



Religions and the Politics of Peace and Conflict

By Professor Linda Hogan

Academics at Trinity's School of Religion reflect on the role of religion in both conflict and peace-making in a political context, writes Linda Hogan Ph.D. (1992), Professor of Ecumenics and Vice-Provost of Trinity College Dublin from 2011-16.

Religion has once again emerged as a significant force in political life. Unfortunately its manifestation is often associated with violence, extremism and bigotry. Yet around the globe a majority of religious believers denounce the violence pursued in their name, while significant numbers of religious actors pursue political agendas based on the values of equality, human rights and peace. How can one account for this paradoxical position? Will the re-politicisation of religion inevitably lead to more conflict? Or, can the peace-making potential of religion dislodge the narratives of legitimate violence pursued in God's name? These are questions that a group of academics at Trinity's School of Religion pursue, through our research and in the School's doctoral and masters programmes.

The Resurgence of Religion in the 21st Century

In the 20th century it was assumed that religion would become ever-more marginal to political life. However the most comprehensive analysis of global religious affiliation ever undertaken suggests a different trajectory. *The Future of World Religions Report*¹ indicates

that, rather than being in decline, the proportion of the world's population that affiliates with a religion is growing. Using demographic data from more than 2,500 censuses worldwide, the report projects how the global religious landscape will look by 2050 (updated to 2060 in 2017) if current trends in demographics continue, incorporating patterns of religious switching (including disaffiliation/exit) and migration. It shows that religiously affiliated people will continue to make up an increasing share of the world's total population. Islam continues to see the most significant growth, so that by 2060 Muslims will make up 31% of the world's population, and Christians, 32%. The religiously unaffiliated are projected to shrink from 16% of the world's population in 2015, to 13% in 2060. This situation

is complicated further by increasing religious diversity² particularly in parts of the world that have previously been homogenous. Nor is Europe immune from these patterns, since it has also seen the rise of new religions and the revival of others, particularly because of the impact of migration.

This continued growth of religious affiliation has been accompanied by a re-politicisation of religion. This has been in train since the 1970s, manifested most dramatically in the Iranian Revolution of 1979, but has continued apace since then. This re-politicisation of religion has not only changed politics, it has also changed the nature of religion and the character of religious affiliation. The forces of secularisation and globalisation have also impacted on the nature of religion. Nor have the religions been passive objects in a changing landscape. Rather they too have been part of this process of change.



Linda Hogan, Professor of Ecumenics and formerly Vice-Provost of Trinity College Dublin

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In particular the last two decades have seen the emergence of de-cultured, post-colonial forms of religious fundamentalism. These new forms of religious fundamentalism engage politics in a transnational manner and use the global connectivity of social media to pursue their religious and political agendas. We see this pattern not only in political Islam and in forms of Hindutva and fundamentalist versions of Buddhism, but also in evangelical Protestantism and latterly in Catholic fundamentalism.

These trends indicate that religion worldwide is undergoing a period of unprecedented change, and within Trinity's School of Religion one of our research groups seeks to understand these transformations, particularly their political impacts, and especially the interplay of religions with the politics of peace and conflict.

The Ambivalence of the Sacred

The connections between religion and violence are multifaceted. From the conflicts in Middle East and East Africa to those across Asia, religious ideologies frame and justify political violence. Moreover in international relations post-9/11 religious language and metaphors have acquired a new political significance. Indeed religious justifications of violence are omnipresent in international politics, leaving some to conclude that religions are intrinsically and relentlessly violent. However this unambiguous indictment of religion fails to acknowledge the diversity within religions on whether and under what conditions recourse to violence can be justified, it neglects the significant role that religious actors play in conflict resolution, and ignores the religious roots of pacifism.

Buddhist Violence and its Colonial Roots

Dr Jude Lal Fernando, Assistant Professor, Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies

Religiously supported violence is not new in history even though religions have promoted important virtues. However, with Buddhism, many, particularly westerners, are shocked to hear about its association with violence. Buddhism is viewed as nonviolent and peaceful compared with other religio-ethical traditions. The Sangha (monastics) are perceived to be world-renouncers and paragons of greedlessness. Buddhism has shaped the lives of great Asian leaders like Asoka, Gandhi and Ambedkar. Its practices of mindfulness, promoted by the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, have attracted many who seek inner peace in highly materialistic and individualistic societies. Nevertheless, it is equally evident that the war against the Tamils in Sri Lanka which killed, according to UN estimates, at least 70,000 people and the mass atrocities committed against the Rohingya people in Myanmar, which forced over 700,000 people to flee to Bangladesh, were not simply triggered by a few Buddhist extremists. These crimes were state-mediated and overwhelmingly backed by the Sangha and the Buddhist majority.

The Western romanticisation of peace-loving Buddhist societies has colonial roots. A newfangled form of Buddhism was constructed under British colonial rule in Burma and Ceylon. Lay leaders of the emerging intermediary social classes, supported by Western admirers of Buddhism, formed a Buddhism that upheld its meditative practices, rather than popular, indigenous and interreligious expressions.

The contradictions between the ethical core of a religious tradition and its adherents' lived reality cannot be understood by a simplistic binary that associates religion either with violence as Richard Dawkins does or with peace as religious peace apologists do. What needs to be analysed are the historical, political, social and cultural conditionings of a faith community that lead them to ideological justification of mass atrocities or non-violence. Buddhism is no exception. To portray what happens in Sri Lanka and Myanmar as purely local ethno-religious conflicts based on age-old antagonisms amongst communities is misleading. Both states are majoritarian and part of a geopolitical network of economic-military alliances that continue to strengthen the exclusionary positions of the ethno-religious majorities of both countries.

Justice for the victims of these majoritarian states as well as conflict resolution entail application of the ethico-emancipatory core of Buddhism not simply to individuals, but to state structures with their global alliances, which bolster the majoritarian Buddhist false view of supremacy, a view that led to mass atrocities. Attached to a colonially carved state, Buddhists falsely perceive Tamils and Muslims as invaders, thus thwarting many peace attempts towards alternative ways of being a polity. However, the suffering of war victims has the transformative potential to lead Buddhists along the path that Asoka took two millennia ago and Ambedkar in our day.

Breaking the Old Habits of Secular Diplomacy towards the Middle East

Dr Carlo Aldrovandi, Assistant Professor in Religions, Conflict and Peace Studies

Mainstream international relations theory and diplomacy have traditionally misunderstood or undervalued religion and its far-reaching influence on people's lives, particularly in the Middle East. That exclusion is largely related to two common epistemological misconceptions. On the one hand, scholars and diplomats tend to frame sacred values, beliefs and motivations as 'epiphenomenal': a meaningless symbolic gloss over the real 'material' interests at stake in that dispute (i.e. territory, Israeli security, the Palestinian refugees' right of return, the building of settlements in the Occupied Territories, Jerusalem as undivided capital, water resources, etc). On the other hand, many still hold that religion is too overwhelming and irrational a force to act upon.

It is time to break the 'old habits' of mainstream conflict resolution and diplomacy and think about the sacred and its influence on politics in an altogether different way. Even a diplomat indifferent to religion or with marked atheist predispositions requires a more sophisticated understanding of what people's faith is about and how a religious identity interacts with the outer world, often by becoming political. This appears to be the case especially in Western diplomacy towards the Middle East, where often times it is impossible to draw a clear line of separation between the domain of the sacred and that of secular politics.

Crossing identity boundaries and building bridges across 'impossible divides' becomes the hardest yet most necessary task - a task which religious actors and stakeholders might be better equipped to deal with, perhaps even more than secular politicians or diplomats.

Religious leaders of all denominations ought to be included in the Middle East peace processes as they hold critical information about the sacred values and dynamics at play in the conflict, while commanding a considerable influence upon their respective communities. During the Oslo and Camp David talks, the last two meaningful attempts to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian issue, the diplomatic team consulted with almost everyone (politicians, security experts, academics, civil servants, etc.), but left out prominent clerics and religious representatives. A top-down diplomatic approach neglecting or side-lining the opinions of Jewish, Christian and Islamic leaders turned out to be the 'Achilles' heel' of the peace negotiations, which found no resonance whatsoever within the local communities.

In sum, in order to learn how to negotiate over the 'non-negotiable' and tackle a religiously charged conflict like the Israeli-Palestinian one, diplomats should make a start by developing a much more sophisticated 'religious literacy'.

In fact, religion plays many different roles in political conflicts. It can function as a proxy for ethnic, cultural or economic wrongs (real or imagined), can be one factor amidst a range of historic grievances, or can itself be a cause of conflict. More often than not however, religious factors become so entangled with other aspects of conflict that they must be addressed if there is to be a sustainable peace. Within the School, research on the religious drivers of conflict focuses on two main strands: i) religious fundamentalism and ii) ethical justifications of religious violence.

Our research on religious fundamentalism interrogates its theological underpinnings both within the Abrahamic spectrum and in other world religions. It asks what does a fundamentalist mind-set entail? Are all forms of fundamentalisms religious in their essence? How does religious fundamentalism relate to the secular values of western modernity? Should we engage with fundamentalists, and why? What should be the ethical terms of such an engagement? We also investigate the drivers behind religious fundamentalism's involvement in (or withdrawal from) the realm of politics, and expose students to particular cases which have a bearing on current affairs: US Evangelical Right, the messianic settlers in Israel, Hamas, Iranian Revolutionary Shiism, past and present form Jihadi-Salafism, Hindu/Buddhist radicalism, White Supremacism and other forms of religiously-inspired violent political activism. Research on religious fundamentalism is complemented by work on the ethical justifications of religious violence. Here we investigate the many ways in which religions use their sacred texts and their ethical traditions to justify political violence; how religions frame violence as morally compelling in certain circumstances, and how religious legitimations of violence are challenged and resisted from within those traditions.

Catalysing Religious Peace-making

Although much of our research is aimed at understanding the religious drivers of conflict, in Trinity our attention is firmly focused on contributing to conflict resolution and religious peace-making. This involves challenging the abuse of religious texts in the service of justifying violence; contesting the centrality of 'the just war' in the ethical landscape of religious actors; developing strategies to reinforce and amplify religion's potential for peace-making and partnering with faith-based organisations to support their role in conflict resolution.

During the Bosnian conflict, then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan spoke about the need to restore religion to its rightful role as peace-maker and today many of our academics and alumni are involved in such work throughout the world. Our research and teaching is intentionally interdisciplinary. Academics trained in theology, religion, political and social science, collaborate to advance our understanding of religiously-based conflict and to support religious peace-making. This unique environment facilitates a level of religious literacy not often found amongst policy-makers and means that our alumni are much sought after for their expertise. Currently alumni work as policy-makers, educationalists, and reconcilers, in the United Nations, European Union, World Council of Churches, and with ecumenical, faith-based and secular NGOs. They work across the globe, in Burundi, Georgia, Ireland, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Nepal, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Timor-Leste, Turkey, Uganda and Zimbabwe, bringing their expertise to bear on some of the world's most intractable conflicts.

Enacting a peaceful future calls for vision, imagination and trust in the creative capacities of humans, and the religions have the potential to play a central role in this ethical project.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda Hogan, Professor of Ecumenics and formerly Vice-Provost of Trinity College Dublin

FOOTNOTES

1. Pew Research Centre, *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050, updated to 2060* - www.pewforum.org/

2. Pew Research Centre, *Global Religious Diversity: Half the Most Religiously Diverse Countries Are in Asia-Pacific Region* - www.pewforum.org/