

Religious Contributions to Conflict Prevention and Transformation

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We are on quite an important panel here. After all, getting conflict prevention mechanisms and processes right is the key to creating world peace. Prevent violent conflict from erupting, and conflict resolution and post-conflict reconciliation become moot points. Answer this and topics discussed at other panels at this conference, mediating with armed actors or political reconstruction, become concerns of the past. Conflict prevention, in this sense, is the Hope Diamond of the peace field.

This dilemma is reflective of so many of the essential dilemmas in the field of peacebuilding. In many ways, we already know what is needed to prevent the outbreak of violent conflict: human rights, fair and sustainable development that eradicates poverty, power-sharing, equal distribution of resources and wealth, education. But still we have not perfected the mechanisms to halt the powerful dynamics that propel violence forward. Still violent conflict persists around the world.

Stop. Parenthesis: I'm sure this point has been made countless times before at CPN conferences, but it always bears repeating. What we are talking about today is the prevention of violent conflict, not the prevention of conflict per se. Conflict is a fundamental and inevitable part of social functioning – conflict over finite resources, over the definition of the common good. Indeed without conflict – as a rejection of the status quo – progress is unlikely to occur in those places where injustice arises. What we seek to prevent is not conflict, then, but violence as the means to address and resolve conflict. So what peacemaking is about is the production and sustenance of non-violent means to resolve conflict in a manner that promotes justice and equality in addressing the root causes of conflict. Close parenthesis.

I have been asked to speak about religious actors and institutions in conflict prevention, and what I want to do is speak to how the religious realm, not least the Catholic Church, has the capacity and resources to address what are some of the gaps in this field – things the political system has not quite perfected or does not have the capacity to address in its own attempts to prevent violent conflict. So where I am going to start my remarks is with the public policy world’s standard definition of conflict prevention, which is this: in an environment characterized by a series of minor crises contributing to, and symptomatic of, deteriorating societal and political stability that can lead to the outbreak of violence, conflict prevention is defined narrowly as the capacity for early warning and response. Early warning in the sense of systems that can raise alerts to outsiders of the increasingly volatile situation. And early response in the sense of on-the-ground capacity to address and mediate disputes between conflicting parties and to address the root causes contributing to the conflict as a means to de-escalate it before violence erupts.¹

Within the parameters of this narrow definition of conflict prevention, I want to offer two suggestions here about what resources the Church already has at its disposal that could be marshaled and strengthened to provide early warning and response:

1) Early Warning

Various international organizations and national governments have attempted to piece together early warning systems in recent decades, motivated by post-Rwanda priorities and lessons-learned. They have not yet gotten it together – they have found that they simply do not have the reach or the institutional capacity to be able to monitor appropriately social, political, and economic dynamics in the far corners of the world.²

One thing I don’t think they have quite appreciated, though, are pre-existent structures

¹ For a sound treatment of conflict prevention techniques, particularly by international organizations, see: Conflict Prevention: from Rhetoric to Reality, Volumes I and II (Schnabel, Albrecht and David Carment, eds. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004).

² This is a consistent complaint by many who assess the role of trans-national organizations in early warning. A. Walter Dorn writes “UN officials stationed in the field ... are limited in what they can observe, anticipate, or report,” and that delegating monitoring responsibilities to UN offices “may overextend capacity and mandate of the UN field offices.” Dorn also writes that individual actors in the local population are “generally less biased, inside sources, [and] may be the best sources of info on the capabilities and intent on conflicting parties” (“Early and Late Warning by the UN Secretary General” in Conflict Prevention: From Rhetoric to Reality, Vol 1. Pp 305-344) 320-321.

that are already perfectly situated to serve as indigenous systems for early warning. Like religious institutions. Clergy are on the ground, including in rural areas. They tend to have a good sense of local political and social relations and disputes affecting their communities, certainly much more so than any diplomat who has parachuted in for a weeklong assessment. In Sri Lanka, where I have worked in the past, in the villages when a conflict is escalating, people generally do not call up their local UN representative, nor even their local politician (like in many places around the world, democracy is a weak system and local politicians are not generally trusted to respond to the conflict in a just manner). Instead, these folks go to their religious leaders. And so these local religious leaders have knowledge the international organizations desperately are looking for with regards to local conditions.

All this said to prove the point that clergy are already well placed to take upon themselves a responsibility to monitor these local dynamics and raise alerts when dynamics that can lead to an outbreak of violence are emerging, and that they have the institutional capacity for relaying information to the central authorities. So for example, a team of clergy in rural Burundi or Guatemala, recognizing the warning signs of an alarming deteriorating situation, can send messages to their national council of Bishops, who can put pressure on government officials to respond, or, I suppose, even send message all the way to the Vatican, who may more effectively persuade appropriate international institutions to respond. I know this sort of early-warning is already happening ad hoc within the Church, but I would suggest that it could be better systematized. What is needed to make this already existent early warning system effective is training for local clergy in monitoring and recognizing the warning signs of alarming political and social instability, and the creation of an institutional system for relaying information about local conditions in a manner that can ensure swift and proper response. Moreover, this is the perfect opportunity to create horizontal linkages with other peace-minded actors – to partner with international and regional organizations in the pursuit of a more coordinated and effective system for early warning.

2) Early Response

Situated as they are in the heart of villages, and oftentimes commanding respect and trust from local communities, clergy can themselves address rising tensions *if* they have the tools and are empowered to do so. They simply need training in alternative dispute resolution and mediation. One suggestion I want to stress forcefully is that in order to be effective as a mediator between communities in conflict, however, these religious leaders will need to be trusted – not seen as biased towards one community or insensitive to the concerns of the other. This means that clergy should be encouraged to build constructive and respectful relationships with other religious, ethnic, and political interest groups as standard practice, before violence erupts. When inter-communal conflict does erupt, then, the clergy will already have relationships with various groups, and with leaders from all sides, that will grant them more authority and capacity and trustworthiness to respond and mediate. In Nigeria, my program’s partners Imam Asafa and Pastor James Wuye have demonstrated time and again how their multi-religious partnership (in addition to their authority as religious clergy) gives them a great deal more credibility and access to address outbreaks of conflict between Christian and Muslim armed groups. I will also tout James and Ashafa’s work as an early warner and responder – through their training of religious clergy both Muslim and Christian in mediation, a training that encompasses both Islamic and Christian ethical teachings about peace as well as training in conflict analysis and conflict resolution techniques, they have created just this sort of clergy-based system of conflict responders across Nigeria – a network of clergy who can recognize and respond constructively to emerging conflict in order to de-escalate it before it erupts in violence.³

But let’s also bear this in mind: this definition of conflict prevention as I describe it here is a rather narrow short-term immediate response to emerging violent conflict just as it is about to erupt. It is reactive conflict prevention, not proactive measures to strengthen the capacity of communities to address conflict nonviolently or to resolve the root causes of conflict. As the

³ You can read more about James and Ashafa in “Mediating between Christians and Muslims in Plateau State, Nigeria” in *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking: When Religion Brings Peace, not War*. David Smock, ed. (Peaceworks No. 55. Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2006). Or by watching the USIP-sponsored documentary, *The Pastor and the Imam* (Dir. and Prod. Alan Channer. FLT Films. Initiatives of Change, 2006).

title of our panel suggests, conflict prevention is not just early warning and response. Conflict prevention is also about creating new social norms and mechanisms that can proactively address the political, economic, and social causes of violent conflict, promoting transformation of structures in the process. When taken more broadly in this sense, religious actors and resources have an even more vital role to play.

There are two roles they can play I'll discuss briefly here, neither of them new to the Catholic Church.

- 1) In addressing structural political and social injustice

Pope John Paul II said it best when he said that in order to build peace, one must work for justice. When a group of people is institutionally or socially prevented from their just access to political power and decision-making, economic means of uplift, or fair involvement in and access to the social good, communal discontent is an inevitable response. When unable to address political or social grievance through non-violent means, these groups may resort to violence in defense of their dignity.

Certainly there is language enough within religions, not least in Christianity, to motivate a faith-based commitment to ensuring that the marginalized are given just and equal access to resources necessary for their well-being – not just through humanitarian assistance and charity, not just through addressing the *symptoms* of the conflict, but through advocating for institutional change that addresses the causes. The ideological warrant and the ethical framework provided by religion can go far in changing social and political norms. But religious leaders can advocate for this sort of change through coordinating non-violent mobilization as well. And again, here, the institutional capacity of the churches provides a perfect structure for this sort of mass non-violent mobilization. I'll use as an example the churches in the civil rights movement in America as an example of marshalling of ideological and institutional religious resources to serve a goal of peace and

justice. Taking advantage of their horizontal ties across the length of the nation, local churches working together networked and coordinated an en masse mobilization of people (If a bunch of Protestant denominations, normally so divided and uncoordinated, can mobilize this sort of a movement, surely the Catholic Church can!). They drew on religious language and ethic to encourage a commitment to nonviolence. They drew on spiritual strength and resolve to face down brutal responses and inevitable snags the movement hit. They depended on visionary leaders with rhetorical gifts, many of them preachers who offered sermonical speeches as a means to rally and define their mission and to convince others of the justness of their cause. It is hard to imagine the political and social changes that resulted from the civil rights movement without the role of the churches to coordinate such a large, sustained, morally persuasive, and nonviolent movement.

Religious groups and individuals can thus marshal theological, moral, and institutional capacity to put pressure on social, political, and economic mechanisms to constantly strive towards greater equality and justice. The Catholic Church has a wonderful program for conflict prevention in its very own Catholic Social Teachings, which can and should be approached as a program for conflict prevention.

2) Social-Psychological healing and transformation

But unjust institutional realities are not the sole source propelling violent conflict. There are also social-psychological factors at play. These can take the form of historical grievance that leads a group to take up violence as a means to right some past injustice they faced, or this can emerge as communal suffering, fear, and existential insecurity which leads to violence as a way ensure control and security for one's group, or this can take the form of what is often called "othering" – a dehumanizing of social groups other than one's own and a

scapegoating of one's own problems on them.⁴ Religious resources are very well suited to respond to these individual and social psychological issues, in many ways more so than political resources, which do not have much reach into the psyche and spirit of individuals and communities.

Let's take "othering" as an example. Social ordering inevitably creates communal groups with shared identities that are defined by their internal common interest or make-up and by their differentiation from other social groups. This is a normal process of social ordering and it need not lead to violent conflict. The problem arises when these group identities are forged in an exclusionary way that limits partnership or even shared identity with other groups, in a way that promotes the specialness of one group at the expense of the other. This process of othering – which creates an inability to empathize or even engage with others peaceably – is a necessary component to overcoming the moral hurdles in place to prevent violence being inflicted on others. We must de-humanize and fail to recognize what is essentially good and sacred about the other in order to wage violence against him or her. Hence conflict prevention can be promoted through nurturing group identities that are in some manner porous and open, and that promote engagement, and curiosity and respect for others. Group identities that do not promote one's own group at the expense of putting down others.

Clergy, again, have a lot to offer here, as does theology. To the degree that Catholic clergy are reaching out to faith leaders from other traditions to engage in dialogue, cooperative social norms are nurtured. To the degree that lay are encouraged as well to interact constructively with those from other faiths, and to develop appreciation and respect for the diversity of paths taken toward understanding of and encounter with our infinite God, stronger ties are made between communities. Same goes with engaged facilitative reaching across the boundaries of race or class or caste. These stronger inter-communal bonds can

⁴ For more on social and psycho-social dynamics of conflict, see Kim, Sung Hee and Dean G. Pruitt, eds. Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004).

help prevent a future political manipulation of communal identity to stir discord and violent conflict by opportunistic politicians. This sort of work can create a means of assuring that the religious realm will respond critically to any attempt by power-hungry politicians to stir up communal division to serve their own agendas. When respect for the other is nurtured, driven by a respect for the Other, violence against that other becomes untenable. Let me repeat this theological precept. The religious enterprise in itself is about reaching out to what is other and different and beyond our selves. It is driven by a curiosity and yearning to understand and be with the divine Other that is God. This same sort of desire to understand what is beyond the narrow confines of our selves and our social comfort zones of family or nationality or religion should propel us to reach out with yearning to the others in our midst. This reaching out to the other, and to the Other, can transform social norms and combat exclusionary communalism, not only in the manner in which it leads to an understanding of our common grounds with others, but also by promoting an appreciation of our compelling differences with others. Through engagement with others not like us we come to see that the differences that exist are not as frightening and need not cause such deep divisions or discord as we might have assumed from afar.

Before I end let me review quickly my suggestions for the future of Catholic peacebuilding in its pursuit to prevent violent conflict.

1. Capitalize on the particular institutional capacity of the Church to serve as an early warning and response system. Train local clergy, both through seminary education and diocesan programs, in the means to monitor and respond constructively to growing inter-communal disputes that might erupt into violence. Put an information-relaying system in place within the Church so that these warnings about local instability can be relayed up the chain of command to those with greater resources and mandates to respond. Partner with international and national organizations to share and build on this early warning and response system.

2. Continue in the vein of Catholic social teaching and the imperative in our Hebrew scriptures and gospel narratives to address the root causes of conflict, which are so often political and economic injustice: poverty, lack of minority rights, lack of fair access to power, and so forth. See this as a means to proactively promote a sustained program in the prevention of violent conflict.

And finally:

3. Promote social-psychological transformation that nurtures an ethic of engagement with others. Pursue inter-religious initiatives at all levels of society – in the grassroots and amongst leading religious figures, as a means to strengthen social bonds between religious groups so as to prevent political manipulation of religious difference in a manner that can create violence in the future. Do the same with cross-ethnic, class, race, and other social-divisions. And capitalize on religious resources including pastoral care that can nurture new social norms and constructive healing that can better transform deeply embedded social-psychological conditions that lead to violence.