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Religious Radicalization: Challenges to Peace Building

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To address Religion and Peacebuilding we first need to understand the nature of what is popularly called religious violence or religious terrorism, for it is rarely religious.

Religion is often connected with conflict. Religion inevitably discriminates between the righteousness of the ‘true believer’ and the unrighteousness of the rest. Discrimination in belief and values can extend much further to result in ‘unbelievers’ being treated differently, facilitating the process of ‘othering’, the drawing of boundaries around those considered insider and outsider. While these boundaries can remain solely moral, distinguishing between groups with different values and beliefs, the boundaries can also become social, political and economic, such that the religious ‘other’ is subjected to structural disadvantage and inequality. Such systems of oppression are more likely to occur whenever religion and ethnic identity coincide, so that religion becomes associated with exclusive ethnic nationalism. In such circumstances religion can become wrapped up with both ethnic defence and ethnic expansionism, where religion is used by ethnic groups to defend their interests in a nationalist struggle of resistance or in nationalist expansion and colonialism. In these situations, combatants feel god to be on their side.

Taken to extremes, the link between religion and nationalism can result in the elision of territory, identity and religion to give ‘chosen people status’ to a group who become supposedly especially elected by god to inherit a land that is thought to be theirs by right of religious covenant. Afrikaners in South Africa, Jews in Israel, Protestants in Ulster and the Pilgrim Fathers who colonised New England have all claimed chosen people status to give religious justification to their territorial usurpation. The idea of a ‘homeland’ in these circumstances is constructed in part by means of religion. Throughout history therefore, there have been many examples of religious extremism, now popularly called ‘religious terrorism’.
Religious extremism is very rarely conducted under a fairness rule that respects the human dignity of others and treats unbelievers as moral beings. It is possible to tolerate ‘true religion’ when the limits of intolerance are defined by this fairness rule and religious believers do not morally enervate others and deny their humanity. Religion is not therefore inevitably extremist. It is more often the case that political extremists use religion for political purposes, giving their conflicts a religious hue even when the substance of the conflict is deeply political because ‘true religion’ so easily mobilises zealous adherents. Religious extremism is thus mostly a surrogate for political, social and ethnic conflicts that are not disputes over religious texts, rituals, symbols or practices. Religious violence is never just about doctrine. It is for this reason we can refer to religious violence as a myth; what is mythological is that it is religious in substance, not that it is non-violent.

This, however, is not how religious violence is generally perceived. It is necessary to ask, therefore, what happens to religion when politics and religion elide. I suggest there are six problems that characterise politicised religion, which form a backdrop to any reflection on religion and peace.

1. First, there are hermeneutical problems: doctrine is given a political interpretation; politics shapes the canonical emphases; and there is doctrinal excision, where politically inexpedient texts are omitted from mention.

2. Secondly, religion is politicised. Religion is used to provide the meaning, motive and moral justification of political action – apartheid, slavery, anti-Catholicism and sectarianism are examples.

3. Thirdly, the meaning of religion is distorted. Faith commitment is wrapped up with political loyalty as a form of cultural religion rather than an expression of personal faith.

4. Fourthly, religion fragments. The chaos of political diversity affects the unity of religion as it fragments under denominational differences and schisms, which represent political differences as much as religious ones.

5. Fifthly, religious spaces become divided and partisan: some religious spaces become out of bounds; and some religious spaces are never seen as neutral and above the fray.

6. Sixthly, and finally, religion becomes an obstacle to reconciliation not a facilitator, seen as part of the problem, not part of the solution.
This marks the problem of religion and peace. That the connection between religion and peace should be thought problematic is deeply ironic given that the three Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Islam lend considerable doctrinal support to the principles of peace, justice, reconciliation and forgiveness, and that other religious traditions and world faiths like Buddhism and Hinduism are committed to peace as a principle and a practice. The politicisation of these world faiths by some adherents, however, leads to doctrinal excision of the empathetic texts that uphold peace, partisan hermeneutics that interpret some texts as justifying violent ‘othering’, and an approach to religious identity in which it entirely overlaps with exclusionary political, ethnic, racial or national loyalties, turning personal faith into group identity.

Piety becomes politics, losing sight of god. Three things follow from this for religious peacebuilding. First, religious peacemakers are opposed by co-religionists, finding themselves reluctantly drawn into the wider conflict as they are abused, threatened or attacked by co-religionists who have different views on the religion they share. Secondly, religious peacemakers not only require religious zeal to undergird their peacebuilding, they need courage, bravery and tenacity to resist and triumph over opponents from their own religious group. Accusations of being traitors to their religion or their faith community are often combined with the most cutting allegations of all for a person of faith, that they are not true believers, are heathen and beyond the religious pale. Thirdly, the spectacle of co-religionists in dispute with one another over the meaning of religious texts can produce cynicism in the public and members of other world religions and faith communities, encouraging criticism of religion generally or of that religion in particular, which limits the capacity of people to see religion as part of the solution rather than as a source of the problem.
All this has the effect of marginalising religious contributions to peace, and with it also the empathetic religious teachings about love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness and healing. In societies in conflict or merging out of it, people need a moral compass; the politicisation of religion encourages all but the zealous religious extremists to find this in other value systems than religion. The politicisation of religion, in short, facilitates secularisation. Religious peacemakers thus have more than war to try to overcome; it is to support the very legitimacy of religious faith itself.

Further reading


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