Can religious groups help to prevent violent conflict?

LAURA PAYNE 23 March 2015

When peace and violence are examined through a faith-based lens, a different set of factors come to the foreground.

A glance at the daily news confirms that religion is regularly complicit in violence. In early January of 2015, Boko Haram killed up to two thousand people in Baga, Northern Nigeria. As this massacre unfolded, two men stormed into the offices of Charlie Hebdo magazine in Paris and murdered 12 people. Hijacking a car, they told the driver "If the media ask you anything, tell them it's al-Qaeda in Yemen." Both before and after these events the so-called Islamic State (IS) drip-fed films showing the beheadings of civilians and hostages in territory it controls.
We are all too familiar with the idea of violence in the name of religion, and not just Islam. Other faiths have been complicit in violence throughout history, from the Crusades in the Middle Ages through to the recent brutalities of the Lord's Resistance Army in Central Africa. In July 2014, Israel's massacre in Gaza killed nearly 2,200 people, virtually all of them Palestinian Muslims.

But to recognize that violence often involves religion is not the same as saying that religion is the driving force of violence. Conflicts normally have their causal factors firmly embedded in the material world. Politicians and armed groups use religion to divide neighbour from neighbour, call people to arms, and raise the stakes in their pursuit of power. Religious identity and ideology matter, but they tell us more about how conflicts are set in motion than about their causes.
Debates about religion and violence have raged for years and intensely so now. But one area that's underexplored is how people of faith can help to *prevent* violence—not just to manage or mitigate it, but ensure it doesn't take hold in the first place.

I work with religious groups in the thick of violent conflict in places as diverse as Nigeria, Zanzibar and Solomon Islands. Sometimes these groups have had a hand in exacerbating violence, directly or indirectly. At other times they have played a peacemaking role. And sometimes they have done both, even simultaneously.

In Rwanda, for example, several hundred clergy were killed during the genocide of 1994, some for being Tutsi and others for refusing to stand by as Tutsis were slaughtered. But priests and nuns have also been convicted as génocidaires, and

[church groups have been accused of failing to bear witness](#) to atrocities or call those responsible to account.

Wars are never simple, and neither are religious institutions. But always, and even in the most desperate of places, I've come across people working to prevent violence who are inspired by their faith. They are remarkable not only in their conviction and commitment, but also in their foresight. To prevent violence one must anticipate it. This is what separates conflict prevention from response. To anticipate violence is rarer than one might think. To organize in advance of it is rarer still. Sitting politicians have little incentive to raise the alarm in case it reflects on their competency. As is clear in Syria, the international community doesn't always welcome warning calls to intervene in internal conflicts, however high the levels of atrocity. And ordinary people are buried in the everyday, trying to keep body and soul together and the wolf from the door.

But some donor governments and international organisations are now investing in conflict prevention. They sponsor election-monitoring missions, early warning systems, dialogues, and programmes to counter extremism. Groups like [Ushahidi](#) (or "witness" in Somali) crowd-map data during crises through text messaging and email, and use it to provide real time information and lay the groundwork for truth telling and accountability.

These initiatives appeal to the technocratic base notes of policymaking—where every problem can be hacked and social conflicts are just another bug in the system. This is ironic, because working with religious groups has taught me that preventing violence is more of an art than a science.

For all their readiness to build technocratic prevention mechanisms, most donor organizations have a blind spot when it comes to recognising the work that's already being done by religious groups. I can't blame them. Donors have their paymasters too. They are expected to show value for money and steer clear of controversy. They are risk averse, and working with religious groups is fraught with risk.

But this stance represents a huge missed opportunity. In the Nigerian cities of Jos and Kaduna, for example, church-led and interfaith groups are helping to tip the balance in favour of non-violent responses when crises emerge. They have the local access and real time information to intervene at critical moments. And they have the trust and influence required to build bridges between decision-makers, working over the long term so that these relationships are more resilient. One interfaith group formed of ex-combatants in Kaduna literally counts the costs

of conflict with communities, bringing home how destructive it really is. How much does a dead cow cost? A dead child? A burnt house? It can be harder for agitators to mobilise communities when they can put a figure on what will be lost. Another group in Jos organises local peace committees. Comprised of men and women, young and old, from different religious and political creeds and backgrounds, these committees are the eyes and ears of their towns and villages. They look for indicators of violence like irregular vehicles on the road at night, a tipped-off neighbouring tribe packing up and moving on, strangers asking questions, dialed-up political rhetoric.

When trigger points are hit the committees can take action quickly. There's often a gap between raising the alarm and effecting a response, but experience shows that the more localised the responses are, the quicker and more effective they're likely to be.

Other forms of prevention work try to tackle the underlying causes of conflict. In the Democratic Republic of Congo for example, the church-supported Baraka Academy teaches orphaned children whose parents were killed during successive conflicts in the Ituri district. Why? Because the founders had the foresight to know that today's street children, soaked in violence, are likely to become tomorrow's child soldiers, or the machete-wielding, glue-sniffing enraged young men who politicians can hire for $20 a time to go on the rampage. This is conflict prevention on a generational scale, attempting to halt the powerful dynamics that propel violence into the future.

Many of the characteristics that are vital for prevention work—like trust, local knowledge and navigation, and foresight—might apply to non-faith based organisations too. But the pastoral support that faith groups can provide and their closeness to people at life's most important moments mean they can often form relationships of a different quality.

Sometimes the importance of spirituality in guiding behavior is explicit, as in Solomon Islands where the hands of ex-combatants are symbolically washed when they turn over their weapons.

Also in Solomon Islands, a prison chaplain told me how in the reconciliation ceremonies he hosts, "The offenders say something and then they ask the victims to forgive. I hold out my stole and everyone holds [a part of it] to show that they are connected. I say a prayer and the victims and perpetrators hug each other. The perpetrators stay in prison because that it is the law of the land, but they are now brothers and sisters again."

Sometimes the link to spirituality is less overt but still pervasive. Worldviews are underpinned by religious philosophies from which people draw strength to persevere with relationship building in testing circumstances. And sometimes, as with non-faith based organisations, it is simply being a local, permanent, trusted presence that bequeaths legitimacy and the mandate to act.

Of course these are success stories. What about the dilemmas involved in working with religious groups? They can be complicit in violence, and oppressive of women, minorities, young people—most people, in fact. But governments can be oppressive too. They can discriminate, abuse, mismanage, torture and kill. And if isn't possible to change society without engaging with governments, the same goes for religion. In contexts where large parts of the population are religious (which means most of the world), religious groups are simply too big to ignore.

Even if they weren't, there is a lot to learn from them. When conflict prevention is examined through a faith-based lens, a different set of factors come to the foreground. Technical fixes seem less important, faddish even. The importance of relationship comes into focus. The approach to time changes. The slow, steady approach I've witnessed in many places can yield real results. The tortoise can overtake the hare.

Working with faith groups to prevent conflict may not be easy, but it is important. Ultimately we have to work with societies as they exist, not as we would like them to be. Where communities are held together in large part by religious institutions, that means coming out of the comfort zone of secularity.

Faith-based approaches are a provocation. They turn some of the conventional wisdom that has grown up around conflict prevention on its head. And that is badly needed—never more than now.

About the author

Laura Payne is a Research Associate at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University. She works with civil society groups, churches and mosques to identify forms of conflict prevention that build on local people's existing capabilities and grounded understanding and blogs at www.allroadsout.com. Funding for the research that underpins this article was provided by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Making All Voices Count group.