CONTENTS

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Religion in World Affairs

Its Role in Conflict and Peace

Summary

- No major religion has been exempt from complicity in violent conflict. Yet we need to beware of an almost universal propensity to oversimplify the role that religion plays in international affairs. Religion is not usually the sole or even primary cause of conflict.

- With so much emphasis on religion as a source of conflict, the role of religion as a force in peacemaking is usually overlooked.

- Religious affiliation and conviction often motivates religious communities to advocate particular peace-related government policies. Religious communities also directly oppose repression and promote peace and reconciliation.

- Religious leaders and institutions can mediate in conflict situations, serve as a communication link between opposing sides, and provide training in peacemaking methodologies. This form of religious peacemaking garners less public attention but is growing in importance.

- Interfaith dialogue is another form of religious peacemaking. Rather than seeking to resolve a particular conflict, it aims to defuse interfaith tensions that may cause future conflict or derive from previous conflict. Interfaith dialogue is expanding even in places where interreligious tensions are highest. Not infrequently, the most contentious interfaith relationships can provide the context for the most meaningful and productive exchanges.

- Given religion's importance as both a source of international conflict and a resource for peacemaking, it is regrettable that the U.S. government is so ill equipped to handle religious issues and relate to religious actors. If the U.S. government is to insert itself into international conflicts or build deeper and more productive relationships with countries around the world, it needs to devise a better strategy to effectively and respectfully engage with the religious realm.

In recent decades, religion has assumed unusual prominence in international affairs. A recent article in *The Economist* asserts that, if there ever was a global drift toward secu-

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larism, it has been halted and probably reversed.[1] In the article, Philip Jenkins, a noted scholar from Pennsylvania State University, predicts that when historians look back at this century they will see religion as "the prime animating and destructive force in human affairs, guiding attitudes to political liberty and obligation, concepts of nationhood and, of course, conflicts and wars." The article then cites statistics from a public opinion survey in Nigeria demonstrating that Nigerians believe religion to be more central to their identity than nationality. Nigerians are thus more likely to identify themselves first and foremost as Christians or Muslims rather than as Nigerians. The horrendous events of September 11, the conflagration in Iraq, and the aggressive assertiveness of quasi-theocratic Iran only confirm in the popular mind that religion lies behind much of contemporary international conflict.

Religion and Conflict

Throughout the world, no major religion is exempt from complicity in violent conflict. Religious conviction certainly was one of the motivations for the September 11 attacks and other violent actions by Muslim extremists in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Some Buddhist monks assert an exclusively Buddhist identity for Sri Lanka, fanning the flames of conflict there. Some Christian and Muslim leaders from former Yugoslavia saw themselves as protecting their faiths when they defended violence against the opposing faith communities in the Balkan wars.

Yet we need to beware of an almost universal propensity to oversimplify the role that religion plays in international affairs. Iran's international assertiveness is as much due to Iranian-Persian nationalism as it is to the dictates of Shiite clerics. The international policies that Iran's clerics adopt rarely are driven by theological precepts or religious doctrine, but rather political power calculations and a desire to preserve the quasi-theocratic status quo. Similarly, in Iraq, conflict between Sunnis and Shiites rarely stems from differences over religious doctrine and practice, but rather from historical and contemporary competition for state power. Sunni and Shiite identities are as much ethnic as religious, and intergroup relations between the two are very similar, though more violent, than relations between Walloons and Flemish in Belgium or between English and French in Canada, where language and culture rather than religious belief constitute the primary sources of division. Meanwhile, the Kurds—the third principal constituent community in Iraq—are ethnically based. Most Kurds are also Sunni Muslims. This is not to suggest that religious identity is synonymous with ethnic identity, as in many circumstances religious identity implies explicitly religious behavior and belief. But in many cases the lines between ethnic and religious identities become so blurred that parsing them to assign blame for violence is difficult if not impossible. Religious identity has often been used to mobilize one side against the other, as has happened in Iraq, Sudan, and elsewhere; populations have responded to calls to defend one's faith community. But to describe many such conflicts as rooted in religious differences or to imply that theological or doctrinal differences are the principal causes of conflict is to seriously oversimplify and misrepresent a complex situation.

The decades-long civil war in Sudan is often described as a religious conflict between Muslims and Christians, with the north being predominantly Muslim and the south predominantly Christian or animist. There is some truth to this characterization, particularly after 1989, when an Islamic fundamentalist government came to power in Khartoum with an agenda to Islamicize all of Sudan. But the differences between north and south go well beyond religion and rarely are the disagreements religious or theological in character. Northerners speak Arabic and want Arabic to be Sudan's national language. Southerners generally speak Arabic only as a second or third language, if at all, and prefer English as the lingua franca. Northerners are more likely to identify with the Arab world, whereas southerners tend to identify themselves as Africans. Thus, racial identity is fundamental

to the division between north and south. The religious division between Christian and Muslim happens to overlap with these racial, ethnic, and geographical divisions, but the conflict's divide has not been confined to or even dominated by religion. British colonial policy also reinforced the divisions between north and south, and over the past twenty years Christians have fought Christians in the south and Muslims have fought Muslims in Darfur.

In Nigeria, religion is divisive and a factor in conflict, but it is often exaggerated as the cause of conflict. The popular press asserts that tens of thousands of Nigerians have died in religious warfare over the last decade. True, many died, both Christians and Muslims, in riots over Danish cartoons depicting Mohammed. Others were killed when Christians opposed extending the authority of sharia courts in several northern states. But the causes of many of the killings have not been exclusively religious. In places like Kaduna and Plateau State, conflicts described as religious have been more complicated than that; the causes also include the placing of markets, economic competition, occupational differences, the ethnic identity of government officials, respect for traditional leaders, and competition between migrants and indigenous populations.[2]

In both Somalia and Afghanistan, one source of the conflicts is over which brand of Islam will prevail. But in both cases clan and ethnic differences define the composition of the forces in conflict as much as religious differences do. In the Arab-Israeli conflict, the management of and access to religious sites are sources of serious disagreement and extreme religious groups—both Jewish and Muslim—exacerbate the problem. But religion is not the principal factor underlying the conflict; rather, conflict is principally over control of land and state sovereignty.

All of these cases demonstrate that while religion is an important factor in conflict, often marking identity differences, motivating conflict, and justifying violence, religion is not usually the sole or primary cause of conflict. The reality is that religion becomes intertwined with a range of causal factors—economic, political, and social—that define, propel, and sustain conflict. Certainly, religious disagreements must be addressed alongside these economic, political, and social sources to build lasting reconciliation. Fortunately, many of the avenues to ameliorate religious violence lie within the religious realm itself.

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Religious Activism to Promote Peace with Justice

The public perception prevails that religion is a principal source of international conflict, but the role of religion as a force in peacemaking is usually overlooked. The United States became heavily engaged in trying to bring peace to Sudan because evangelical Christians pressured the Bush administration to deepen its engagement. Evangelical concern was based initially on an oversimplified view of the conflict, that an Islamic fundamentalist government was forcing Christians and animists in southern Sudan to convert to Islam. As evangelicals mobilized, they developed a more nuanced and authentic understanding of the conflict. Jews have joined Christians and others in bringing public attention to the crisis in Darfur because widespread slaughter there has been viewed as genocide, provoking memories of the Holocaust.

Religious communities have also directly opposed repression and promoted peace and reconciliation. Churches in Eastern Europe mobilized opposition to Soviet occupation. More famously, clergymen Desmond Tutu, Frank Chikane, and Beyers Naude in South Africa worked to break the bonds of apartheid. This effort entailed not only civil disobedience and advocacy for international sanctions against South Africa, but also shaming white South African Christians into recognizing that their effort to justify apartheid contradicted biblical teachings. The Dutch Reformed Church—sometimes described as "the Nationalist Party at prayer"—did not fully accept that argument until after the government aban-

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doned apartheid, but many whites did become uncomfortable with the structures they had devised and imposed.

More recently, the civil disobedience of Buddhist monks in Burma (Myanmar) dramatically illustrated how religion could motivate the promotion of human rights and peace. In addition to the street demonstrations that garnered so much national and international attention, the monks' refusal to accept alms from members of the military was a particularly poignant declaration that the regime's policies and actions violated Buddhism's fundamental precepts. The regime recognized that the demonstrations generated much greater international attention and domestic pressure than would have been the case if they had been exclusively secular. The monks' moral authority and respect that others have for them, the symbolic resources they drew upon, their chants for compassion, and their nonviolent approach all contributed to a deeply persuasive message and image. The largely religious leadership of the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1960s carried similar moral weight and authority.

According to Douglas Johnston, in promoting peace and reconciliation, religious leaders and organizations offer credibility as trusted institutions; a respected set of values; moral warrants to oppose injustice; unique leverage for promoting reconciliation among conflicting parties; capability to mobilize community, nation, and international support for a peace process; and a sense of calling that often inspires perseverance in the face of major and otherwise debilitating obstacles.[3]

Religious Mediation and Facilitation

Religious leaders and institutions can be mediators in conflict situations, serve as a communication link between opposing sides, and provide training in peacemaking methodologies. In the summer of 2001, Rabbi Menachem Froman, chief rabbi of the Tekoa settlement in the West Bank, approached the United States Institute of Peace and indicated that one of the two chief rabbis of Israel, Bakshi Doron, and the chief Palestinian sheikh, Talal Sidr, wanted to come to the Institute to sign a joint declaration for religious peace between Israel and Palestine. While the Institute welcomed this initiative, it did not turn out to be feasible, largely because of visa problems that Sidr encountered. But then Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey became involved and in January 2002 helped organize a large conference in Alexandria, Egypt for many of the most highly placed Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders from Israel and Palestine. The participants signed a declaration of religious peace that became known as the Alexandria Declaration. The Alexandria process has continued since then, with regular interfaith meetings of religious leaders held in Jerusalem, guided by Canon Andrew White of the Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East (FRRME), Rabbi Michael Melchior, and, until his death, Sheikh Talal Sidr. The Institute has been the principal financial backer of the Alexandria process since it began. With financial support from the Institute and other sources, Rabbi Melchior has also established centers in Israel and Gaza to promote interfaith dialogue more broadly in Israel and Palestine.

Recently, under the leadership of Rabbi David Rosen and Muslim and Christian leaders in Israel and Palestine, a new interfaith organization has been launched with a similar mission to that the Alexandria process, namely, to provide a religious track to what hopefully will be a political track to promote peace in the Middle East. Before the Annapolis peace conference in November 2007, this Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land sent a delegation to Washington consisting of the highest-ranking Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders in the Holy Land to reinforce the message that religious leaders in Israel and Palestine are committed to a serious peace process. They agreed upon a six-point plan to use their positions of leadership "to prevent religion being used as a source of conflict, and to serve the goals of a just and comprehensive peace and reconciliation."

Rabbi Froman has reached across the typical lines of religious and ethnic division to communicate with Hamas. When Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin (who was killed in 2004) was incarcerated in an Israeli prison, Froman visited him frequently, and the two men formed a bond due to their shared religiosity despite their adherence to different traditions. Before Yasser Arafat's death, Froman regularly visited his offices in Ramallah carrying messages between him and the Israeli government. With Hamas's rise to power in Gaza, Froman has contacted the new leadership and offered to establish lines of communication between Hamas and the Israelis, an offer that the Israelis have not yet taken up.

For the past five years the Institute also has partnered with a remarkable pair of religious peacemakers in Nigeria, the Reverend James Wuye and Imam Mohammed Ashafa of the Interfaith Mediation Center. Remarkably, roughly simultaneous epiphanies transformed the pastor and imam from religious warriors to religious peacemakers. They had been engaged in the violent struggle between Christians and Muslims in Kaduna, Nigeria before they committed their lives to turning religious conflict into peace and reconciliation. Joint activities between the Institute and the Interfaith Mediation Center have included training for young Nigerian religious leaders in peacemaking techniques; sponsoring a religious summit for top Muslim and Christian leaders in Nigeria to combat violence during Nigeria's 2007 elections; and efforts to establish a strong interfaith council in Nigeria that includes Christian and Muslim leaders. Their work brought peace mediations to two different parts of Plateau State, where thousands have died in fighting between Christians and Muslims. In Yelwa-Nshar, where over 1,000 villagers were slaughtered in May 2004, the pastor, imam, and author of this paper successfully mediated a peace agreement that ended violence and resulted in a compact to promote reconciliation and the resolution of contentious issues between Christians and Muslims. The peacemaking methodology drew from Western conflict-resolution techniques as well as traditional Nigerian approaches, but religious components were also central. These included using scripture, with both pastor and imam quoting both the Bible and the Quran, along with exhortation based on religious principles. In 2008 the Institute will assist the pastor and imam as they travel to other African countries to share their peacemaking methodologies with religious peacemakers in those countries. In addition the Institute will finance the production of a DVD illustrating these methodologies so that prospective peacemakers in Africa and beyond can benefit from the successes that the pastor and imam have achieved.

In Sudan, Christian-Muslim relations remain tense despite the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in 2005 to end the north-south war. With assistance from the Institute, the Sudan Inter Religious Council (SIRC), our partner organization in Sudan, has organized high-level meetings between Muslim and Christian leaders. It also has established local interfaith peace committees where Sudan faces its most volatile intergroup relations. In 2008, SIRC will focus on strengthening interfaith peace committees in Darfur, where the tensions are most acute.

In 2005, the Institute, along with Catholic University and the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, cohosted a visit by a delegation of nine religious leaders from Iran, including seven Muslims, one Christian, and one Jew. A week of meetings with U.S. religious and secular leaders opened up deeper understanding between the Iranians and Americans. As the week progressed, it became evident that the Iranians were much more comfortable discussing sensitive issues with Americans when the discussions took place in a religious context. The Iranian delegation refused to visit congressional offices to meet with members of Congress, but when a meeting was relocated to a townhouse owned by the National Prayer Breakfast, the Iranians did not hesitate to meet with several members of the House and the Senate, where they discussed some of the most divisive issues that make U.S.-Iran relations so conflicted.

Building on this insight, the Institute decided to send a delegation of American Muslim specialists on Islamic peacemaking to Iran to meet with their Iranian counterparts. This trip, organized by the Salaam Institute, took place in October 2007. Members of the delegation gained valuable insights into Iranian society and Iran's intellectual and religious

life. Doors were opened to them because they were Muslims and their Iranian counterparts were enormously grateful for the visit. They were fascinated to be able to relate to religious brethren and to learn that Islam thrives in the United States. The Institute and the Salaam Institute plan to invite a return delegation of Iranian specialists on Islamic peacemaking to the United States in 2008.

The Institute's partner working in the religious realm in Iraq is Canon Andrew White of FRRME. After helping to found the interfaith Iraqi Institute of Peace in Baghdad with Institute support and partnership, White helped organize the Iraqi Inter-Religious Congress (IIRC). In 2007 the IIRC brought together a cross section of high-level Sunni, Shiite, and Christian leaders who committed themselves to promoting peace in Iraq. After meetings held between Sunni clerics and advisers to Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, a delegation of Sunni clerics met with the ayatollah in November 2007. Following that meeting Sistani issued a fatwa condemning violence against all Iraqis and urged Shiites to make special effort to protect Sunnis. This breakthrough occurred because the approach was religious and despite the fact that an Anglican priest was the initiator.

Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue is another form of religious peacemaking. Rather than seeking to resolve a particular conflict, it aims to defuse interfaith tensions that may cause future conflict or derive from previous conflict. Shortly after September 11, when tensions worldwide were particularly high between Muslims on one side and Christians and Jews on the other, the Institute, focusing on the United States and Europe, organized a series of interfaith dialogues to generate lessons about how to defuse interfaith tensions. These lessons are summarized in *Building Interreligious Trust in a Climate of Fear: An Abrahamic Trialogue.*[4] This report was followed by an edited volume, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding,*[5] which drew on cases from the Balkans, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and elsewhere to extract lessons about how to conduct effective interfaith dialogue. The Institute will soon offer an online course about interfaith dialogue on its Web site. Other Institute publications have provided guidance about how to evaluate the success of interfaith dialogue[6] and how a religious community can learn about the faiths of other religious communities in educational institutions.[7]

The Union for Reform Judaism and the Islamic Society of North American recently cooperated to produce curriculum material for Jewish-Muslim dialogue. The program, entitled *The Children of Abraham: Jews and Muslims in Conversation,* addresses scripture, theology, ethical principles, and diversity within the two traditions. The material also addresses sensitive issues at the heart of disputes between the global Jewish and Muslim communities, including the status of Jerusalem, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism.[8]

In 2007, 138 Muslim scholars, clerics, and intellectuals gathered in Amman, Jordan, and issued "A Common Word Between Us and You," a statement that declared common ground between Christianity and Islam. The signatories to this message came from every denomination and school of thought in Islam. Every major Islamic country or region in the world also was represented in this message. The declaration cites scriptural parallels between the two faiths and the many similarities in their core teachings. A large group of Christian scholars and clergy signed a response prepared at Yale Divinity School expressing appreciation for the Muslim declaration and concurring with its central assertions. The Vatican also issued a positive response and invited some of the Muslim signatories to meet with the Pope.[9] This exchange underscored what is so often forgotten in these times of Christian-Muslim tension, namely, the similarities between the two faiths.

Unity in Diversity: Interfaith Dialogue in the Middle East, published recently by the Institute's press,[10] demonstrates that interfaith dialogue is an expanding enterprise even where interreligious tensions are the greatest, as in Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, and Egypt. The research findings also demonstrate the extent to which interfaith dialogue needs to be

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tailored to the particular religious and political context in which it is occurring. One particularly sensitive issue in the Israeli-Palestinian context is the asymmetry of power among the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities and the need to ensure that Palestinian participants play an equal role to Jews in the conception, organization, and implementation of an interfaith dialogue process.

Not infrequently the most contentious interfaith relationships can turn out to have the most meaningful and productive exchanges. In 2005 the embassy of Saudi Arabia asked the Institute to host five Muslim scholars from Saudi Arabia for a week of religious discussions in Washington. The Institute accepted on the condition that it fully controlled whom the Saudis would meet and what the agendas for the discussions would be. One day was devoted to meeting with Muslim counterparts, another day to meeting with Christian clergy and theologians, and a third day to meeting with Jewish leaders, primarily orthodox rabbis. By far the most productive meeting was that held between the Saudis and the Jewish leaders. Unlike the Christians and the Muslims, who principally sought to establish their common humanity with the Saudis, the Jewish leaders and Saudi scholars addressed the tough issues. The Jewish leaders asked the Saudis if they could accept the existence of a Jewish state in the Middle East. The Saudis in return wanted to know if they could be critical of the policies of Israel without being accused of anti-Semitism. Each side spoke to the other with firmness and respect, and an atmosphere of civility prevailed, enabling the participants to address the issues honestly and forthrightly.

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U.S. Government Neglect of the Religious Dimension

Given the importance of religion as both a source of international conflict and a resource for peacemaking, it is regrettable that the U.S. government is so ill equipped to handle religious issues and relate to religious actors. An act of Congress in 1998 authorized the establishment of both the Office of Religious Freedom in the State Department and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. As a result, religious freedom is a significant issue on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. But religious conflict and religious peacemaking are too frequently neglected. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright addresses this issue in her recent book,[11] noting the shortcomings of the Clinton administration along with all other U.S. administrations in understanding and addressing religious factors. She recommends that all foreign-service officers be trained in relevant religious subjects and that specialists on religion be posted to U.S. embassies abroad.

A report published in 2007 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies echoes Albright's points.[12] The report concludes that

> U.S. government officials are often reluctant to address the issue of religion, whether in response to a secular U.S. legal and political tradition, in the context of America's Judeo-Christian image overseas, or simply because religion is perceived as too complicated or sensitive.... Current U.S. government frameworks for approaching religion are narrow, often because they approach religions as problematic or monolithic forces, overemphasize a terrorism-focused analysis of Islam, or marginalize religion as a peripheral humanitarian or cultural issue.... Institutional capacity to understand and approach religion is limited due to legal limitations, lack of religious expertise or training, minimal influence for religion-related initiatives, and a government primarily structured to engage with other official state actors.[13]

These and other analysts argue that if the U.S. government is to insert itself into international conflicts or build deeper and more productive relationships with countries around the world, it needs a better strategy to engage effectively and respectfully with the religious realm. As September 11 and the current situation in Iraq attest, failure to understand religious motivations and interpretations of political situations is ultimately to our nation's detriment. As has increasingly been learned in Iraq, however, engaging religious leaders can create tangible and positive results that contribute to peace and global security.

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Conclusion

In June 2007, reflecting a growing international awareness of the past neglect of religion, Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa, the president of the United Nations General Assembly, stated that "promoting a true dialogue among civilizations and religions is perhaps the most important political instrument that we can use to reach out across borders and build bridges of peace and hope."[14]

This report has sought to demonstrate the nature of the religious dimension of international conflict, which is sometimes neglected, often misunderstood, and frequently exaggerated. It has also illustrated how religious leaders have addressed conflict and injustices confronting their societies. In addition, religious leaders have employed a variety of peacemaking techniques, ranging from mediation and facilitation to interfaith dialogue, to address conflict around the globe and make the world a more peaceful place.

Notes

1. "In God's Name," *The Economist*, November 1, 2007.

2. David R. Smock, ed., *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking: When Religion Brings Peace, Not War,* USIP Peaceworks no. 55 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006), 17.

3. Douglas Johnston, "The Religious Dimension," unpublished paper, n.d., 3, based upon Johnston, ed. *Trumping Realpolitik: Faith-Based Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

4. Special Report 99 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2003).

5. David Smock, ed. (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007).

6. Renee Garfinkel, *What Works? Evaluating Interfaith Dialogue Programs,* Special Report 123 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2004).

7. David Smock, *Teaching about the Religious Other,* Special Report 143 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2005).

8. Union for Reform Judaism, URJ–Muslim Dialogue, available at http://urj.org/muslimdialogue/ (accessed January 15, 2008).

9. The original letter and the responses can be read at A Common Word, available at www.acommonword. com (accessed January 15, 2008).

10. Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Emily Welty, and Amal I. Khoury, *Unity in Diversity: Interfaith Dialogue in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007).

11. Madeleine Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

12. Liora Danan and Alice Hunt, *Mixed Blessings: U.S. Government Engagement with Religion in Conflict-Prone Settings* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007). Available at www. csis.org/media/csis/pubs/070820_religion.pdf (accessed January 19, 2008).

13. Danan and Hunt, *Mixed Blessings,* 3.

14. United Nations press release, June 13, 2007.