

The Relevance of Interreligious Collaboration in Peacebuilding

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Abstract-This paper closely considers how interreligious collaboration between religious peacebuilders could help to make religious peacebuilding in cases where religion is (part of) the problem more effective. Considering how interreligious collaboration applies to some peacebuilding mechanisms such as conflict mediation and workshops, I identify and discuss four major advantages, which include the following: (i) bolstering the legitimacy and influence of religious actors, (2) enhancing the capacity of religious resources, (3) providing a platform for the combination of intra-/intercommunal human, intellectual and material resources, and (4) sending unspoken and influential messages of love, tolerance and reconciliation to the public.

Keywords: religious peacebuilding, religion-related or religious conflict, conflict mediation and workshops, interreligious relations, collaboration in peacebuilding.

I. INTRODUCTION

Examples of religious peace actions and peacebuilders have been presented in a number of texts, including Little (2007) and Appleby (2000), but the advantages of interreligious collaboration for peacebuilding have not been itemised yet as a way of promoting it as an approach to religious peacebuilding in cases where religion is (part of) the problem. As a way of increasing our understanding of approaches to religious peacebuilding, this paper aims to address the following major question: in what ways can interreligious collaboration between religious peacebuilders help to facilitate settlement in conflict situations where religion is (part of) the problem, for example where the conflicting parties belong to two or more different religious groups or where the object of dispute is a religious one? I suggest here that interreligious collaboration is a deeply helpful approach to peacebuilding or peacemaking, especially in conflicts over religious issues, sacred objects or space, or conflicts between religiously different groups.

This study was partly guided by the school of thought which holds that although religion has caused and/or exacerbated (armed) conflicts in the past, it could and has, through its institutions, sacred texts, rituals, ethical principles and esteemed traditions, notably contributed to the promotion of peace in different parts of the world (Appleby 2000, Gopin 2000 and Little 2007). With the amount of literature on religious peacebuilding in existence, including Appleby, Omer & Little (2015), there is no doubt that there have been religious actors who make efforts to resolve or facilitate the resolution of (armed) conflicts around the world, through

ways such as conflict mediation, preventive diplomacy, and problem-solving workshops. It is partly due to this reality that I believe it is relevant to examine approaches to religious peacebuilding, such as interreligious collaboration. In what follows, I define collaboration and identify the major components of a solid one, and then go ahead to identify the four advantages, before I then conclude.

II. INTERRELIGIOUS COLLABORATION FOR PEACE

(A) *What it means to collaborate*

It is the act of working jointly or a situation whereby two or more persons work cooperatively, usually for the achievement of a shared goal or protection of a shared interest. Among other things, the decision to work jointly is preceded, especially in serious cases, by (1) the willingness to cooperate, (2) joint and/or private consideration of certain issues such as interests of the prospective collaborators, context or target of operation, obstacles and prospects, (3) sometimes disagreements and agreements, and then (4) the definition of plans for the joint operation. Therefore, an interreligious collaboration between religious actors who seek to settle disputes where religion is part of the problem is a situation whereby religious peacebuilders from the different religious traditions or groups involved in the concerned conflict work jointly for the purpose of achieving or facilitating settlement. For instance: (a) When Christian and Muslim leaders work together in organising and hosting workshops in a location where there is a dispute between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority, or (b) when a Catholic and a Pentecostal priest who both desire to achieve the settlement of an ongoing dispute between Catholics and Pentecostals or create opportunities for the settlement both decide to make efforts to positively transform conflictual relationships and address some issues that generate conflict in their religious communities through their preaching. It is the relevance of such a collaboration that I analyse under the following four themes related to legitimacy and influence of religious peace actors in conflicts, the capability of religious resources or tools to promote peace, the combination of human, intellectual and material resources for peacebuilding, and positive body language.

(B) *Advantages of interreligious collaboration*

(1) *Bolstering the legitimacy and influence of religious actors:* This could be seen in its possible effects on mediation. The

conditions under which religious actors can be effective in mediation are similar and perhaps slightly different from those said to enhance effectiveness for mediators generally. According to political scientist Saadia Touval (1982, cited in Hurewitz 1984: 133), a mediator can be successful if he/she has influence with the conflicting parties, serves as a communicator between them, finds areas of common interest between them, offers suggestions to them based on the commonality, and makes efforts to maximise the identified common interest. But before these comes legitimacy. The legitimacy of the mediator and his/her acceptance by the parties go a long way in determining the extent to which he/she can influence the parties and the conflict generally, and the legitimacy is part of where interreligious collaboration could have a positive effect.

Although legitimacy and acceptance do not just have to do with the identity of the mediator, the identity remains of great importance in this regard. And, it is said that the identity of a religious leader commands respect and legitimacy, at least among the believers in the religious traditions of the leader. This is argued by Bercovitch & Kadayifci-Orellana (2009). While holding that the identity of the mediator has significant effect on the success or failure of mediation, they emphasise that religion and religious actors are important in the process, mainly because of the legitimacy and leverage which they bring into it. The faith-based actors would even be more important and influential, according to Bercovitch & Kadayifci-Orellana (2009: 195), in cases where religion is largely relevant and valued, and where 'religion plays a key role in the social life of the parties and in defining their identities'. This is veracious, at least to a large extent. It is true that religious actors or faith-based actors are accorded respect, legitimacy, trust, and even admiration by people, and this gives them the ability to influence conflicting parties for good even without tangible resources such as money.

What is not recognised by them, however, is that in some cases, especially where conflicting parties have different religious identities or belong to dissimilar religious traditions, faith-based actors that represent or belong to certain religious traditions, sects or groups could have little or no respect, legitimacy, trust or admiration in one opposing party or another. In other words, the membership of a faith-based mediator to one of the religious traditions or denominations involved in a conflict could pose a limitation to the mediator's legitimacy. In such cases, the involvement of religious leaders or faith-based actors in mediation and other forms of unofficial peacemaking may not only produce little or no good result, but could possibly fuel anti-group hatred and violence.

So how could this legitimacy, trust and leverage be sustained even in religious conflicts where the faith-based peacemakers belong to the different religious traditions/sects of the conflicting peoples? It is through collaboration between the peacebuilders from the different traditions/sects. When the Christian and Muslim actors, the Catholic and Protestant, the Sunni and Shi'a peacemakers, can cooperate and decide to

carry out peace actions together, approach conflicting actors together or in authorised proxy, mediate as collaborators, then the erosion of legitimacy and trust could be significantly inhibited. 'The identity of the mediator affects the mediator's influence, trust, and legitimacy' (Bercovitch 2011: 84) both positively and negatively. If this identity is a combination of the identities of the conflicting parties, then it is more likely to affect influence, trust, and legitimacy positively in the process of religious mediation, as well as related forms of interactive peacemaking with the involvement of a third-party.

(2) Enhancing the capacity of religious resources:

It enhances the capacity of religious resources to promote peace in the sense that it could make, for instance, the Holy Qur'an relevant and legitimate to the Christian, or the Holy Bible respectable to the Muslim in conflict. Also, a visible collaboration among key figures in given Christian and Muslim communities has the potential of diminishing the relevance, legitimacy, or force of sacred texts and/or 'holy' ideologies that (could) arouse in-group hatred and/or violence against given nonbelievers. This would be done through the leaders' theology, ethical and doctrinal interpretations communicated to the public from 'the pulpit'. In the context of a Christian/Muslim conflict in a place like the predominantly Muslim northern Nigeria which has been plagued by ethnoreligious conflicts, the identification and utilisation of the commonalities between the Christian and Muslim traditions, sacred texts and theology, imagery and vocabulary, rituals, doctrines and values, overseen by educated Christian and Muslim peacebuilders, has a great potential to influence people across the religious divides. It is evident, and it has been acknowledged and examined by many such as Appleby (2000) and Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana (2009), that part of what is central to religious peacebuilding is the maximal utilisation and application of these religious resources. The peacebuilders often frame their strategies within religious traditions, and derive substantial backing from the holiness of their spiritual vocations. Religions embody principles and values which support universal peace, and which can be applied as tools for promoting peace amidst disputes and/or sustaining this peace when it is achieved.

A major obstacle to this, however, is that in conflicts where religion is largely involved, as has been mentioned earlier, the legitimacy of a particular religion or denomination (say Catholicism), its representatives and even its values may be little or possibly non-existent among a given party in the conflict who belongs to a different religious tradition (say, Sunni Islam). This means that for a peacemaker who is of a given religion to have legitimacy while intervening in a conflict where his/her religion is involved, it would do a lot of good if he/she applies his/her religious tools with those of the other side in the conflict. In the context of an intra/interreligious or interdenominational collaboration for peace, religious peacebuilders do not only bolster their legitimacy and the legitimacy of their tools, but are more able

to use these religious tools to redefine conflicts in favour of peace, make scriptural interpretations that contest anti-group attitude and promote social ideals, challenge dominant narratives that drive given conflicts, (re)define identities in ways that recognise the legitimacy of the Other and in ways that do not dehumanise, disrespect or encourage hatred against the 'Other', or as Gopin (2000: 28) puts it, develop 'religious traditions that are accepting of the Other' and/or 'theologies of coexistence' (87), and ultimately transform conflictual relationships even in seemingly intractable conflicts.

(3) Providing a platform for the combination of intra-/intercommunal human, intellectual and material resources: For the achievement of certain goals (peace in this context), such a combination unarguably remains more potent than individual or independent efforts. In terms of Christian-Muslim relations, for example, we know that neither Christianity nor Islam is monolithic. The cooperation of actors from their different sects, particularly those involved in a given conflict, would produce different but collectively relevant suggestions as to how best to approach the case. 'Theologically, culturally, and historically, Islam [as well as Christianity especially of the post-reformation] embodies diverse perspectives on a variety of religious and political concerns' (Hogan 2009: xi). It is common knowledge that in Islam, some of the major sects include the Sunni, Shi'ite, Sufi, Baha'i and Ahmadiyya Muslims, with various theologies. In Christianity, there are the Catholics, and then the Protestants, which is a broad umbrella of several sects, and the faith groups who prefer not to be classified as Protestants. These intrareligious differences could generate conflicts, and could equally be sources of strength for the peacemakers in conflicts where the differences are (part of) the problem. The cooperation between the different peacemakers could facilitate the provision of the hermeneutical, human or even material tools that are most suitable to the conflict whose settlement is sought. For more on how this combination of human, material and immaterial resources could make a significant difference in faith-based peacemaking in religion-related disputes, this section examines the nature of workshops, which are an important medium by which religious leaders and scholars influence conflicting peoples to facilitate settlement.

Workshops have been said to be among the important ways of de-escalating conflicts, as they bring people from the conflicting parties together and serve as platforms for productive interactions. They are part of what is referred to as Interactive Conflict Resolution (ICR) or Interactive Problem Solving. Saunders (2000: 253) defines the concept as 'the processes of nonofficial dialogue, analysis, and...common citizen action that enable citizens to act systematically to change conflictual relationships.' The unofficial dialogue or interactions are platforms where the parties – their members – get closer to each other as they discover and discuss their viewpoints, needs, preferences, motivations, fears and grievances. Fisher (2007: 228) explains the advantages of ICR especially regarding the transformation of people's

perceptions, attitudes, ideas and relationships mainly through workshops; and the subsequent transmission of the positive outcome of this transformation to decision-making organs through leaders and influential participants in the workshops. Whether they are problem-solving or process promoting workshops, as classified by Foltz (1977), they are mainly meant for the realisation of a 'deep understanding, mutual recognition and respect, and jointly acceptable and sustainable solutions –in sum, an improved relationship between the [conflicting] parties' (Fisher 2007: 229).

According to political scientist and Africanist William J. Foltz, the problem-solving workshops are designed to have a direct effect on the conflict and the relationship of the parties through influential participants, whereas the process-promoting ones are meant to have a more indirect and less immediate effect through the positive change that favours conflict resolution. The problem-solving ones are 'characterized by considerably more openness and willingness to examine radical solutions than is usual', thereby appearing as formal negotiation (Foltz 1977: 203). And on the other hand, the process promoting workshops aim 'to prepare participants to take back to their ordinary roles in the outside world new abilities and knowledge which will help them function more effectively' in their organisations and communities, all creating possibilities for settlement (203-204).

So how could a solid and visible interfaith collaboration facilitate the effectiveness of workshops in a situation of Christian-Muslim conflict? First, with the collaboration of Christian and Muslim peacemakers, the workshop will be taking place under the planning of a relatively adequate and largely balanced team that come from the different religious groups in the conflict. And second, if the collaboration is solid, and intellectual resources related to the particular conflict are combined in the process of organising and executing the workshop, there will be a likelihood of more managed series of discussions during the workshop, and ultimately more influential communication. But nonetheless, the collaboration might still be insufficient, especially in cases where the peacebuilders do not have adequate intellectual capability or experience to host and regulate the dialogue, or even for the purpose of sending a message of impartiality to the participants. Therefore, where and when necessary, the faith-based peacebuilders should involve 'skilled and impartial facilitators' who can, together with other actors in the interactive process, 'foster an open and supportive climate for the representatives to examine their perceptions, analyse the conflict, and create innovative directions toward resolution' (Fisher 2007: 231). Also, it is the duty of the facilitators to ensure that participants who do not desire to be passive feel relevant in the discussions, whether they are less authoritative than other participants or not. Such a leadership style that makes sufficient efforts to not knowingly or unknowingly exclude some participants from the interaction has more chances of succeeding than one which creates consequential perceptions of selective inclusion in the

workshop. So, sustaining a balance between a top-down and bottom-up style where both the leaders/facilitators and the (ordinary) participants play corresponding roles in the process of answer-seeking and discussion-regulation seems to be important for effective workshops. And, whereas differences within the organising team could also inhibit the success of the workshops, a solid collaboration that prioritises a given goal over the disagreements and differences between has a better chance of succeeding.

(4) *Sending symbolic, unspoken and influential messages of love, tolerance and reconciliation to the public*: Symbolism is important in peacebuilding. For example, when religious authorities in a given situation are seen by the public as actually united, peacefully sharing platforms, for instance in the media or in public, shaking hands, sitting and laughing together, jointly leading rituals, their behaviour join with their words to send messages of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. In divided societies, those joint actions are potent visible symbols of cooperation. They send invitations to reconciliation to those who view the symbols and possibly those who are indirectly reached through those influenced directly. These create opportunities for settlement of ongoing disputes. As Gopin (1997: 9) observes, even the smallest gestures of leaders are often significant to the public, so it becomes 'a liability when one is saddled with callous leaders, but a boon when a leader understands the healing power of symbolic behaviour'.

Depending on the context, some symbolic images, actions and gestures, could notably induce decisive human emotions and motivate behaviours in ways that verbal communication may not achieve in a given situation. For instance, as Syria's war has been raging since 2011, thousands of lives have been lost and properties worth millions of dollars destroyed, and the Europe migration crisis increasingly worsened partly due to that. People who have closely observed the situation attribute most of the blame to, first, Syria's president- Bashar al-Assad and second, the state actors who have been dropping bombs and supporting militant groups in the country, namely the United States led coalition of actors and then the Russia-Iran block. But arguably, no media broadcast in recent months has generated so much global outrage against these foreign forces in Syria like the photo/video of shocked and wounded Omran Daqneesh, a 5-year-old boy who was pulled out of bombing-generated rubbles in Aleppo in August 2016 (see BBC News, 2016). Such an outrage is similar to the anger that ran across the world in 2013 when images of Syrians, including children, who were suffering from the effects of chemical weapons emerged. In September 2015, the photo of Aylan Kurdi, a 3-year-old boy whose body was found by Turkey's coast equally aroused huge public sympathy and international calls for immediate practical and concerted efforts to handle the migration problem in ways that would save lives and provide succour to the obviously helpless (see Barnard and Shoumali, 2015). Similarly, in times of interfaith or inter-sect conflicts, say between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, Catholics and Protestants or Christians and Muslims, visible and symbolic

images of collaboration between the leaders and influential persons in the conflicting faiths or sects have the potential of generating or increasing the urge for reconciliation among peoples.

III. CONCLUSION

This article is part of the outcome of concerns about the positive role of religious actors in contemporary societies, and part of the growing literature and discussions on religious peacebuilding. Whereas religion has probably caused and/or complicated (armed) conflicts in the past, and whereas there is hardly a general agreement on the extent to which religion can facilitate international and local disputes-settlement around the world, there are credible indications that religion, including its beliefs and values, the culture that arises from these, its institutions and leaders, can and has actually been important in the achievement of peace in conflict zones. Moreover, world religions extol peace, and through its institutions, religion wields a great socio-cultural power and occupies a special location in societies. It is based on these that the research was carried out.

What this article has done is examining how the effectiveness of religious actors in peacebuilding in situations of religion-related conflicts can be enhanced through a visible and solid interfaith collaboration between peace actors. I suggest here that interreligious collaboration between religious peacebuilders could have important positive effects on the legitimacy and influence of the actors, the capacity of the religious tools they use in the process, their capabilities, and ultimately, on the likelihood of compromise by disputants.

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