

The State of the Evidence in Religions and Development

Accessible Summaries

Religions, Peace and Conflict (summary written by Susan Hayward)

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What have the main debates on religions, conflict and peace been in the last 20 or so years?

The most common, perennial debate - one you encounter again and again in this space - has been whether (or which) religions cause violent conflict ... or are at least whether religions are responsible for deepening or escalating violent conflict. Relatedly, there has been a lot of debate about whether a particular conflict is a religious conflict or not. For example, I'm often asked: is the situation in Israel and Palestine a religious conflict? Despite decades - even centuries - of debating questions like these ones, they persist, with people arguing passionately in defense of opposing answers, never seeming to reach a resolution.

A challenge in answering these kinds of questions lies in the difficulty of defining religion, or at least drawing a distinction between what is religious and what is not. In reality, the world cannot be so neatly compartmentalized into the boxes we make for it. There are some historical reasons that we tend to associate things that are violent and unjust with religion, and peace and prosperity with secularity. But the reality of human society and power is far messier than those categories relay. Both "religious" and "secular" interests (like those economic) have driven and legitimated violence in the modern world... and both have contributed to peace and human rights. They are ambivalent forces, to use the language of Scott Appleby.

When the more recent field of scholarship and practice focused on religions, conflict, and peace first arose in earnest in the 1990s here in the US, there was a strong impulse to correct a blinder to, or bias against - religion in the existing literature and policy. And so scholars at this time directed a good deal of attention to the pro-social dimensions of religions and their contributions to peace - Catholic nuns on the front lines of violence, Buddhist monks leading peace walks in Cambodia, religious ideas at the very heart of human rights frameworks. This helped in some ways, for more to appreciate the range of religions' impact, but it also sometimes reinforced this idea that religions are distinct, autonomous, easily distinguished forces in human society.

And this gets us back to the question about whether a particular violent conflict is religious or not... In many conflicts, there are religious dimensions, but they aren't the only ones that exist. So yes, the situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories has religious dimensions to it, but so to does it have dimensions related to economic interests and political power, or to nationalism and ethnic identity. Rather than asking "is this conflict religious?" I think it's more helpful to ask "how are religions intersecting with other factors in this conflict to drive violence and peace?"

Questions like these ones, which have arisen out of the debates of the last couple decades, have helped peace practitioners embrace an understanding of religions that is more contextually-based, which will make them more effective.

What have been key trends in the last 1-5 years?

In recent years, helpful criticisms arose about the gendered assumptions and consequences of earlier efforts to engage religious actors and factors in peace efforts. Far too often, peace practitioners engaged primarily – sometimes exclusively – traditional authorities in religions, often older men. But as we know, violence affects those of different genders, sexualities, and ages differently, and so these communities' needs for peace are different. Moreover, women and others who may not hold traditional or institutional authority in some religions, often still have enormous insight and influence in shaping religions. They may also be sensitive to dimensions of religion that are legitimating particular forms of violence, precisely because of their experience as women (or as a sexual and gender minority) who've been harmed by certain religious practices, stigmas, or ideas. And so, religious peacebuilding efforts - and by this I mean peace efforts that seek intentionally to draw on different dimensions of religion (actors, practices, symbols, etc.) - are increasingly more gender and generationally diverse and address issues of gender injustice that are often an enormous component of violent conflict.

I've also seen in general a more complex understanding of religions being considered among policymakers and practitioners. Efforts to advance what's called "religious literacy" among those interested in building peace have moved away from simplistic understandings that seek to replace "good" religion with "bad" religion, or that only think of religion in its institutional dimension. There's greater understanding that all religions are internally diverse, that they change over time, and that they are culturally, politically, economically, and in so many other ways, entangled and embedded in human society. There are no neat boundaries that mark the borders between religions and those things we normally define as secular - like political institutions or legal structures. They shape one another.

This embrace of the messiness has been a good thing, even if it's made the design of religious peacebuilding more complicated. It has helped to ensure that these efforts do not unintentionally reinforce forms of injustice, or false distinctions (including between the religious and the secular). These trends are ensuring that religious peacebuilding efforts are more contextually-designed and implemented, recognizing there is no one religious peacebuilding strategy that will work everywhere.

Finally, over the years the field of scholarship and practice at this intersection has become inclusive of far more diverse viewpoints within and between religions. At its outset, it focused quite a bit on Christianities and Islams. Over time, it has come to incorporate more Jewish, Buddhist, and Hindu actors. I'm particularly excited about the contributions in recent years of indigenous traditions in this space. These traditions have much to offer the field: new ideas about - and practices for - promoting sustainable human and ecological well being. They also can help us think even more critically about what we consider religion to be, as these traditions don't often fit neatly in the colonial, institutionally-focused standard definition of religion (and in fact, indigenous practitioners sometimes reject the term "religion," because of its colonial legacy).

What are key takeaway points from these debates for practitioners, policymakers, researchers and civil society groups, including faith actors, who work on religions, conflict and peace?

I hope this survey of the scholarship and practice can leave those of us committed to just peace who have an appreciation for the fundamental and important place of religions in many - if not most - societies worldwide with a few takeaways.

First, to embrace and further this move away from defining and engaging religions in a way that fails to appreciate their complexity and multi-dimensionality. It's tempting to engage simply with formal religious institutional bodies and actors in our peace efforts - it's far easier. But just as we know political and economic change cannot simply come through top-down measures, so it goes with religions. We must engage across religious traditions - the formal and informal, within grassroots communities and at the highest level of formal religious power. This will ultimately be more strategic - and also create outcomes that are more just and sustainable, especially when it comes to questions of gender.

Second, to ensure that religious peacebuilding strategies are not niche or siloed. We tend to think of religions as a distinct dimension of human society, separate from the secular. And we build our religious peacebuilding efforts accordingly - getting religious leaders together to dialogue and build relationships or to de-escalate tensions when they arise. Those efforts are important, but they are limited. We must better integrate religious dimensions of peacebuilding into multi-sectoral approaches, because at the end of the day conflicts are driven by structural issues that must be addressed.

And I want to end on a point that might seem surprising. That is that we need to be careful not to over-emphasize or accentuate the importance of religions in the work of peacebuilding. Don't get me wrong - I think it's critical these dimensions be considered for a lot of reasons - including that these dimensions and aspects of social and political life often matter to folks living in situations of violent conflict. And so, this can help advance localization and de-colonization in peace efforts by the international community. And yet, I also encourage all to "right-size" the role of religion in peacebuilding, a term coined by Peter Mandaville. This means, do not over- nor under-emphasize the contribution of religion to violence-making or peacebuilding.