

Can religion be a force for good in international relations?

When I was preparing for this lecture I remembered the address given by Pope Benedict XVI to Politicians, Diplomats, Academics and Business Leaders in Westminster Hall in September 2010. Pope Benedict pointed out that religion is not a problem for legislators to solve but a vital contribution to the national conversation about the common good and the good of our civilisation. He said that there are people who would advocate the voice of religion be silenced or at least relegated to the purely private sphere. There are those who argue that the public celebration of festivals such as Christmas should be discouraged in the questionable belief that it might somehow offend those of other religions or none. The Pope continued that there are worrying signs of a failure to appreciate not only the rights of believers to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, but also the legitimate role of religion in the public square.

This evening I would like to talk about the role of religion in the public square of international relations.

With 5.8 billion people or more that 80% of the global population regarding themselves as members of a religious group,¹ the opportunities for faith leaders, adherents, institutions and organisations to influence positive change is clear.

This is only strengthened by the way in which religion transcends national borders, and the depth of theological teaching that faith groups can draw upon to help shape our world for the better.

However while potential clearly exists - there are many who argue that it is waning or underused, leaving religion increasingly irrelevant in the global international system. Their voices are joined by others who assert that the profoundly negative impact of some individuals, groups or governments acting in the name of religion, offsets or even eclipses any positive contribution that has been made.

A working group on religion and international relations at the University of Notre Dame recently summarised this persistently powerful 'secularization thesis' as holding that religion in an

¹ Pew Research Centre, *the Global Religious Landscape* (2012)

international context is *“irrational, inherently violent and doomed for extinction.”*²

This evening I will address these challenges and argue that on the contrary religion has been and continues to be a relevant influence with positive consequences for international relations.

Furthermore while evils ostensibly committed on the basis of faith present one of the most destructive and destabilising forces in the contemporary international system, these are nothing more than subversions of religion, which contrast starkly against the significant contribution of all faiths to peace-building and humanitarianism.

Individuals driven by faith

One particularly striking indication of religion’s consistent relevance to international relations is the diversity of men and women motivated by their faith who have received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Throughout the years a number of religious leaders have been recognised as doing *“the most or the best work for fraternity between nations”*³. And In their own way each has made it clear that their endeavour for peace, justice and human

² University of Notre Dame, *Religion and International Relations: A Primer for Research* (2013)

³ Nobel Peace Prize wording

rights was not simply adjacent or complementary to their religious vocation, but an integral component of it:

Accepting the prize in 1984 while his country languished under the horrors of apartheid, Archbishop Desmond Tutu framed his address to the assembled dignitaries by emphasising the infinite value of human beings, who regardless of colour or nationality are all made in the image of God;

Five years later, introducing himself as ‘a simple monk’ the 14th Dalai Lama received his prize, reflecting on Buddhist teachings of altruism, love and compassion as the basis of his proposed plan for peace and ecological preservation in Asia;

And when Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo was honoured for his tireless struggle towards justice in East Timor and reconciliation with Indonesia, he stated in no uncertain terms that *“as a member of the Church, I take upon myself the mission of enlightening and the denouncing of all human situations which are in disagreement with the*

Christian concept and contrary to the teaching of the Church concerning all mankind.”⁴

Other laureates, whose primary vocation was political or judicial rather than religious, have similarly been driven by their faith:

For example, René Cassin, recognised by the Nobel Committee as a key architect behind the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was strongly influenced by the ethics of his Jewish background;

When Aung San Suu Kyi eventually reached Oslo, more than two decades after being awarded the prize while under house arrest, she drew upon Buddhist philosophy, linking the great ‘dukkha’ or ‘sufferings’ to contemporary challenges faced by prisoners, refugees, migrant workers and victims of human trafficking;

And of course Nelson Mandela - in his words ‘could not over-emphasise’ the role that Methodism played in his life and struggle.⁵

These individuals have not only made momentous and categorically positive contributions in their own

⁴ Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech (1996)

⁵ Address to Annual Conference of the Methodist Church (1994)

right – but inspire countless others who are actively shaping international relations today.

Likewise figures such as Mahatma Ghandi and St Pope John Paul II who, respectively driven by Hindu and Catholic devotion, helped to bring about fundamental international changes with human dignity at the centre, remain deeply influential figures even among statesmen and women who themselves are not motivated by any particular faith.

Faith organisations

In addition to the Nobel laureates and household names there are innumerable other individuals who, as a practical expression of their religion, are playing an active and positive role in international relations – not least through the multitude of faith-based organisations that operate across the globe.

This is most visible in the field of aid and development, where both national governments and intergovernmental bodies now recognise faith-based organisations as indispensable partners.

Here for example, NGOs from Islamic and Christian traditions account for six of the thirteen leading aid agencies that make up the Disasters

Emergency Committee.⁶ They spearhead the UK's response to humanitarian catastrophes, often through their local networks in the affected nations.

Given the paramount importance of aid in building positive relationships between states, the prominent role of religion in this area is extremely significant.

Similarly faith-based organisations have consistently been among the key 'implementing partners' of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, utilising their resources in support of coordinated initiatives to protect and support people fleeing war or persecution.

In recent years the commissioner has particularly highlighted the role of Lutheran World Federation, Islamic Relief Worldwide, and Caritas, underscoring the diversity of religious backgrounds in which effective and professional international organisations are rooted.⁷

In addition to providing humanitarian assistance, faith organisations are also playing an active role in promoting human rights, tackling the most

⁶ Islamic Relief, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Tearfund, Care, World Vision

⁷ UNHCR, *Partnership Note on faith-based organisations, local faith communities and faith leaders* (2014)

devastating communicable diseases, and reducing the use of weapons such as landmines or cluster munitions.

It stands to reason that some of the most transformative moments in international relations during recent decades, such as interstate agreements on debt relief and climate change have been realised with the assistance and participation of religious groups.

Peace building

The role of religion in peace building is another area that merits particular attention. The Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone for example, has been acknowledged as *“the most highly visible and effective”* non-governmental actor involved in ending the country’s brutal ten year civil war.⁸

This is especially significant from an international relations perspective given the active involvement of other states and the potential for more to be pulled in, the longer that war continued.

More recently, interfaith cooperation between the Turkish Cypriot Mufti and Eastern Orthodox Archbishop of Cyprus has been at the forefront of efforts to facilitate meaningful peace talks. The

⁸ Turay, *Civil society and peacebuilding: The role of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone* (2000)

political dispute in Cyprus has long been a damaging feature of international relations in the region, and the UN Special Advisor has explicitly highlighted the “*incredibly important role*” that religious leaders have in bringing about a solution.⁹

Likewise the South Sudan Council of Churches and the South Sudan Islamic Council are playing a key part in resolving the conflict that has destabilised large parts of the country and blighted relations with its Northern neighbour since secession four years ago.¹⁰ These bodies are so respected and embedded in local communities that several national governments are now directly supporting them by way of their own contribution to peace in the region.¹¹

Sometimes the involvement of religious figures takes a much lower profile. While political discourse around the conflict in Eastern Ukraine has been dominated by national governments and armed groups, senior church figures from across the region have been working tirelessly behind the scenes to stop the fighting.

⁹ World Bulletin, *Cyprus religious leaders discuss peace with UN envoy* (2014)

¹⁰ Vatican News, *Appeal of Christian and Muslim leaders: pursue political dialogue for peaceful settlement and end the war*

¹¹ Sida, *The Church contributes to peace in Sudan* (2014)

Intergovernmental talks are naturally focussing on the immediate future; however churches are also preparing to sustain a peaceful settlement once the guns do eventually fall silent. The United Methodist Bishop recently explained: *“religious leaders will have a special role for reconciliation. We teach people to forgive and not to hold a grudge; to love and not to take revenge; to reveal mercy and not to judge. All this is impossible without God's help.”*¹²

International norms

Beyond the rich plethora of individuals and organisations playing such a positive role, religion has helped to form many of the norms, rules and institutions that shape international relations today.

Take for example established principles about the use of force between states, which Timothy Shah acknowledges are *“inconceivable apart from the historical contributions of the Just War tradition, as developed and refined by thinkers such as St Ambrose of Milan, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Francisco de Vitoria, Hugo Grotius, and Paul Ramsey.”*¹³

¹² United Methodist Church: *Religious leaders from Ukraine, Russia try peace effort* (2015)

¹³ Shah, *Religion and International Relations: Normative Issues* (2013)

Indeed seminal documents including the Lieber Code and the Geneva Conventions have been strongly influenced by the theological contributions of these and others. Such works form the basis of international law concerning aspects of warfare including the humane treatment of prisoners, protection of civilian infrastructure and use of the Red Cross or Red Crescent.

Though by no means universally respected or adhered to, this framework has nevertheless tempered the worst excesses of successive interstate conflicts and continues to do so today. It has furthermore underpinned an international justice system, which despite its many imperfections, has held to account individuals responsible for some of the most heinous abuses during wartime.

A diversity of religious teaching was also utilised in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which since its adoption by the UN General Assembly in 1948 has been recognised as the cornerstone of human rights norms in international relations. Although the document is sometimes criticised as being unduly influenced by Western Christian thinking, it in fact reflects *“a convergence of different religious and cultural traditions, all of them motivated by the common desire to place the*

*human person at the heart of institutions, laws and the workings of society.*¹⁴

On the declaration's 50th anniversary, the Dalai Lama emphasised its universal applicability, stating: *"[some] governments have contended that the standards of human rights laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are those advocated by the West and do not apply to Asia and other parts of the Third World because of differences in culture, social and economic development. I do not share this view and I am convinced that majority of ordinary people do not support it either. I believe that the principles laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights constitute something like a natural law that ought to be followed by all peoples and governments."*¹⁵

It is clear therefore that not only through the practical involvement of individuals, organisations and institutions, but also the influence of theological teachings on international norms – religion plays a positive role, particularly concerning peace and humanitarianism.

¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to UN General Assembly* (2008)

¹⁵ 14th Dalai Lama, *Message on the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1998)

International reach and the Common Good

Religion also brings a unique dimension to international relations by spanning borders and prioritising the Common Good of all humanity.

Of course national governments can and do act altruistically on the world stage, as we have seen recently for example, through the UK's extensive use of resources and political capital to combat sexual violence in warfare.

However many decisions of global significance such as those surrounding trade, aid and the environment are often shaped by domestic political or economic concerns. Equally despite notable exceptions, governments are often reluctant to prioritise foreign policy initiatives that will carry no tangible benefit to their own state.

On the contrary religious actors can engage in international affairs without such constraints, but with a level of influence that stretches beyond any one group of citizens. This was aptly demonstrated by the recent work of Pope Francis in securing a deal to restore diplomatic relations between the USA and Cuba. As one US diplomat explained after months of secret negotiations facilitated by the Holy Father: *“the support of the Vatican was important to us, given the esteem with which both*

the American and Cuban people hold the Catholic Church.”¹⁶

The combination of this respect by both nations, along with the clear absence of any vested interest, gave Pope Francis an exceptional opportunity to earn trust and help address one of the most damaging Cold War legacies. Consequently we are witnessing an historic shift from hostility to cooperation that many never dared believe was possible.

Religion as a cause of war

Having explored these achievements it is important to address counter-assertions that the constructive role played by religion is undermined by the profoundly negative influence that it may also present.

This is most significantly manifested in claims that religion is a preeminent cause of war, or at least a key factor in many of the world's most devastating conflicts - a serious point that needs careful consideration, particularly given the religious motives openly ascribed to so many wars in centuries gone by.

Although it is a nuanced area that cannot be neatly quantified, various studies do give some context

¹⁶ Guardian, *US-Cuba deal: a marriage 18 months in the making, blessed by Pope Francis* (2014)

the role of religion in contemporary international conflicts. For example, as part of a wider historical analysis Michael Desch explored the causes of 13 wars between 1980 and 2003, identifying religion as a factor in less than half and as the primary factor in just two.¹⁷

The Institute for Economics and Peace similarly examined the causes of 35 armed conflicts that took place in 2013 - including civil wars and insurgencies. This showed a stronger link, with religion playing a role in 21 – although it is notable that religion was never the only cause and in over half of conflicts where it did play a role, was just one of three or more factors. The study explicitly concludes that based on these findings “*religion is not the main cause of conflicts today*” and observed that there are many other socio-economic factors which have far more significance.¹⁸

Of course such analyses should never lead us to simply dismiss the role of religion in tragedies ranging from the wars that accompanied Yugoslavia’s breakup, to the indiscriminate violence blighting the Holy Land today. As people of faith we have a particular responsibility to

¹⁷ Desch, *The coming reformation of religion in international affairs? The demise of the secularization thesis and the rise of new thinking about religion* (2013)

¹⁸ Institute for Economics and Peace, *Five key questions answered on the link between peace and religion* (2013)

contribute however possible towards a peaceful resolution of such conflicts.

However it is important to also acknowledge that while religious divisions are sometimes a driving force in ethnic and political strife, the converse is also true. Far too frequently religion has itself been a victim, exploited by political or military leaders in conflicts over power, territory, ideology or historical grievances. Meanwhile people of faith are often on the frontline of efforts to stop the fighting.

We only need to recall how during the Troubles in Northern Ireland some politicians and paramilitaries cynically exacerbated inter-denominational tensions, while faith leaders on all sides worked tirelessly for a ceasefire. Similarly despite concerted efforts to aggravate religious divisions in Israel and Palestine, interfaith initiatives involving Jews, Muslims and Christians from across the world are driving forward the search for peace.

On this basis it is fair to suggest that depicting religion as an inherent source of war, both overstates and oversimplifies the picture. The majority of contemporary conflicts are not instigated by religion; and where religious identity does appear among the causes of strife, faith often also features as a driver for peace.

Religion as a cause of terrorism

More potent challenges can be made against the role of religion in international relations, when considering its apparent significance as a catalyst for terrorism; indeed the recent growth of terrorist groups supposedly compelled by religion is profoundly troubling.

In 1968 –the year regarded as the advent of modern terrorism, there was no major recognised terrorist organisation that cited religion as its main motivation or ideological foundation. Yet by 2004 half of all terrorist organisations did so.¹⁹

This reflects how the decline of separatist movements and political extremists from the far left and right, has been accompanied by the growth of jihadist outfits such as Boko Haram, ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban.

According to the Global Terrorism Index these four groups alone were responsible for almost 70% of terror-related deaths last year, reflecting not only their increasing strength but also the particular lethality of so-called religious terrorists, who believe in a divine imperative and do not seek popular support for their actions in the manner that other terrorist organisations have done previously.

¹⁹ Nilay Saiya, *Religion and Terrorism: What Remains to be Said?* (2013)

Yet while they cite a literalist interpretation of selected Islamic teachings as the basis for their actions, these groups cannot be deemed religious in any meaningful sense. Barack Obama recently emphasised this distinction stating *that "no religion is responsible for terrorism - people are responsible for terrorism"* before going on to emphasise that the US is not at war with Islam but rather those who have perverted the religion.²⁰

Indeed all four groups have been resolutely condemned by innumerable Islamic scholars and leaders who regard this is no more than a hijacking of Islamic identity to underpin political ambitions and justify criminal acts. Many clerics have issued fatwas denouncing those organisation and prohibiting followers from supporting them.

It is also notable that practicing Muslims are among those most actively opposing nominally 'Islamic' terrorism: from the Islamic relief organisations working to support civilians displaced by Boko Haram attacks; to many of the Kurdish troops liberating civilians from ISIS. These adherents of Islam far outnumber the comparatively small group who are taking part in brutal terrorist activities.

²⁰ USA Today, *Obama: no religion responsible for terrorism* (2015)

Likewise the young Muslims in Egypt and Pakistan, who inspired the world in recent years by frequently forming human chains to defend Christian worshipers and Churches, greatly outnumbered those extremists who were orchestrating sectarian attacks.

A remarkably similar pattern is evident wherever religion is used to justify terrorist atrocities. For example Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, which has brought horror to multiple states throughout Central Africa, evokes a selective and distorted interpretation of the Ten Commandments which is almost universally rejected by practicing Christians and Church leaders.

Here too it is the faithful who have most resolutely opposed terrorism: from nuns risking their lives to prevent the LRA conscripting child soldiers; to countless congregations throughout the world who have raised awareness and political pressure, as well as funds to support the victims.

The increasing number of terrorist organisations citing religion as their motivation cannot and should not be ignored. However their reliance upon fringe distortions of theology and their rejection by the majority of established faith groups indicate that as in the context of interstate conflicts, religion is often hijacked by those with

malevolent intentions rather than singularly motivating violence.

Furthermore so-called 'religious terrorists' are almost invariably opposed by the overwhelming number of religious people who actively contribute to security, conflict resolution and humanitarian relief.

Conclusion

Ultimately the question of whether religion can be force for good in international relations is answered by the men and women of faith without whom our world would be less peaceful, less hopeful and less just.

Religion can be subverted in an attempt to validate violence and hatred. Yet this does not and should not be allowed to undermine or overshadow the immense role that faith plays in our world.

Of course this does not mean that we can become complacent.

And there is always more to be done.

But the contribution of every religion to the Common Good is something we must recognise - and something we must cherish.