FORWARD THINKING

Frontline mediation. Challenging perspectives.

Exploring the Role of Religious Leadership in Promoting an End to Conflict

November 2022

St George's House, Windsor

CONTENTS

Foreword

Against the background of an increasing threat of a third intifada and a growing scepticism over any foreseeable revival of the moribund Israeli/Palestinian peace process, we organised a meeting of religious, academic and political leaders at St George's House, Windsor. The purpose of the meeting was to allow an exchange of experiences and to examine the role of religious leaders in promoting durable political agreements to end conflict. It was prompted by the awareness that religion can frequently complicate the search for a political solution, and, therefore, any meaningful process requires a theological underpinning to avoid the risk of derailment by religiously inspired protagonists. Some think that the failure to recognise the religious dimensions of the Israel–Palestine issue undermined the 2000 Camp David negotiations and most subsequent efforts to resolve that conflict.

The combination of the Enlightenment and the Treaty of Westphalia led Western secular thinking to regard religion as irrelevant in the political sphere and of no real consequence in the search for a peaceful solution to conflict. Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis may have over-emphasised the potential divisive role of religion in shaping the identities of different peoples, but his controversial argument underlined the fact that religion cannot be ignored in the search for solutions to armed conflict. The tracker of major conflicts worldwide produced by the Council on Foreign Relations' Center for Preventitive Action suggests that out of the current twenty-four conflicts, fifteen – over 60% – have a religious dimension. Such figures underline the importance and timeliness of the Windsor consultation, the findings of which are summarised in this short report.

Executive Summary

A conference held in Windsor in November 2022 under the auspice of Forward Thinking explored the role of religious leaders in conflict resolution, with participants offering perspectives from the three main Abrahamic faith traditions.

An open and frank discussion included a hard look at the problems raised by the sometimes toxic history of religious conflicts and the complex link between religious belief and identity, against a background – particularly in secular Western societies – of ignorance about and lack of interest in religious issues, and a generally negative view of the potential contribution of religious leaders to conflict resolution.

This background meant, inter alia, that would-be conflict mediators frequently ignored or underrated the religious element of conflicts, even if the majority of conflicts had a religious element. Moreover, political leaders of communities involved in conflict could cynically play the 'religion card' as a way of consolidating their control over those communities. It could however be very difficult to separate the religious dimension from other political, social and economic issues involved in grievance-driven conflicts.

The potential contribution of religious leaders to the cause of conflict resolution was underpinned by the emphasis in all three Abrahamic faith traditions on tolerance and respect for others whatever their beliefs, and there were positive examples in Northern Ireland and elsewhere of the role religious leaders could play in peace-seeking and the equally demanding task of peace implementation. This required courage and a willingness to risk losing support in a leader's faith community.

Sacred spaces such as Jerusalem presented particular challenges and could easily become targets for violence since they were central to individual and collective identity. But ways could be found to make sacred spaces inclusive and part of the conflict resolution and peace implementation effort.

Recommendations flowing from the discussion included the proposal that interfaith discussions at all levels should regularly review the scope for joint action to contribute towards conflict resolution/peace implementation; that religious leaders should consider production of a joint 'Toolkit'; and that political leaders/diplomats/mediators should always consider the extent to which religious leaders might be involved in conflict resolution and peace implementation.

Introduction

This paper represents Forward Thinking's synthesis of the main points made during a conference of Abrahamic faith leaders held in Windsor from 7–9 November 2022, and the recommendations which emerged from a wide-ranging discussion and in post-meeting consultation.

Perspectives from the Abrahamic Faith Traditions

All participants at the conference emphasised the need for cross-cultural understanding of, and between, those from different community and faith backgrounds. This required a willingness to listen and a commitment to an ongoing process of dialogue, and it was encouraging that interfaith dialogue based on tolerance and equality had made considerable progress in recent years, although this had generally and perhaps necessarily been accompanied with a tacit recognition of theological 'no-go' areas and of the need not to challenge the core beliefs of particular faith groups.

Such dialogue had led in recent years to a number of faith group specific and joint statements, with an increased focus on the identification of shared values and even the scope for joint action in support of human rights and other social/political/economic issues.

There was also felt to be a growing understanding that religious leaders, by their presence and prayer, could contribute to an environment which facilitated dialogue.

But the task was far from complete and new conflict situations could always emerge. Leadership remained critical, in faith communities as in all walks of life.

Moreover, the sometimes toxic history of religious conflicts and the complex link between religious belief and identity meant that in Western secular societies in particular there was frequently political and public scepticism about the potential contribution of religious leaders to conflict resolution. Some participants commented that all of the three Abrahamic religions had potentially problematic elements in relation to claims of the uniqueness of their particular covenantal relationship with God. All three had different historical perspectives which continued to be shaped in the modern world, but which all too often had involved prejudice and violence. All three had core texts which could on occasions be read as justifying violence.

From a more practical perspective, none of the three Abrahamic religions was represented by a fully coherent single organisation, and they exemplified a range of leadership models which complicated equivalence and dialogue, and the issue of 'authority'.

In all three Abrahamic faith traditions, women had generally played a secondary role, and often continued to do so. Women were however important players in conflict resolution, raising the question of whether there might be ways to promote women in religious leadership, and currently for male religious leaders to do more to incorporate women's contribution in their conflict resolution efforts.

All three faith traditions in their long histories had also faced problems of extremism within their ranks, sometimes prompting violence towards not just those in other faith groups, but towards others within the same faith groups who did not share the same set of fundamentalist beliefs.

Nevertheless, within all three of the Abrahamic religions there was considerable emphasis on respect for others and indeed for all human beings, whatever their particular set of beliefs. And in all of them there was a sense of the need to respect human dignity as God-given, with a consequent overriding priority – respect for human life – which at least in theory created the space for compromises to be contemplated in conflict situations in order to respect that priority.

Examples cited included a Jewish prayer calling on Jews not only to bless Jews but to 'bless the human being in the world', and passages from the Quran stating that God had created a world of diversity with many nations and peoples, and that 'there is to be no compulsion in religion'.

Religion, Identity and Conflict: Exploring the Role of Religious Leaders during and post Conflict: the Irish Experience

Northern Ireland was a classic example of a conflict with deep and intractable historical, and to a substantial degree colonial, roots, and with complex links to a number of external stakeholders (the Republic of Ireland, the UK, the US, the EU).

Even the creation of Northern Ireland in the early 20th century had reflected the inability at the time to resolve the identity divide which was in large part religious (Catholic/Protestant) in origin, although the colonial legacy also involved deep political, economic and social inequalities. Nevertheless the key divisions between those living in Northern Ireland were not based on any rational analyses of the balance of socio-economic costs and benefits, but on deep differences of identity and allegiance and equally deep disturbed historic relationships between the different communities, and in such situations peace-building efforts based on the assumption that resolving socio-economic problems would address the root causes of conflict were doomed to failure.

What religious leaders could achieve in such situations had been illustrated in Derry/Londonderry by Bishops Edward Daly (Catholic) and James Mehaffey (Anglican), who had worked together on joint initiatives to help all the people of the city, Catholic and Protestant, and whose work had provided the backdrop for the start of political dialogue and ceasefires.

There was however a need for realism about the intractability of historically-rooted identity divides: in such situations conflict resolution would not be able – perhaps ever – to create a new shared identity. This did not mean that the scope for common ground should not be explored, but the key need was to find a way forward based on living with difference and mutual respect, while continuing to look for potential common causes (e.g. both working class Catholics and Protestants had a shared interest in the economic situation). This could only be achieved based on an acceptance of pluralism, and for this acceptance to be incorporated in the institutions and arrangements agreed as part of peace accords such as the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

However creating such institutions did not in itself guarantee the success of a peace agreement: peace implementation required at least as much time and effort as reaching an agreement, with the additional challenge that political and religious leaders involved in the original deal, and the original compromises, would one day leave the scene with no guarantee that their successors would feel the same commitment to that deal and those compromises, or would have made the same difficult journey towards trusting their interlocutors. Religious leaders at all levels were potentially particularly important in coping with the legacy left by conflict, in terms of issues such as ongoing trauma, addictions to alcohol or drugs, mental illness and the breakdown of human relationships.

If political and other – including religious – relationships did not continue to be conducted in a spirit of respect and fairness they would inevitably fray with the potential for renewed conflict particularly, in the Northern Ireland case, when Brexit had damaged the wider sets of relationships within the European Union which had helped hold the United Kingdom and Ireland together and facilitated the peace process.

At least for the moment this did not appear to represent a serious threat of a return to the kind of violent campaigns of the past, but it did mean there was now a need to recapture the vision and the practice of relationship-building which had characterised the peace process, and to focus on young people who had not lived through the period of intense violence and did not recognise the complexity and work that needed to be done to ensure no return to violence. Education remained crucial, and the reality was that schools in Northern Ireland for the most part reflected the confessional divide with the consequent risk of perpetuating the identity divide.

The Northern Ireland experience also highlighted the fact that 'history is always present' and had always to be dealt with. Reconciliation, and 'spaces of reconciliation' where individuals and communities could come together remained an ongoing necessity.

In all of this, the role of religious leaders remained critical, including in their use of language. One lesson from Northern Ireland was that while such leaders needed to condemn acts of violence by 'both sides', they should never demonise the perpetrators of that violence. To do so was to fail to recognise them as responsible human beings and to inhibit their being held responsible for their actions.

The Northern Ireland experience also underlined the courage required by religious leaders willing to try to play a conflict resolution/reconciliation role, including the willingness to risk alienating parts of their constituencies.

Sacred Spaces

A sacred space was defined as a space where holiness took the place of the profane, where daily routines were broken, and which transcended history and shaped identity; and as (quoting Leonard Cohen) 'cracks where the light comes in'.

Jerusalem, where the three Abrahamic faiths intersected, was a classic case. But there were many others and such sacred spaces were frequently linked to a violent origin e.g. the Serbian sense of Kosovo's special status in the creation of their identity was linked to the battle with the Ottomans on the Kosovo plain in 1389. And tensions over sacred spaces did not only arise between the three Abrahamic faith traditions, but within them, as demonstrated for instance when Sunni or Shia militants attacked mosques affiliated with the other, a problem exacerbated when such militants used their own mosques as military bases/weapons caches etc.

Given that sacred spaces were central to individual and collective identity, in conflict situations they frequently became particular targets for violence by those asserting a competing, and often faith-based identity, thereby seeking to humiliate or even eliminate 'the other'.

The challenge was always to transform sacred spaces into spaces/cities of peace. Religious leaders had a critical role here, in maintaining sacred spaces as spaces of peace, and promoting respect for the integrity of all sacred spaces and for other faiths with a potentially competing identity link to the same sacred space.

Positive examples were the February 2012 communique from the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land to American religious and political leaders, which called for holy sites to be accessible to believers and for their integrity to be respected, and for any act of desecration, aggression or harm to be condemned.

In Jerusalem, the public prohibitions expressed by the Chief Sephardi Rabbi and other rabbis against Jews entering the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif remained an important example of the role religious leaders could play in limiting the possibility of violence breaking out over competing rights to access to sacred spaces.

Consideration needed to be given as to how to make sacred spaces inclusive. One example was the reconstruction (by the Serbian Orthodox Church) of their cathedral in Mostar which had been bombed during the 1990s Balkans conflict. This was being done with international support and also in dialogue with the Muslim community in Mostar, with the goal of encouraging Serbs to return to the city and restoring religious pluralism.

In Cyprus, after the division of Cyprus in 1974, 574 Christian churches and 119 mosques had ended up on the 'wrong side' of the post-1974 dividing line. Initially the leaders of both faith communities had focused on the pain being felt by their own communities, blaming the other side for the problem. But a process of dialogue had led for instance to the prioritisation of the building of mosques in areas where churches had been converted to mosques, to enable the reconversion of the latter, and Christian support for Muslim pilgrimages to Islamic holy sites on the other side of the post-conflict divide.

Cyprus was also cited as an example where peace efforts such as the Annan Plan had failed because of its lack of understanding of the religious elements in the conflict and the importance of religious monuments. While considerable EU resources were now being allocated to the restoration of the island's cultural heritage, this process did not involve religious leaders (seen as 'too difficult' and not committed to the idea of a common heritage). This meant that rather than building trust the process represented the breaking of trust with original owners and users from the two faith communities, and in effect diminishing the pluralistic mosaic of the island by making the sacred places less sacred.

The Cyprus example suggested that, at its best, the dialogue between religious leaders in Cyprus had managed to shift perspectives, enabling the conflict to be understood not as-between the two faith communities but as a joint struggle against forces which denied both communities their rights, thereby changing the image of 'the enemy'.

In Iraq, the rapid action of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the religious establishment in Najaf following the bombing of one of the al-Askari shrine in the northern Iraqi city of Samarra in February 2006, in strictly forbidding Shia tribes from marching into Baghdad to avenge the shrine demolition, had prevented a major escalation of violence.

Analysis and Lessons Learnt

Religion was often seen as the cause or a principal driver of conflict, and sadly 'toxic religion' had left an equally toxic historical legacy in several parts of the world, even dating as far back as e.g. the Crusades or the ancient confessional fault-lines in the Balkans. Indeed, according to the Global Conflict Tracker produced by the Council for Foreign Relations' Center for Preventive Action (with the support of the Carnegie Foundation), of the world's 27 major conflicts 15 had a significant religious dimension. And even in a more secular age (at least in many Western societies), the problem continued, with religious leaders playing a toxic role, as Patriarch Kirill was doing in suggesting that the illegal (in international law) Russian aggression against Ukraine was justified.

Moreover, 'sacred spaces' for religions could often come to represent the toxic, and contested, core of a conflict, as was classically the case with the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, or could be particular targets for one side or another as they challenged the right of 'the other' to a shared political landscape.

But although religious/theological differences could be vitally important, it was rare if not unknown for them to be the only factor involved in conflicts, most of which were grievance-driven. It could indeed be very difficult to separate the religious dimension from other political, social and economic issues involved in generating tension between states and/or communities, particularly when political leaders played the 'religion card' as a way of consolidating their control over particular communities.

The ability of such leaders to play such toxic political games reflected the fact that religion was a key means whereby individuals/communities defined their 'identity', and the sad human reality that the search for identity was always potentially divisive/conflict-generating. Secularisation might be a trend in many – particularly Western – societies, but it did not mean that the historical 'identity lines' for which religion had a significant responsibility did not matter in conflict issues, and when it came to access to jobs/employment opportunities etc.

It was however also the case that secular ideologies/governments could be intolerant and suspicious of religious groupings in their country, seeing the religious loyalties involved as a challenge to their authority. So the problem was not one-way, and authoritarian governments could cause additional problems by failing to respect the role of faith leaders even of the same confession as them, as was apparent for instance in parts of the Middle East where the real space for religious leaders to take a separate line from the governments on whom they frequently depended for resources/appointments could be extremely limited. There could also be a blur – as for instance in Iran – between political and religious leaders in particular societies.

And even if there was always a risk that 'toxic religion' might trump 'good religion' because of its simplistic populist appeal, it was equally important to remember that religion could serve the cause of peace, and that religious leaders could contribute towards conflict resolution drawing on their standing, reach and influence in their communities. But this was only possible if leaders of religious communities were prepared to play a real leadership role and – while remaining solidly rooted in their own faith tradition – to encourage their communities to reach out to 'the other' on the basis of shared values: dialogue, equity, equality, inclusion and respect for human dignity. This required courage and a willingness to risk losing at least some support in that leader's community – to become a 'prophet' from within but challenging a particular faith community, rather than a rabbi/imam/priest/chaplain merely representing that community. And on occasions it could require physical courage, and a willingness to risk becoming a target of violence.

However unacceptably high the human cost of conflict might be, those seeking to resolve conflict also needed to be aware that conflict created opportunity for 'paradigm shift', given the human reality that people were unlikely to shift from safe positions during times of peace and stability. Conflict could provide the momentum for new levels of self-challenge and opening out to 'the other', and religious leaders could be crucial in encouraging such an effort rather than in reinforcing conflicting identities.

There were also some particularly modern factors which needed to be fed into the equation, including the negative role social media could play in promoting simplistic identity narratives based all too often on disinformation.

In today's world, there were in addition particular issues in modern 'multi-confessional' societies. For instance never before had so many Muslim minority communities existed across the world, in particular in America and Europe. Quite apart from grievances which might arise because of actual or perceived inequalities between religious and other communities in particular societies, it was also that case that potential conflicts between faith groups could be exacerbated by conflicts elsewhere in the world eg the Israel/Palestine issue could become a driver for anti-Semitism; and Islamphobia too could be driven by eg media reports of events in other parts of the world. Indeed, lazy media reporting and stereotyping could be a major negative factor.

All this pointed to a need to address and redefine terms such as 'pluralism' and 'tolerance' in a modern context, a task which religious leaders could only share with political leaders who ultimately had to take responsibility for the societies they purported to govern. Religious leaders could not however duck the responsibility to promote such values in and between their faith communities.

For their part, political leaders and those involved in conflict resolution efforts could not ignore religion, and religious identities, if only because it was rare for conflicts not to include a religious element. This was perhaps not surprising given inter alia that Muslims and Christians make up over half of the world's population. It was indeed arguable that part of the failure to resolve some of the intractable conflict situations inherited from history (eg Cyprus, Israel/Palestine) was because those involved in efforts to reach peace agreements had no understanding of, or feel for, the religious issues involved particularly when it came to competing claims to sacred spaces/territory. This could be a particular concern when such efforts involved would-be mediators etc from modern, secular Western societies, without the sensitivity and understanding required to consider the scope for religious leaders to play a positive complementary role, or indeed for such leaders to promote possible theological/ideological compromises to underpin political concessions.

For religious leaders as for political leaders, conflict resolution was a long-haul task requiring time and sustained effort. And this commitment did not end if and when a peace agreement was agreed: it was an ongoing role in terms of implementing any peace agreement and achieving any meaningful long-term reconciliation between the communities involved. This peace implementation role was as demanding and difficult as getting to an agreement in the first place, as the Northern Ireland experience demonstrated. But religion could be particularly important on this front, with the emphasis on forgiveness and redemption in all three Abrahamic faiths, and with religious leaders able to provide the spiritual framework to help individuals in conflict work through difficult and emotive concepts such as forgiveness, mercy, justice, love, trauma, and to develop a new openness which could create positive change.

The past was always present and needed to be dealt with in addressing roots of conflict. Most peace processes began with mutual suspicion and distrust, and listening and open discussion in a safe space were generally necessary to overcome these. But the past could not be ignored, and nor could the religious dimension to deeply-rooted conflicts, if the identity issues usually at heart of a conflict were to be addressed, even among those who no longer 'believed' in any straightforward sense.

Each conflict situation needed however to be addressed separately, on the basis of a deep understanding of the issues involved and with a focus on the particular historical – including religious – factors involved in generating tensions. There was no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the interplay between religion and other factors in conflict situations, even if some common lessons could be drawn e.g. about the optimal role of religious leaders.

Many of the key points in relation to conflicts involving faith groups applied to most if not all attempts at conflict mediation. A mediator needed to be neutral and empathetic, and to focus on building up relationships and inclusive dialogue. In most instances, success meant finding an outcome which both sides could claim as a victory.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Inter-religious/interfaith discussions at all levels should regularly review conflict situations involving members of the relevant faith traditions, and the scope for joint action to contribute towards conflict resolution/peace implementation. Exchange programmes and joint visits to sacred spaces could also be a way of encouraging understanding of other faith communities and of the conflict-faultlines to which religion could contribute.

Recommendation 2

Leaders of the three Abrahamic religions should consider the scope to extend such discussion on conflict issues to leaders of non-Abrahamic faiths, again focusing in particular on conflict situations involving members of the relevant faith traditions, and the scope for joint action to contribute towards conflict resolution/peace implementation.

Recommendation 3

Leaders of the three Abrahamic religions should review whether training for those seeking to become priests/imams/rabbis etc included a sufficient focus on 'conflict and religion' with a view to promoting understanding of the complex historical legacy and the scope for religious leaders at all levels to contribute to conflict resolution/peace implementation.

Recommendation 4

Leaders of the three Abrahamic religions should consider the scope for the production of a joint 'Toolkit' outlining how religious leaders at all levels could contribute to conflict resolution/peace implementation, including case studies of previous successes and failures. Such a Toolkit would inter alia be useful material for the training envisaged under Recommendation 3.

Recommendation 5

Leaders of the three Abrahamic religions should consider whether the curriculum in confessional educational establishments was designed in a way which encouraged and deepened religious identity divides, or opened the way to empathy, tolerance and understanding.

Recommendation 6

Leaders of the three Abrahamic religions should consider whether more could be done to involve women members of their faith communities in conflict resolution/peace implementation.

Recommendation 7

Political leaders/diplomats/mediators should always consider the extent to which religious factors might form part of the nexus of identity issues and other divides involved in conflict situations, and the scope for religious leaders at all levels to contribute to conflict resolution and peace implementation, including the possibility of including a religious track in any peace process.

Recommendation 8

Training for diplomats and others likely to be involved in conflict resolution efforts should include material on 'religious literacy', so that such individuals are sensitive to the importance of religion in shaping the identity issues which were generally at the heart of a conflict.

This report has been written by members of Forward Thinking.

Final responsibility for the content of the report rests with the authors alone.

Feedback is welcome and should be sent to:
admin@forward-thinking.org

FORWARD THINKING

Frontline mediation. Challenging perspectives.