships and preventing future violence.

While many courageous religious leaders have acted in the midst of violent conflict to help save lives, speak out for peace, and bring an end to killing, the third-side roles often played by religion are most effective when seized before a conflict erupts into violence or to help restore relationships after war. In the midst of violent conflict, religiously motivated actors can play important roles as witnesses and protectors, even
as peacekeepers and by providing safe refuges, but their impact will likely be limited by the escalating dynamics of the conflict. Before violence erupts or when conflict deescalates, more space and opportunities are open for positive religious contributions to reconstructing societies and preventing a slide back into war. This is not unique to religion’s role; the space for constructive nonviolent conflict management is always greater in the pre- and postconflict phases, and conflict becomes much more difficult to handle after it has become deadly. Still, positive religious contributions in relation to beliefs and values, leadership, social networks, and identity may be most effective in the modes of prevention and reconciliation.

Religious actions can and should be helping to prevent deadly conflict by countering the negative use of religion to fuel conflict and promoting cooperation, tolerance, and respect for human dignity. As a case in point, many Muslim leaders across the world are speaking out more actively against the recent rise in attacks against civilians perpetrated by extremist groups claiming an Islamic mission. Working to reclaim the sacred space of Islam and engage Muslims globally in renouncing violence, they hope to constrain the negative use of their religion and reduce the number of recruits available for such missions in the future. In a similar way, religious leaders of all faiths can promote teachings that encourage interfaith tolerance and respect, help adherents manage conflict constructively, and reduce the potential for new cycles of religiously motivated violence. If disputes begin to escalate, religious leaders with standing in the community can step in to deter violence and help mediate a solution. Such prevention efforts by religious leaders have helped head off violent disputes and reduce bloodshed in many cases, but more attention to mobilizing religious and other peacemaking resources before violence erupts is urgently needed.

Following the experience of violent conflict, religion can also be a vital tool for restoring relationships and encouraging reconciliation among former combatants. Most religious traditions include teachings on forgiveness, reconciliation, or managing relations with former enemies. In many ways, faith-based efforts can go where secular reconstruction efforts cannot, into the deepest pain individuals have experienced with resources to help them find hope again. Religious institutions and structures often survive wars or state collapse when other social and government institutions break down. Faith networks, churches, temples, and mosques are often the first to begin picking up the pieces after war and will remain as part of the communities long after humanitarian workers and international aid have moved on. More sustained support for religiously based peace-building efforts as a conflict recedes from the headlines is often needed.
While religion can function throughout a conflict cycle in both negative and positive ways, greater study is needed into how religiously motivated peace building can be effective in preventive efforts to avert violence and restore relationships in the aftermath of war.

CONCLUSION

Including religion more thoroughly and effectively in conflict resolution theory and practice will require considerably more research and practical learning. Fortunately, academics, policymakers, practitioners, and people of faith themselves are increasingly exploring the role religion plays in conflict and its peaceful management. While theories to explain concepts like faith-based diplomacy and religious peacemaking have yet to be clearly established, the practical experience of religion as both a negative and positive force in human relations is beginning to be more widely documented and acknowledged. Significant gaps and challenges remain, but the growing number of people engaging the nexus of religion, conflict, and conflict resolution offers reason for hope that faith will become a more integrated part of the search for solutions to human problems.

The questions posed in this chapter provide one starting point for better understanding the religious dynamics at play in conflict situations and for identifying opportunities to support religious contributions to peace. The hope is that they will serve as a practical tool for students of conflict resolution, practitioners, and policymakers to stimulate new insights, prompt new questions, and improve approaches to addressing conflict. In the meantime, people of faith have their own responsibility to promote tolerance and cooperative values within their communities; build interfaith connections and open dialogue with the secular world; and lift up teachings, leaders, and institutions that provide resources for constructive conflict management in their own tradition. By combining our efforts, we may be able to reduce the impact of those who would use religion to justify violence and strengthen religion’s third-side potential for building peace.

References


