NOW WHAT?

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMICS, POLICY MAKERS, AND PRACTITIONERS

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Our case studies, ranging from ongoing land disputes in Israel to the continuous quest for sustainable peace and reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda and women responding to violence in their communities in Pakistan, show the significance of religion in each of these conflicts. With different faith traditions in each context, their roles reveal remarkable similarities as religion has been used for both good and bad. How can we then, as academics, policy makers, and practitioners, better understand the concrete role of religion in a given conflict? And how can we strengthen the constructive resources religion brings to conflict resolution? Based on, but at the same time going beyond our discussion, we now present nine concrete implications and recommendations for academics, policy makers and practitioners.

IMPLICATION 1: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR

Religious peacebuilding “still operates on the fringes of the larger field of peace and conflict resolution, which is itself situated on

the fringes of international relations, a field dominated by real-politik or a hegemonic power paradigm” (Abu-Nimer 2015: 16). The side-lining happens from two sides. On the one hand, religious peacebuilding is still often ignored by the secular side. Governmental and NGO-based efforts for integration must therefore include promoting religious literacy in government, business, media, and higher education (McDonagh 2018: 26). On the other hand, many religious initiatives are designed and implemented independent of secular efforts. Here, theological reflection that stresses the cooperative and public dimensions of faith can be helpful, for instance, in public theology (Storarr and Morton 2004). Efforts towards integration must happen from both sides.

IMPLICATION 2: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN DIFFERENT FAITH TRADITIONS

Besides the necessity for bridging the religious–secular divide, there is a need for more and deeper cooperation between different faith traditions in conflict resolution. More often than not, ignorance and prejudices hinder interfaith cooperation. Interfaith dialogue and joint initiatives, however, can serve as powerful inspirations for overcoming violence, not only within a particular conflict, but also far beyond it. The example of Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye, former enemies who overcame their own enmity, not only helped to re-establish peace and trust in their own warring communities in Nigeria, but the interfaith methodology developed by them has been employed in Africa and beyond (for further examples on interfaith conflict resolution see Abu-Nimer and Augsburg 2009).

IMPLICATION 3: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN ACADEMICS, POLICY MAKERS, AND PRACTITIONERS

Effective conflict resolution depends on the cooperation of all relevant actors, religious or not, including academics, policy makers, and practitioners. One powerful example is the “Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies”, a joint endeavor by the governments of Brazil, Sierra Leone, and Switzerland to fulfill the

vision of SDG 16+ (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). This roadmap aims to “mobilize partners from all sectors behind a shared vision” (Pathfinders 2017: 7), including policy makers from the UN and national governments, religious and secular NGOs, and academics. At the same time, integration here goes beyond its functional dimension in terms of a broad coalition between all relevant partners. Integration also refers to the interconnectedness between SDG 16 and other SDGs. This is signified by the plus in SDG 16+. For peace cannot be viewed in abstraction from education, gender equality, and climate change, to name just three related challenges.

IMPLICATION 4: MORE EVALUATION

Despite the increasing number of programs focusing on religious peacebuilding, there is a knowledge gap in the area of evaluation (Vader 2015) and there is a “pressing need for greater monitoring and evaluation of religious peacebuilding work – and peacebuilding generally” (Hayward 2012: 8). One of the pioneer studies in this area is the meta-review of interreligious peacebuilding evaluations, which was conducted by Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium (PEC), led by Alliance for Peacebuilding (Vader 2015). Evaluation of religious peacebuilding generates better understanding of what is effective religious peacebuilding, and supports evidence-based policy and practice. A deeper understanding of the nature and impact, as well as strengths and weaknesses of religious conflict resolution, would in turn help with integrating it into the larger academic, political, and societal frameworks.

One helpful example is the South African Reconciliation Barometer, the world’s longest running public opinion survey on national reconciliation. Since 2003, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa conducts nationally representative public opinion surveys on South Africans’ attitudes towards reconciliation. While not specifically geared towards examining the role of religion in reconciliation, its extensive data base allows for the reconstruction of the impact of religion. The availability of all surveys online not only ensures the worldwide accessibility of the data, but also facilitates chronological and comparative approaches necessary for in-depth evaluation.

IMPLICATION 5: BETTER INCLUSION OF WOMEN

Most of faith-based peacebuilding work focuses on clergy, which, traditionally, have been mostly men. Women are often marginalized in these processes, and consequently, their perspectives and experiences are excluded. Many women of faith are actively involved in peacebuilding in their communities. In fact, studies have shown that women are particularly effective agents of social change and conflict resolution (Hayward 2012; Marshal et al. 2011; cf. the case study of Pakistani women in Chapter 10).

One recent attempt to better include women at various levels in conflict resolution processes are the current negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Zalmay Khalilzad, Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation at the US State Department, proposes a formula that not only includes senior government officials in the negotiations, but also representatives of the political opposition, of civil society, and in particular, women (Al Jazeera 2019). Khalilzad's approach represents the growing recognition that for too long the vital contributions of women in processes of conflict resolution and reconciliation have been sidelined.

IMPLICATION 6: BETTER INCLUSION OF THE YOUTH

At the same time, more attention in conflict resolution theory and praxis must be directed towards the youth. While the so-called “youth bulge” in many countries of the Global South has already given rise to concern about potential destabilizing effect, its tremendous potential goes largely neglected. Children and youths are often the most vulnerable group and those most severely affected by conflict. Engaging them in peacebuilding and trust building activities, for instance, through interreligious partnerships between local synagogues, churches, and mosques, is therefore critical. Youth leaders such as Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg show the remarkable transformative power of young people that can quickly grow in outreach from a local to a national and even global scale.

Given the wide scope of SDG 16, SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality) are of particular importance. The current UNHCR report on refugees and education shows that more than half of the children who had to leave their home, often

due to violent conflict, have no opportunity to attend school. Yet children and youths who do not attend schools are more likely to be involved in child labor or criminal activity, gangs, and militias. Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, points to the direct connection between peace and educating the youth by arguing “Education will prepare refugee children and youth for the world of today and of tomorrow. In turn, it will make that world more resilient, sustainable and peaceful” (UNHCR 2019: 9).

IMPLICATION 7: BETTER ENGAGEMENT OF THE MEDIA

Connected to the need to better include the youth is the need for conflict resolution in general, and religious conflict resolution in particular, to become better in strategically engaging the media and social media. The events connected with the so-called Arab Spring, for example, were largely driven by the youth and (social) media. And while there is no shortage of media outlets preaching religious hatred and intolerance—ISIS, for example, demonstrated how the media can be used creatively and effectively to disseminate their message of fear and destruction—religious peacebuilders have to catch up in employing these powerful instruments for the means of peace and tolerance.

Abu-Nimer points to three stumbling blocks on the way to successfully engaging the media (Abu-Nimer 2015). First, the existing religious media outlets are often part of the problem rather than the solution by promoting intolerance or even outright violence. This holds true for countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, or Somalia, as well as the Western communities such as ultra conservative evangelicals in the US. Second, especially in the Western hemisphere, many media outlets are influenced by the post-Enlightenment paradigm which regards religion as utterly private with no legitimate relevance for the public sphere. Accordingly, many media outlets lack religious literacy necessary to adequately understand and represent the religious dimension of many public issues. Third, religious peacemaking is usually not regarded as the most interesting type of news and therefore deemed neglectable. Filmmaker Wim Wenders points to the difficulties in portraying peace contrary to the more “exciting” violence (Wenders and Zournazi 2013).

IMPLICATION 8: TAKING THE ISSUES OF PROSELYTIZATION AND INSTRUMENTALIZATION INTO ACCOUNT

Religious actors often face the charge that their main goal is to attract followers and convert others. “The fear of conversion often comes up in interfaith engagement and it is not unfounded, because numerous traditions do contain a mandate to spread the faith” (Garred and Abu-Nimer 2018: 12). This can be a serious impediment to peacebuilding between religious groups. At the same time, one needs to acknowledge that conversion is not an exclusively religious phenomenon. Rather, “Both secular and faith-based organizations are engaged in some form of conversion. ... All organizations aim to transform the way people in developing countries think and operate” (Heist and Cnaan 2016: 12). In the case study of post-genocide Rwanda, for instance, conversion and evangelization were named as explicit goals of the Christian churches in the context of reconciliation and development, without, however, making it a prerequisite for service delivery. This sensitive subject should therefore be treated in a differentiated manner and framed under the aspects of transparency and equality. If there is a goal of religious conversion, is it made transparent? Is service delivery independent of religious affiliation? Negative answers to these questions would indicate a problematic view on proselytization and the possible instrumentalization of service delivery for religious purposes.

IMPLICATION 9: BETTER ENGAGEMENT OF INDIGENOUS AND NON-ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS

With much of Western attention focusing on the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—in conflict resolution, little attention is being paid to the contributions of indigenous and dharmic traditions (Hayward 2012: 6–7). Similar to Abrahamic faiths, these traditions have a wealth of resources and values that promote peacebuilding and justice, and many religious actors in these traditions play critical roles in their communities to resolve conflicts. Therefore, there is a pressing need for academics, policy makers, and practitioners to engage these traditions to broaden and deepen the field (Hayward 2012: 7).

Religions for Peace is an example of a multi-religious coalition that engages in common action for peace amongst the world's religious communities. As the world's largest and most representative multi-religious network engaged in promoting peace, Religions for Peace engages local communities from the grassroots level to senior political leaders. At the 10th World Assembly in Lindau, Germany, in 2019, Religions for Peace adopted the Peace Charter for Forgiveness and Reconciliation. Its preamble states,

The vision of the Peace Charter for Forgiveness and Reconciliation is that the process of forgiving is vital if healing and reconciliation are to take place, as part of our collective efforts to seek justice, harmony and sustainable peace. Fostering and practicing forgiveness has the power to transform memories and deep-seated responses to legacies of injustice, conflict and war. ... Faith and spiritual traditions guide and inspire us to awaken the best of our human potential, by practicing compassion, mercy, kindness, love, forgiveness and reconciliation, and to positively reshape our destinies.

(Peace Charter for Forgiveness and Reconciliation 2019)

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