The Role of Religion in Peacebuilding

Introduction

The effort of peacebuilding requires partnership of institutions that bring together all dimensions of human experience. Integral approaches regard religion as one of the contributing institutions to social integration and harmony. To confirm the argument, a number of believers claim that political organizations cannot ignore the role of religion. Religion plays a central role in attitude and character formation. It is unfortunate that in the public sphere, the place where we debate public policy, is sometimes hostile to religion. Critics argue that religions are the source of conflicts and therefore they should not be included in the process of peacebuilding. Of course, this is not true.

The ultimate responsibility of peacebuilding requires a holistic framework of reflection considering the current trends of violence in Africa. Such a situation links the process of peacebuilding to critical issues such as human rights, social justice, shared security, gender equality, economic empowerment and local capacities of self-organization. The claim that religion cherishes public values more strongly than any other institution, makes it a credible partner in the process of social reconciliation and peacebuilding. The task of

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peacebuilding cannot be left to political initiative alone; it also requires collaboration emerging from different institutions, religion inclusive.

The argument this article advances is that religious practices should be approached as a platform that reinforces any initiative intended to promote peace. Such possibility derives from the fact that religious activities shape public conscience. The framework of this article examines four variables that I consider to be crucial in the process of peacebuilding namely pluralism, tolerance, role of religion and methodologies of implementation.

**Religion and tolerance**

Many people, especially the youth, are getting skeptical about the role and scope of religious communities in peacebuilding. Young people are aware that most of the destructive conflicts have been fuelled by people who profess one faith or the other. In most cases, the religious institutions have simply failed to uphold their prophetic role. We have to acknowledge that some religious communities have, at one time served as a source of peace and violence at the same time. There is no doubt that many religions reveal exclusionist attitude that lead to lack of respect for other faiths and traditions, stifling imagination and limiting a people’s cultural capacity to respectfully encounter and transcend identity and faith-based prejudice and conflict. Such a situation has tempted a number of critics to claim that we need to conduct an audit of how religious communities have been responding to destructive conflicts in places like Liberia, Southern Sudan, Northern Uganda, Kenya, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo among other war and conflict-torn nations. Perhaps a critical task of peacebuilding must document these experiences even when they seek to be legitimate players in peacebuilding.

Because of ethical pluralism and global interaction, whether we like it or not, most of us are destined to live in religiously mixed societies. For this reason we have to find ways in which people can
relate to one another peacefully. The model of a single religion for a single state cannot fit in the modern world. The idea of imposing one religion on everybody is often advocated by those who believe that tough measures are required to restore the model of theocratic state.

Religion is an ambivalent reality containing within itself, the power to destroy or liberate human beings. The experience of the sacred takes several forms. It may be an experience of the first order in which the sacred is encountered directly in an epiphany or an ecstatic moment of mystical union. It could also be interpreted as an experience of the second order in which the sacred is mediated through mystical experiences. Both types of religious experiences are essentially filtered through the faculties of perception, with all the limitations of comprehension it implies, and then interpreted within the symbolic frames of myth and ritual.\(^1\) Therefore, religion discloses the sacred with limitation in its ability to fully comprehend what it discloses.

Purporting that religion is ambivalent is not to underestimate its divine character and potential to transform social relationships. Rather, it is to admit that religion is limited because it is also shaped by cultural dynamics. Its limitation arises from the fact that there is a difference between the infinite God and the finite human being. Ambiguity characterizes religious experience because historical experience presents a series of interacting changes with unpredictable effects. Religious experience occurs within competing contradictory possibilities. The ambivalence arises as the human perception, which is imperfect, encounters the sacred. A challenge that ambiguity poses to religious believers is to interpret the changing world of diverse and polyvalent experience by maintaining its relationship with God.\(^2\) In search of a lasting solution to the aforementioned limitation, it is inappropriate to impose religious beliefs and practices on everybody. Every person is free to practise religious beliefs of his/her own choice. Believers must

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be allowed to practise their religion and enjoy freedom of worship provided they do not disturb the requirements of a just public order.\(^\text{3}\)

Religions, because of the aforementioned limitation, must be challenged to purify themselves constantly. Inter-religious dialogue that enables every religion to look at itself in the light of another, promotes the process of internal reform. But beyond inter-religious enmity, religions can and should agree on the defence and promotion of spiritual values, even if each religion justifies them differently. Justice and peace form part of the basic teaching of all religions. The dynamics of economics and politics should retain their autonomy; but such autonomy should not attempt to exclude the role of religion from the public sphere. Both will have to be responsive to moral values as well as dialogue with religions.\(^\text{4}\) An accent should, instead, be put on the point that religions are called to promote friendship and togetherness rather than intolerance and hostility.

Religions, remarks Mark Juergemeyer, cannot be left alone; they need the temper of rationality that enlightenment values give to civil society.\(^\text{5}\) Without such awareness, religious practices could be used to promote sectarian interests. For Christianity, attitudes of intolerance, segregation and exclusion contradict the basic message of the gospel which is to build the kingdom of peace and justice. Religions have become the source of conflict because of doctrinal disputes, fundamentalism and politicization of religious identity. The situation occurs when religious power is used to address different forms of injustice without being in dialogue with other institutions.

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Pluralism

In the case of South Africa, during the apartheid era, a number of churches were used to justify the apartheid system in order to safeguard privileges of the white minority. Such proponents claimed that the minority white South Africans were God's elected people, and that segregation based upon colour was God's will. In such experience, we learn that without critical and prophetic voices, religions could be used as tools of maintaining status quo. Such cases occur when religions are controlled by interests of the privileged. It is interesting to note that when there is no prophetic voice within religions, the privileged could use religion to serve their own interests. With this experience, one could argue that religion influences social relationships in different ways depending on how it is practiced.

There are three extreme positions that must be avoided, when we want to use the power of religion for social transformation. The first position is the one that excludes religion from the public sphere. On this front, a number of scholars tend to enforce the idea that religion must be limited to the private sphere because it is irrational; and, while it could be tolerated in the private sphere, it should not be allowed to play any role in the public sphere. The second position is found among those who enforce the idea of forming theocratic states. What is at stake in this vision is that it ignores religious pluralism, freedom of choice and cultural differences.

The approach of imposing religious beliefs on everybody remains problematic. In the context of Africa, I wish to argue that, this approach will only worsen the situation by increasing the number of conflicts. The third position makes use of religion to achieve political goals. This is precarious because extremists can hijack the religious cause to serve political interests. In order to avoid these extremes we have to move towards a state that would be inclusive of all religions. There must be a dialectic relationship between state and religion so that the state could be nourished by religious virtues. Such mutual influence could also be institutionalized.
Religious values are indispensable in the public life because processes of social interaction and mutual care require personal commitment. Processes of reconciliation and peacebuilding are based on the spirituality of restoration and social love rather than political interest. Any effort geared towards developing this vision requires a conscious intent to promote dialogue based on fundamental values. This approach must be founded on the dynamics of self-transformation of the human person who is committed to the common good. These variables constitute categories required for any fully developed ethics of reconciliation and peacebuilding. This means that the process of peacebuilding necessarily includes transformation of the attitude and character. The dynamics of religion play a significant role in the process designed to promote peace.

Religious intolerance and exclusion could be avoided insofar as we acknowledge the difference between religions. It is not easy to outline effective solutions because many religions are characterized by the tendency of exclusion. Any proposed solution, however, must go together with the task of demonstrating how faith can strengthen democratic ideals and the will to combat intolerance and exclusion in a concrete way. Religions are called to submit themselves to self-evaluation and self-criticism with a view of seeking reforms that can draw them closer to the best ideals of building humanity.

The constructive role of religion

There is no doubt that a number of religious traditions are destructive. Nevertheless, it is wrong to articulate ambiguities and limitations of religion without considering the constructive role of religion in public life. Religious contributions, from the viewpoint of statecraft, are often ignored by local governments and foreign policy practitioners, which, if properly used, could be an incentive to the process of peacebuilding. Politicians and policymakers fail to recognize the role that religious peacemakers can play in building trust and facilitating processes of
reconciliation and peacebuilding. Opportunities lost include the joint application of religious and political virtues that could lead to a peaceful resolution of differences rather than a resort to violence.6

Religiously inspired violence is often motivated by social injustices, unresolved frustrations, endless suffering, powerlessness and hopelessness.7 Similarly, politicization of religion emerges when secular regimes fail to establish the rule of law. When injustice lingers for too long, it builds hatred and thereby becomes the source of violence among people. The rationale of initiating violence is not always geared to defeat the enemy but to gain psychological victory and publicity.8 This kind of reaction is not moved by consideration that the greatest victims of their violent reactions would be the poor who could be their immediate neighbours.

Religious violence is often sparked by the prevalence of greed in an organized manner within the system that promotes various forms of inequalities and institutionalized injustices in the economic, political, ethnic and religious spheres. Consequently, the situation leads to the feelings of hopelessness, hatred, prejudice and desire for vengeance. Lack of good governance and social structures that deal effectively with political, economic and social inequalities in African societies have resulted into a culture of intolerance where people lack mutual trust and respect.

Despite the weaknesses of religion, there will never be a lasting peace in human society without a constructive involvement of religion. Every religion possesses a prophetic voice that must be acknowledged and respected. These values render religion indispensable because the free market controlled by the pursuit of profit and greed, political

manipulation, and cultural domination cannot guarantee peace and justice. True peace could be achieved when a sense of responsibility, respect for human rights and spiritual values converge. The religious ingredient cannot be delivered by secular order. It is only the prophetic voice of religion that can challenge oppressive structures in the course of history. Only religion speaks of repentance, mercifulness, forgiveness and compassion. That is why believers and non-believers alike turn to religion in search of effective models of social transformation.

The role of religion in peacebuilding can win the trust of the warring sides, both on the personal and communal levels. Trust could be won through persuasion when those in conflict negotiate their differences through mutual dialogue. In this process, the role of religion serves as a bridge between social groups, in supporting social interaction and mutual care. In the case of Mozambique, religious leaders played the role of facilitating interaction between social groups by encouraging people at the grassroots level to support the peace process. Religious activities enhance friendship and solidarity. This is done by facilitating interactive processes of sharing ideas and providing alternative solutions to social problems. Religious motivation facilitates the process of nurturing communal identity and commitment. The use of various alternatives is indicative of commitment and makes the process an inclusive one. Religion provides alternative resource material for moral discourse, and encourages participation by providing space for direct communication and self-expression. Such a space, provides a direct framework of informal networking, dialogue and flexibility.

Religion plays a constructive role in the process of shaping public conscience. Religious virtues inform civic virtues by inspiring personal commitment, solidarity and the common good. Values inspired by religion transcend the horizon of self-interest. Take the example of Mozambique, through the mediation of the Community of Sant'Egidio, religion made the political discourse flexible by providing an alternative channel of resolving conflict. The role of religion that facilitates collaboration could be described as religious diplomacy. The initiative of mediation permits a paradigm shift in relations from enmity to
collaboration. Such methodology facilitated the process of the reconstruction of social relationships.

One could argue that religion, in recent years, has emerged as a key player in social reconciliation and peacebuilding. Such engagement could also be interpreted to include the reshaping of multicultural expectations that make peaceful solutions possible because it goes beyond the legal framework. When dealing with conflicts, it becomes necessary to move beyond formal channels of diplomacy in order to uncover as well as deal with the deeper sources of conflict, rebuild relationships and make the necessary adjustments where possible. In this context, reconciliation born of spiritual conviction can play a critical role in inspiring the parties in conflict to break the cycle of revenge that typically characterizes such disputes. Such a process convenes religious virtues and civic virtues in cultivating mutuality for the sake of the common good. The horizon of religious virtues surpasses the dimension of self-interest. Spiritual practices and imaginations provide the missing link between virtue ethics and the transformation of emotions and moral habits.

Dynamics of spirituality develop specific practices of worship and service meant to deepen engagement with God and community. Indirectly, these practices train the imagination and re-orient the emotions to produce a way of life that is consonant with sound morality. They in turn provide the normative considerations that keep spiritual practices fruitful in promoting social harmony. Unless we are engaged at the level of attitude and character, we cannot concretely be engaged at the level of social transformation.

The public role of religion is not just to give public pronouncements, but rather, to participate in the formation of public conscience with the aim of effecting social practice. The formation of the public conscience and the task of influencing the formation of public policy draws religion into the task of peacebuilding. The religious actors provide a useful resource that allows the political process to be

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9 Spohn, W. Go and Do Likewise, New York: Continuum, 1999, p. 3.
enriched by religious values. A religious contribution makes political discourse flexible as well as capable of responding appropriately to the increased complexity of social relationships. Religious involvement must be conceived as a contribution to a larger political process to which all institutions contribute.

People strengthen their identity by rediscovering their religious traditions. This happens when they engage in the process of renewal. From this perspective, a local parish has the potential to become a zone of free speech and conscientization. Preaching about God’s righteousness prepares the ground for social change. Such a view of social transformation shows that religion can be politically engaged even if it has no political power. Each faith sharing session is, by implication, a political activity. The power of religion challenges all forms of injustice that work against repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. Through such dynamics, religion becomes one of the forces of social transformation. With this knowledge about the role of religion, it is therefore an exaggeration to conclude, without reservation, that intolerance forms the nature of religion. Various forms of religiously-motivated conflicts cannot persuade us to completely reject the role of religion in the process of peacebuilding. To exclude religion from the public sphere is to underrate the dynamics of religion and thereby underestimate its ability to address social evils. Religion possesses distinctive capacities to enhance participation and commitment. A moderate involvement of religion in the public sphere can bring contributions that strengthen concepts of the public good and mutuality. If religious communities bring a significant contribution to the public life, then, their role in social transformation should not be ignored.

In promoting a deeper meaning of life, religious practices strengthen personal identity and simultaneously reinforce inter-group solidarity. Although religions reveal divisive tendencies, it is an exaggeration to deny the fact that some religious communities advocate inclusive understanding of civic life and the values required to enhance the common good. It is an exaggeration and a blanket blame to state
that all religions are basically involved in fomenting conflicts. Such a sweeping statement is based on selective consideration of events of a few religious movements. It is a mistake to generalize the public role of religion. The characteristics of the most conflict-prone and exclusive religious groups are certainly not universal attributes of religion as such.\textsuperscript{10} Many of the conflicts in the world today that have religious dimensions are not simply clashes between faiths; rather, religion is often a flag that serves as a rallying point for other politicized aspects of group identity such as ethnicity and nationality.

It is true that some religious communities rejected ideas of pluralism, human rights, freedom of conscience and democracy. Today, on the contrary, a number of religious communities accept these ideals and participate actively in promoting civic life based on these values through religious practices. The role of religion in public is justified by the fact that activities of religious communities reveal an inclusive understanding of the public values and the common good.\textsuperscript{11} These convictions are often communicated through ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.

Activities of some religious movements and commitment of some religious leaders demonstrate that there can be a constructive integration between faith and the public good. A good example is seen from the struggles of Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu who promoted reconciliation in the post-apartheid South Africa. When suspicion overshadows goodness, examples of good works can easily be overlooked. Religious teachings, when applied properly, contribute to the process of building the social fabric of the common good.

It is therefore not true that all religious activities suppress ideals of democracy, freedom and pluralism. A number of religious activities strengthen values of participation and common good. This is pursued by strengthening public virtues, raising the spirit of mutual concern


\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 93.
and mobilizing communal action. The role of religion in society is not only priestly but also prophetic insofar as it is able to raise issues of public interest that have eluded other institutions.

Religion maintains the balance of power in society by challenging state hegemony, proposing alternative models of moral formation and preserving group identities and sanctity of human life. Religions are able to identify overlooked social questions by pointing out inadequacies within the framework of political organization, leadership and governance.\(^{12}\) They can motivate as well as mobilize people to focus on certain issues at hand by identifying social problems and the needs of the poor. Such situations make religions political since their activities create political impact. If civility is a learned value, then, the contribution of religious virtues cannot be taken for granted.

Religion can either be constructive or destructive depending on the direction it takes in forms of the common good. In support of the constructive role of religion, Cardinal Avery Dulles argues that religious groups, because of their authority over the consciences of the faithful, can give powerful motivation for humanitarian reform. Most religions agree on the importance of prayer and worship.\(^{13}\) They encourage the pursuit of holiness and speak out against socially harmful vices such as dishonesty, greed, exploitation and discrimination. In a society riddled with selfishness, the harmonious voices of religious leaders can propel the tone of public morality.

Religious leaders who met in Assisi for an inter-faith meeting, about a decade ago, unanimously supported the constructive role of religion saying that in the name of God every religion is called to bring upon forgiveness, reconciliation, justice and peace on the earth.\(^{14}\) This means religions have to commit themselves to the task of

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\(^{13}\) Dulles, A. SJ. “Christ among the Religions,” *America*, 186, 3 (February 04, 2002), pp. 8-15.

challenging intolerance and violence which seem to be incompatible with the authentic spirit of religion; and as such religions must be open in condemning any recourse to war in the name of God. This goal could be achieved if religions educate their faithfuls to respect others, foster dialogue, value differences, appreciate cultural diversity, defend the defenceless, promote friendship among peoples, transcend prejudices and learn from the past that peace without justice is not true peace. Religious teachings must aim at healing the wounds of the heart and restore damaged social relationships. Whoever uses religion to spark violence contradicts religion's deepest and truest inspiration.

The spiritual struggle of religion is not to challenge injustice in a way that involves it in politics as simply one party among others. The task of religion is to “denounce the alienation and seductions that destroy human freedom by serving it from its divine source.”\(^\text{15}\) In this way, religion does not defend human dignity in abstract but promotes the integrity of social life itself. There can be no authentic politics under totalitarianism, for politics is by its very nature the exercise of deliberation and decision made by free persons through non-governmental organizations and other institutions of social life. For this reason, religion has an indispensable role to play in the process of peacebuilding insofar as it discloses an in-depth dimension that:

- Gives meaning to life even in the face of suffering and death, and guaranteeing supreme values, unconditional norms, deepest motivations and highest ideals. In this way, religion provides a warrant for ethical obligation, even in those situations in which individual or social expediency might urge us to adopt another course of action.\(^\text{16}\)

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While the role of the state is to maintain order, it must also be open to what religion is able to offer in enriching public debate and building public virtues.

Whatever criticism could be advanced towards the role of religion in the public sphere, the point is that religion makes a significant difference. The presence and witness of religious communities in society carries a distinctive role that cannot be ignored. Religions play a prophetic role of promoting fundamental values. These values build foundations of public values. Religions share key principles regarding life-centredness, respect for nature, option for the poor, solidarity and mutual sharing. Religion disregards the culture of individualism, selfishness, complacency and indifference. From the public viewpoint, religious activities promote public values through the process of promoting an alternative opportunity for participation as well as rendering services required for social development. The task of religion is to tell the Good News of God’s liberation and saving power at the centre of history.

The task of religion in public sphere is prophetic, which involves informing and forming public conscience, denouncing injustice and encouraging self-examination. Religious function and impact are juxtaposed to ethical motifs that guide the sense of responsibility. Such a power of self-transcendence enables religion to selectively embrace, reject or refine aspects of the culture of which it is a part, in accordance with the deep presuppositions and framework of self-regulation. In this way it shapes held values, influences institutions, and establishes in the mind of the people, various ideals of the right and good.

It is true that religion can participate in the process of peacebuilding. But, religion must be able to answer the following questions:

(i) How can religion transcend ethnic prejudice in ethnically fragmented societies in order to cater for the needs of diverse ethnic communities?

(ii) What are the consequences of political partisanship in religions?

(iii) How can religion sustain the confidence of the followers in matters of governance and social justice?

Every genuine religion should endeavour to respond to these questions in making a difference in the lives of people.

Methodologies of implementation

Too often religion is ignored by the secular community, without noting that religious communities possess enormous potentials that could be used for peacebuilding. Religious communities' mosques, churches, temples, and other religious structures are virtually located in every country, district, village and city. These structures and organizations range from assemblies designed for worship and reflection to those dedicated to education, health and communication. Religious communities possess spiritual ingredients that could be used for peacebuilding. When properly mobilized and equipped, religious communities can serve as effective avenues for promoting participatory governance and peace education. Religious leaders are uniquely positioned to use their moral stature and influence to advocate for peace and justice and educate society through religious guidance and counselling sessions; initiating rehabilitation centres for the drug addicts, and establishing children's homes to accommodate street children and orphans. This goes a long way in curbing social vices and instituting Kingdom values among them. Such a perspective provides a common ground in promoting peace and justice by establishing consensus regarding common challenges.
More often, in the context of conferences and learning institutions, creative ideas are proposed, but we tend to forget the challenge of proposing concrete methodologies of implementing such ideas. With regard to local initiatives and methodologies of implementation, the following questions could guide us towards concrete and pragmatic engagement and implementation of transformative ideas:

(i) In what ways is your religious community involved in peace education?

(ii) What resources do religious leaders and communities need to become effective agents of peacebuilding?

(iii) From the perspective of your concept of life, how can religion collaborate with other bodies of civil society in addressing conflicts?

(iv) Which models of collaboration between religions seem to be effective in your community?

(v) Do you have any examples that show that religious communities can address legacies of human rights violation?

(vi) Which methodologies seem to be effective in promoting peacebuilding in your country and/or community?

(vii) How does your religion confront the challenges of intolerance and exclusion?

(viii) What role does national religious leaders and institutions play in advancing transitional justice and institutions in the context of reconciliation and social healing?

(ix) How can multi-religious institutions help to educate their communities on peacebuilding?

(x) How can multi-religious institutions participate in the process of advocating peace education, social justice and social reconciliation?
(xi) What role should the national religious leaders and institutions play in order to promote civil society and religious institutions that account and reflect the interests of the people in the process of peacebuilding?

Conclusion

Religion can play an integral role in peacebuilding insofar as we acknowledge that the role of religion in public life is limited, and as such it must always be subjected to self-evaluation and critique. From the structural viewpoint, conflicts are symptoms of deep seated problems that must be dealt with through the process of character formation and institutional transformation.

Peacebuilding is a process of reconstructing relationships between individuals, social groups and communities. Such engagement involves the process of integrated roles, functions and activities. Spiritualities of reconciliation and peacebuilding offer what statecraft cannot. Religious communities and leaders can directly support dynamics of democracy, justice, intra-group and community reconciliation processes. Through the paradigm of restorative justice, religion surpasses legal and retributive dimensions of justice. Religious communities are able to oppose intolerance through peace education. Education programmes and inter-faith dialogues can establish trust when dialogue partners perceive that they are not being dragged into doctrinal disputes.
Bibliography


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