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1. Is religion about conflict or peace?

A collage of images of the Catholic Church during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina might include the two Franciscan priests who were advisers to Mate Boban, the Croat neo-fascist who led the ethnic cleansing of Serbs and Muslims. That collage would also have to include Bishop Franjo Komarica, who was called the “Archbishop Romero of Bosnia” by Human Rights Watch’s Bosnia expert because of his courage in urging Croats in Banja Luka to follow a strategy of non-violence in the face of some of the worst ethnic cleansing of that war.

My colleague at the Kroc Institute, Scott Appleby, calls this the “ambivalence of the sacred.” On the one hand, religion is sometimes a source of conflict and division, a powerful motive force behind exclusivist world views which claim that my candle can burn bright only if your candle is extinguished. Whether it be the religious extremism of al Qaeda or the ethno-religious nationalism of the Balkan wars, the secularists who want to get religion out of the public square and especially out of the foreign ministry have more ammunition than they should to build their case.

Unfortunately, policymakers, whether in the U.S. government or the United Nations, have not paid enough attention to — and do not always fully understand — the other aspect of the ambivalence of the sacred. Bishop Komarica is just one example of the unwavering, absolute commitment to one’s faith that can make religion, not a source of division, but a powerful force for freedom, justice, and liberation. It is no accident that at least half the Nobel Peace Prize winners in the past 25 years have been people whose work was inspired by their faith. What is needed is not less religion, as some policymakers suggest. What is needed is more religion, more authentic religion. We must marginalize religious extremists, as the Church authorities tried to do with the two Franciscan nationalists in Bosnia, but we must not marginalize religion. For one cannot build peace in some of the world’s most conflicted places – eg, Burundi, the DRC, Northern Uganda, Mindanao, and Colombia – if one doesn’t understand the positive peacebuilding role of religion.

2. The varieties of religious peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is often understood to mean post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation. The mandate of the UN Peacebuilding Commission is defined in this way. For the sake of today’s discussion, we will use a broader definition of peacebuilding to include not just what the Catholic Church is doing to promote post-conflict reconciliation, but also what the Church is doing to prevent conflicts from breaking out and to manage or mediate ongoing conflicts. Peacebuilding involves working with a wide range of political, military, economic, and civil society actors; and it includes working at multiple levels: international, national and local.

The litany of Catholic peacebuilding activities runs from direct or indirect involvement in mediating or facilitating peace processes in Colombia, Mozambique, Northern Uganda and Northern Ireland to playing a prominent role in truth and reconciliation processes in Guatemala, South Africa, Chile and Peru. It runs from long-term efforts by Caritas Internationalis and Catholic Relief Services to integrate peacebuilding into their relief and development programs to peace education programs in Catholic schools in Mindanao and trauma healing programs in Burundi. John Katunga will say more about specific peacebuilding programs in his remarks.

3. Effective peacebuilding requires that religion be free to be religion.

Conflicts are complex phenomena that require complex responses. The role of the UN, other international organizations, and governments is essential. But so is the role of civil society — and religion is a critically important part of civil society. In her recent book, Madeleine Albright claims that faith-based organizations “have more resources, more skilled personnel, a

longer attention span, more experience, more dedication, and more success in fostering reconciliation than any government.”

Another way of putting it is to say that religion plays this indispensable role in peacebuilding when its three main assets – its beliefs, its transnational institutional resources, and its ability to influence and mobilize people — are put to work in an integrated way. The Church is deeply rooted in local communities suffering from violence, and is often the most important civil society institution in poor, conflicted countries like Sudan and Burundi. At the same time, its global reach can surpass that of governments, international institutions like the UN, and multi-national corporations, giving it an unusual institutional capacity to bridge the gulf between the zones of peace and prosperity and the zones of conflict and deprivation that divide our world.

The capacity to employ institutional resources and to mobilize people is a metric that we typically use to evaluate the peacebuilding work of NGOs and political actors — important metrics to be sure. But they don't fully explain Madeleine Albright's conclusion that religion is more successful at fostering reconciliation than any government. In parts of Colombia, especially in rural areas, there are Catholic parishes with demobilized right-wing paramilitaries, left-wing guerrillas, and government soldiers — and returning displaced people who have been victimized by all three. Pastors in those parishes are using the resources provided by Caritas Colombia, Catholic Relief Services, the UN Development Program and other international agencies, to help with the long-term process of rehabilitation of that fractured community.

But even with all these essential resources and skilled personnel, that parish will not achieve the reconciliation that Madeleine Albright is talking about unless there is something more. That pastor must also help his parish realize its mission in its deepest religious and spiritual sense. He must, for example, help his parishioners internalize the true meaning – including the communal meaning — of the sacraments of reconciliation and holy communion in their conflict-torn community. That is the kind of “soft power” that political scientists talk about, which gives the Church in Colombia hope that it can help create a culture of peace to replace the culture of violence that is the predictable result of decades of war.

The Church in Colombia, of course, contributes to a culture of peace in many other ways. It participates in the formal peace process as a facilitator (not a mediator, which it considers a political role). It organizes regular national days of reconciliation that attract thousands of people from throughout Colombia. Working with episcopal conferences in the United States and Europe, it advocates for government policies that avoid militarizing the conflict, protect human rights, and support, not undermine, the peace process.

I don't in any way want to minimize these and other incredibly important peacebuilding activities. I highlight the particular challenges faced by pastors in deeply divided parishes because it is indicative of how the Church's peacebuilding role depends on the Church being free to be Church, to live out its particular religious mission of peacebuilding. If the Church is evaluated as, and acts like, an NGO or political actor, its full peacebuilding potential will not be fully understood or realized.

4. The importance and limits of inter-religious peacebuilding.

Especially in recent years, there has been a lot of discussion and a number of interesting initiatives here at the UN related to inter-religious and ecumenical peacebuilding. These UN-related initiatives are matched by countless inter-religious peacebuilding initiatives around the world. The Holy See's dialogues with Islamic leaders, the peacebuilding programs of the World Council of Churches, the work of groups like the World Conference of Religions for Peace, the Sant' Egidio Community, Pax Christi International, and the U.S. Institute of Peace, are just a few examples of this critically important work. Let me highlight three local inter-religious peacebuilding initiatives and a few observations from my own experience of more than 20 years of ecumenical and inter-religious peacebuilding.

Inter-religious and ecumenical peacebuilding comes in many shapes and sizes. In Pikit, a small village in central Mindanao, the Catholic and Muslim communities have worked together in providing relief to those displaced by periodic outbreaks of

violence, the most recent in the past month. This inter-religious collaboration has led, through a lengthy and difficult process of dialogue, to the establishment of what are called "Spaces for Peace." Spaces for Peace are essentially locally-negotiated cease-fires that permit a community to rebuild homes and businesses, and, most important, to repair the fractured relationship between the Christian and Muslim communities.

Also in Mindanao, the Bishops-Ulama Forum was established in 1996 to support a peace agreement that had just been signed. This Catholic-Muslim Forum has enabled the religious leaders to intervene more effectively in crises, such as securing the release of hostages, and it is now looked to by both the Filipino government and the rebel groups as an indispensable support to the formal peace process.

In northern Uganda, where the Lord's Resistance Army has terrorized the local population, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative has, since 1998, helped bring international attention to what was mostly an obscure conflict. They have also played a major role in moving forward the peace process, including going into the bush, at great risk to themselves, to meet with the ruthless leaders of the LRA and encourage them to put down their arms and submit to traditional Acholi tribal practices of accountability and reconciliation.

Let me suggest two lessons that can be drawn from these and other kinds of inter-religious peacebuilding. First, the objectives of inter-religious collaboration for peace vary considerably. In these three cases, the purpose is to find common ground and move to common action and common witness on issues at stake in a conflict (rarely are these theological or doctrinal issues). In other cases, the most important fruit of dialogue is not what is done together but what the coming together allows one to do within one's own community. In Mindanao, the inter-religious dialogue has helped both Catholic and Muslim leaders better understand the need to do much more work within their own communities to help them break out of their respective myths of unique victimization, to counter stereotypes and prejudices, and to promote better understanding and respect for the hopes, fears and legitimate grievances of the other community.

The contribution that inter-religious dialogue can make to peacebuilding within one's own community leads to a second lesson learned. As effective and important as inter-religious peacebuilding is, we must be careful not to put too many of our eggs in the inter-religious basket without giving enough attention to the often more important work of single identity peacebuilding – ie, peacebuilding by individual denominations or faith groups. In some of the world's most devastating and long-standing conflicts, such as Colombia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, religion plays a key role in peacebuilding but much of the most notable work is being done by individual denominations.

This is in part because inter-religious peacebuilding is prone to a least-common-denominator approach, so it lacks some of the power of single identity peacebuilding, which can draw on the full complement of a tradition's rituals, beliefs, norms, spirituality, and communal identity. Moreover, while joint interreligious action can offer a powerful united front against religious extremists on both sides of a conflict, oftentimes the best way to marginalize extremists is for authentic voices from within a particular religious tradition to convince their co-religionists that extremism is antithetical to that tradition. In short, inter-religious peacebuilding is essential and effective, but it is not always the most needed and effective form of religious peacebuilding in a particular context.

Conclusion: the untapped potential of religious peacebuilding

Religious peacebuilding is not well known or well understood, even within many religious traditions and especially by specialists in international affairs. About twenty Catholic universities, Church institutions, and independent Catholic organizations have come together through the Catholic Peacebuilding Network (1) to promote a more systematic sharing, mapping and analysis of the "best practices" of Catholic peacebuilding around the world, (2) to support the further development of the Church's capacity to continue to be a peacebuilder in Colombia, the Philippines, the Great Lakes Region of Africa and elsewhere, and (3) to contribute to the further development of a theology, ethics and praxis of a just peace that is comparable in scope and sophistication to the long tradition of moral reflection on the use of military force.

The Catholic Church, like many other religious bodies, has a long, proud and mostly unheralded tradition of peacebuilding. The peacebuilding work of diplomats and secular NGOs would be enhanced if they better understood faith-based peacebuilding. At the same time, faith-based peacebuilding would be enhanced if the Catholic community, and other religious communities, tapped the full potential of this essential part of the Church's mission.

Holy See Side Event

Peacebuilding: A Role for Religion

United Nations

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