Religious and Cultural Dimensions of Peacebuilding
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Recent studies suggest that there is one common denominator shared by Middle Eastern Muslims who support suicide bombings and other attacks against Western targets: belief that the religious core of their identity—indeed, their religion itself—is under attack. In other words, they believe that the "War on Terror" is really a "War on Islam."[1] And paradoxically, they also appear to believe that saving their religion may require desperate, "defensive" methods that violate basic principles of Islamic just war theory.

Such beliefs and behaviors are not unique to Muslims. For complex psychological reasons, many people in this world are willing to become martyrs if they believe it is necessary to redeem what they value most, to save an assaulted or humiliated core identity. Though such obviously self-destructive behaviors appear to arise most readily within beleaguered or traumatized communities such as Sri Lankan Tamils and Palestinian Muslims, the use of violence to defend a "sacred" sense of identity is by no means a rare phenomenon. After September 11, 2001, many Americans concluded, with President George Bush, that the shocking terrorist attacks on New York and Washington were intended as an onslaught against "freedom," and not, as outsiders perceived, attacks on symbols of American economic and military predominance.

When complex conflicts escalate to the point of organized violence, the "us versus them" dynamic of confrontation can easily develop an autonomous dynamism. What may well have begun as a simple dispute over resources or governance becomes a clash of identities;

symbols of collective identity and belonging become banners of war. We transform symbols and images projected by others into reservoirs for our own fear, loathing, and insecurity; we transform our own group's symbols into instruments of self-justification, through which we bless our own sense of righteous indignation and grievance. Thus do we become enmeshed in a clash of symbols, within which relatively base emotions and motives masquerade as sublime and noble sentiments.

In the contemporary world, economic and technological globalization is proceeding far more rapidly than globalization of awareness and identity, and the eclipse of economically-based ideological contestation (capitalism vs. communism) is encouraging the emergence of new conflict constellations. These conflict constellations are far too complex and indeterminate to merit such simple labels as Sam Huntington's "clash of civilizations," yet contestation over cultural differences is indeed part of our current conflict equation. Both in their responses to putatively "civilizational" tensions and in their efforts to moderate localized clashes over resources, territory, and governance, peacebuilders face the challenge of responding dynamically to the cultural and religious dimensions of conflict.[2]

Threatened Religious and Cultural Identities: Beyond the "Fundamentalism" Frame

Significantly, differences in values and cultures are no more fundamental to the genesis of most conflicts than competing material claims. Virtually all of the world's armed conflicts require comprehensive frameworks (such as Edward Azar's "protracted social conflict" theory[3]) to account for the full range of factors that drive them. Insofar as "communal content" (for example, ethnic or religious rivalry) is present in a large majority of contemporary armed conflicts, so, too, are problems linked to governance, international intervention, underdevelopment, and threatened human needs.

There are many common errors in analysis of conflicts with strong intercultural or religious dimensions, but I would like to focus particular attention on a reductionistic tendency that can easily short-circuit interreligious or intercultural peacebuilding: the tendency to posit "fundamentalism" as the root cause of conflict.

We need to be very clear in how we analyze and diagnose religiously justified conflict

behaviors. To be sure, "fundamentalist" religion—if by "fundamentalist" is meant "intolerant" and "authoritarian"—is indeed a problem. For the sake of conceptual clarity as well as analytical nuance, however, we need to differentiate between fundamentalism and revivalism on the one hand and extremism and terrorism on the other. We also need to acknowledge the potential for non-religious fundamentalism. At its core, the "fundamentalist" impulse is a tendency to take a rich and varied cultural and intellectual tradition and pare it down to a narrow subset of principles that can be used for political purposes, as a means of sealing off outsiders who are perceived as threatening or subversive.

In the context of Islamic-Western relations, we can see the fundamentalist tendency not only among Muslims who feel wronged by Western policies and overwhelmed by external cultural influences, but also among Westerners who insist that dialogue with Muslims must have a predetermined outcome or inflexible agenda, such as conversion of Muslims to a secularist worldview, or support for particular foreign and domestic policies. Sam Harris and Oriana Fallaci come to mind.[4]

In the context of a deeply fractured society such as Afghanistan, attributing ongoing political violence primarily to "fundamentalism" has little analytical utility. After decades of war and violence fuelled by external intervention and internal divisiveness, a majority of Afghans have redoubled their commitment to conservative strains of religious thought. Many Afghans can quite fairly be classified as "revivalists" who are seeking to reassert key tenets of their religious belief system as a means of salvaging meaning and existential security from the situation in which they find themselves. Among those Afghans who are currently in rebellion against the coalition-supported government in Kabul, many are arguably less rigid in their religious commitments than former combatants who now hold major government portfolios. Religion undoubtedly plays a powerful role in the motivation of core Taliban constituencies, yet this motivation arises not from "fundamentalism" as such, but rather from a particular strain of fundamentalist thought that has become conjoined with ethnic loyalties and a highly combative worldview. It is the conflict narrative that animates the Taliban, and not merely the Taliban's religious beliefs, that makes the movement prone to extremism and supportive of groups such as al-Qaeda.

Both in Islamic-Western relations and in other conflict environments, we need analyses that explain religious radicalization without resorting to reductionistic simplifications. These

analyses have to be sophisticated and multidimensional. We need to see extremism and terrorism in the multiple contexts that shape them, and help us to understand the complex processes that lead adherents of particular cultural and religious systems to believe that their identities and sacred values are under attack. We have to ask what went wrong, not only with radicalized groups, but in the relations of these groups with their adversaries.

Let us briefly apply this principle (analysis of multiple contexts) to explain the appeal of religiously justified conflict behavior among many contemporary Muslims. First, we need to address the historical context. Current problems did not develop overnight. And yes, there is a long history of rivalry that is selectively remembered on both sides of the Islamic-Western divide. But we need not go back all the way to the early Islamic conquests or to the Crusades. Starting with the modern colonial and Cold War experiences still provides us with problems we can try to address constructively.

Second, there are cultural contexts. Despite the increasingly transnational and synchronous nature of Islamic intellectual deliberations, facilitated as they are by the Internet, we need to understand the cultural background of various Islamic movements, be they Wahhabi or Salafi or Sufi. Islam in Saudi Arabia differs in significant ways from Islam in Syria or Kashmir, and so on. Islam in Afghanistan is not all of one piece either.

Third, there are political contexts. This is where analysis often gets distorted by nationalist narratives or by inflated rhetoric. There is a whole web of political problems and unresolved conflicts that creates a deep sense of powerlessness and humiliation among Muslim communities. The popularity of conspiracy theories attests to the deep disempowerment that is born of domestic authoritarianism and inability to change unpopular Western foreign policies. In addition, it is worth pointing out that while some grievances of Islamic movements are widely shared, others are localized. We should not repeat the errors of the Cold War by painting all movements with the same brush or imposing an agenda of ideological confrontation.

Finally, there are economic and existential contexts. Unemployment and underemployment are grave problems for young men in much of the Muslim world, and they can have a profoundly damaging impact. They reinforce despair and hopelessness. When social services and economic empowerment come through participation in radical movements, the appeal of combative ideas becomes stronger.

When we consider the multiple contexts that can drive members of an ethnic or cultural group to embrace religion as a pathway to political salvation, it becomes apparent that many of the motivations behind "religious" conflict are not particularly spiritual in nature. Yet insofar as religion is invoked as a galvanizing and justifying force, and insofar as specifically religious values are perceived to be at stake, we have no choice but to engage the religious dimension of conflict, and to attempt to direct it toward the ends of peacebuilding.

Engaging the Religious Dimension

The existence of real cultural differences between human groups increases the degree of "opacity" in intergroup relations, with corresponding risks of misunderstanding and misattribution of motives. Within a context of scarcity and political tension, strategic manipulation of culture and identity heightens the risk of confrontation. Troubled historical relations between groups also add to the potential for destructive rivalry; culture-specific historical narratives tend to selectively represent history in ways that support competition and defensiveness.

All too easily, symbols for sacred values and moral growth can become emblems to carry forward into battle.[5] So also can symbols of wholesome national aspirations (including frequently invoked values like "democracy" and "freedom") become war flags, even as the resources of society become diverted more and more to causes that have little do with national betterment. Taken together, recent conflagrations in Islamic-Western relations (including 9/11, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Danish cartoon controversy, and the debates surrounding Pope Benedict's Regensburg address) graphically illustrate the charged symbolic nature of large-scale identity conflict.[6]

In a world that has become far too polarized, there is a profound need for strong voices of sanity, voices that offer "other ways" to fulfill the values and protect the identities that are invoked by extremists. To amplify these "voices of sanity," we cannot afford to remain in our traditional comfort zones as peacebuilders and development professionals. We need to find ways to directly engage the religious and cultural dimensions of conflict.[7] Over the long term, one of the most important tasks for peacebuilding is depriving violent extremism of legitimacy. Canada and other countries that support international peacebuilding can help

to advance this objective by becoming more proactive in their efforts to foster religiously and culturally informed approaches to conflict resolution.

Let us return to the context of Islamic-Western relations. Since support for political violence often correlates with the belief that Islam is under attack, it makes sense to seriously reconsider policies that feed this perception, while also building alliances in the struggle for reconciliation with moderate and progressive Muslims, especially with Muslims who have achieved a positive integration of values in their own lives (modern, democratic, Muslim), and who have the credibility in their own communities that comes with "multiple critique." In other words, they broadly affirm both Western and Islamic aspects of their own identities, and also are capable of criticizing actions taken in the name of both Islam and the West. Actively engaging reformist Muslims prevents extremists from controlling the agenda, and provides valuable new information as well as options to create new dynamics of intercultural and interreligious cooperation.[8]

To transform conflict scenarios in which religious identity plays a prominent role, we need to seek new and creative options. Demystifying the ways in which religion and culture enter into the politics of conflict is a first step; discovering alternative modes of religious and cultural action is a second. By working with, rather than against, cultural and religious realities, we can demonstrate that mythologies of confrontation are misguided, and that peaceful coexistence can be achieved on culturally authentic grounds.

Religious cultures provide broad repertoires of historical experiences, narratives, and symbols, and are by no means static or closed. Careful examination of historical experiences in almost any conflict zone reveals that narratives of confrontation draw on narrow selections of encounters and experiences. Drawing attention to this selectivity, as well as to distorted and misleading historical analogies, is an essential basis for peacebuilding activity. So, too, is engagement with analyses that seek to "demystify" symbolic conflict by pointing to dynamics that are not strictly cultural or religious in nature.

At a time of profound tension, it is crucial to underscore that opposing groups share common values, among the most significant of which is a desire to live in peace. This desire to live in peace, however, is expressed in multiple ways. In many respects the most important conflicts in the world today are being played out within rather than between civilizations, among divergent ways of articulating what "peace" actually *means*.[9] Most

cultural and religious traditions include multiple definitions of peace. Some historical narratives and textual interpretations support the notion that peace is a simple absence of war secured by military strength, for example, through the extension of hegemonic control or through adherence to militaristic struggle. For others, it is a presence of justice, human dignity, ecological wholeness, and other conditions that can only be secured by cooperation. The question of which concept of peace will prevail and what means will be chosen to advance it depends both on the imagination and energy of the people within each religious culture, and on the extent to which common ground is sought and established between competing groups.

Enhancing Local Capacities for Peacebuilding

One of the most important challenges for any peacebuilding effort that involves intervention in an unfamiliar environment is the development of religious and cultural literacy. This means acquiring fluency in essential religious precepts and developing an understanding of the many ways in which these precepts have been interpreted and applied historically. In this regard, it is important to recognize that religion is expressed and lived through cultural activity; what is essentially religious to one social group or faction may reflect a historical synthesis or inflection that another group rejects.

Another important step towards effective, religiously-engaged peacebuilding is taking inventory of religious peace resources. An NGO team involved with peacebuilding in Afghanistan, for example, would be well-served if its foreign members were familiar with different "Islamic peace paradigms," as well as with local practices and traditions that, though not explicitly recognized in Islamic sources, are carried out through use of an Islamic idiom. Traditional modes of decision-making and conflict resolution, including *shuras* and *jirgas*, would have to be included in this inventory, not merely because they are still in use, but also because their symbolism and principles might possibly be adapted in the service of *solh* (peace). Peaceworkers and development professionals might also wish to become acquainted with Islamic and Afghan exemplars of right conduct and reconciliation. Peacebuilding in a highly religious context such as Afghanistan must necessarily make use of traditions from the Qur'an and from the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (Hadith). Conversance with the achievements and beliefs of more modern figures, such as the Pashtun's greatest nonviolent leader, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, would also be useful.[10]

Working to establish complementarity between etic and emic frameworks for peacebuilding is one of the most essential bases for empowering local actors and helping them develop effective, culturally legitimate practices. International NGOs and UN personnel working to support conflict resolution in the Gaza Strip, for example, found it useful to partner with local change agents who made imaginative linkages between Western notions of "peer mediation" and traditional Arab roles, such as that of the village headman (*mukhtar*). The result was a significant educational program that gave expression to traditional values in an innovative and, some would say, gently counter-cultural manner. The Lebanese Conflict Resolution Network (LCRN), a multi-confessional alliance of trainers based in a variety of NGOs, has engaged in similar efforts to adapt Western concepts and engage with local resources.

Locally grounded, culturally competent approaches to peacebuilding in zones of religious conflict are likely to face significant challenges as they work to identify and amplify suppressed peace resources and narratives. Protagonists of change may also find themselves toggling back and forth between the primary religious language of one group and that of another, or between a primary religious language and a second-order language that is shared (e.g., the language of human rights). Special care should be taken in choosing local partners who are prepared to address local conflicts at the grassroots level, while also working to foster engagement at higher levels of religious and national organization.

Producing locally appropriate peace education materials is vitally important for sustained peacebuilding efforts, ideally materials that make use of both traditional and innovative concepts, and that can be integrated in the curricula of primary, secondary, and post-secondary educational institutions. These materials can also be used to explain the rationale for religious peacebuilding to skeptical parties, to inform readers about past instances of peace and coexistence, and to promote awareness of current peacemaking activities through various local and national media. Particularly important contributions to social discourse can often be made through the dissemination of religiously informed rationales for tolerance, coexistence, peacemaking, political pluralism, and defense of human rights.

Fostering the Growth of Networks: Islamic-Western Applications

The ultimate aim of most religiously and culturally competent peacebuilding initiatives is to foster movement towards reconciliation, albeit in incremental motions, through the construction of alliances and networks. In some cases peacebuilding networks may be largely monocultural and religiously homogeneous, while in other cases they may be intercultural and interreligious. A long-term goal of religious peacebuilding is to develop a constituency for peace; short-term goals include confidence-building, conflict prevention, and the resolution of local disputes that might otherwise escalate. Active, grassroots religious peacebuilding is itself an effort to prefigure the possibility of peace.

Even as religious symbols can be used to polarize and divide, so too can they be used in peacebuilding measures to affirm possibilities for coexistence. Let us return for a moment to the macro-level case of Islamic-Western conflict. From the standpoint of symbolic confrontation, the existence of Muslims in the West and of Western influences in the Islamic world appears to be a threat to cultural and religious purity. Drawing attention to ways in which each cultural area has been enriched by the other, however, can provide a powerful counterpoint to fear-predicated narratives. Likewise, giving greater media prominence to cultural exchanges and coexistence projects could be helpful in efforts to promote alternative readings of intercultural relations, within which difference becomes a source of complementarity and not solely a security threat.[11]

In addition to its symbolic benefits, active dialogical engagement can do much to help Islamic and Western communities immunize themselves from the seduction of misappropriated symbols. Despite polarization caused by cultural symbolism, sustained and active Western-Islamic engagement can make it possible for each side to gain a more profound understanding of how it is reacting to the other without deep knowledge of meanings associated with cultural artifacts and political actions. Given the fact that Westerners still possess significantly more existential security than most inhabitants of majority-Muslim countries, it is vitally important for representatives of the West to take the initiative in the effort to understand the "other." Western demonstrations of respect for Islamic symbolism (as opposed to reflexive discomfort) can help to ease Muslim perceptions of security threat. Calls to address the root causes of conflict without being distracted by manipulated images are also essential if pathology and anti-Western extremism are not to be mistaken for the essence of the second-largest world religion. Through their choices, Westerners have the power to respond to Islam in ways that either

mobilize anti-Western sentiment or bolster the cause of moderation and mutual adjustment. Peaceful management of current tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear program is essential in this regard.

Only through active engagement is it possible to gain a realistic "feel" for other cultures, and a taste for how authentic expressions of human religious sentiment differ from extremist manipulations. The familiarity that comes with dialogue obviates the need for defensiveness, and makes frank, self-critical discourse about bridging the gap between symbol and substance possible. As capacity to discern between mature and manipulative uses of symbolism increases, insight into underlying sources of confrontation also grows, preventing entrapment in a conflict system that still possesses potential for higher levels of escalation. A process of de-escalation also becomes conceivable, through which mutual fears are recognized and each side begins to articulate ways in which it can assist the other through confidence-building measures that address basic human needs for dignity, security, and a hopeful future.

Visible partnerships across cultural, religious, and political divides are not a panacea, but they are an invaluable corrective for the sort of groupthink that led to damaging and counter-productive post-9/11 policies in the United States, and the mere existence of partnerships helps to undermine the "us versus them" logic that threatens to shred the fabric of contemporary societies with their deep-rooted cultural, ethnic, and religious pluralism. Given that Canada is already a party to a contested counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, it is important for Canadian policymakers to discover high-visibility partnership efforts that might help to preserve the country's image as a benign force in world affairs. The Canadian government should also consider lending support to interreligious dialogue, multifaith, and coexistence initiatives, initiatives that provide positive roles for religion in public life, but that do not favor any one particular religious tradition or undermine pluralist democratic principles. It is not enough simply to condemn radical religion; people need positive examples that channel their faith towards hopeful alternative visions (given the popularity of the Left Behind series in some North American quarters, this applies to Christians as well as to Muslims). Such initiatives can open channels of communication that would not otherwise exist.[12]

New Initiatives

At Conrad Grebel University College, we are actively exploring ways in which we might, as an educational institution and center of research, contribute to the cause of religious peacebuilding. We are particularly interested in ways in which we might become a resource center for religious peacebuilding efforts, as well as a convener of forums and dialogues that advance knowledge and skill development. We are convinced that Canadian universities have an important role to play in contemporary peace efforts, both as centers for domestic and transnational dialogue and as educational institutions that equip future professionals with the tools they need to engage interculturally and interreligiously as they pursue career paths in development, conflict resolution, public policy, and diplomacy.

There may be a valuable niche in Canadian peacebuilding and development policy for initiatives that link universities and other civil society institutions (NGOs and professional organizations in areas such as law and journalism) for research and engagement on issues pertaining to peacebuilding and world order values (human security, peaceful conflict resolution, international justice, ecological sustainability, human rights). Canadian efforts to support the field of conflict resolution in regions such as the Middle East and South Asia may bear more fruit than those promoted by other Anglophone states with less popular foreign policy legacies. Potential partners exist in emergent peace and conflict resolution programs, such as one at Tehran University, and even at Iraqi universities (especially in the Kurdish region). The field has engaged practitioners not only in the Israeli-Palestinian context but also in Lebanon, through such institutions as the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies and the Lebanese Conflict Resolution Network.

There are no doubt many other creative options available, options that can make modest yet important contributions to the task of bridging religious and cultural solitudes, within Canada as well as in the larger world.

1. 1. United States Institute of Peace, *PeaceWatch* 12:1 (Jan./Feb. 2006), 14-15. It is important to note that, while belief that Islam is under attack is almost universally shared among Muslims engaging in "asymmetrical warfare" against Western forces and targets, holding such a belief does not automatically translate into support for terrorism. In other words, there are many Muslims who believe that their religion is indeed the mistaken target of the War on Terror, but who nonetheless refuse to

sanction indiscriminate violence. Similar observations could be made in other cases of intergroup conflict: belief that one's identity and values are under attack increases the likelihood of escalatory conflict behaviour, but not in a deterministic fashion. For further reflections on identity conflict, see Jay Rothman, *Resolving Identity-Based Conflicts in Nations, Organizations, and Communities* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

2. 2. Harold G. Coward and Gordon S. Smith, *Religion and Peacebuilding* (Albany, New York: State University of New York, 2004); David R. Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2002).

3. 3. Edward Azar, *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases* (Aldershot, New Hampshire: Dartmouth, 1990).

4. 4. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004); Oriana Fallaci, The Force of Reason (New York: Rizzoli, 2006).

5. 5. R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

6. 6. When specifically religious symbols are mobilized amidst escalating conflict, protagonists of confrontation reappropriate the transcendental associations of their religious teachings and convert them into warrants for actions that quite often contradict these teachings. All too easily, the Christian cross can become less a symbol for Christ than for an imagined national crucifixion and redemption. The Crescent can also become an emblem for everything Christians or Westerners believe that their traditions have rejected (i.e., misogyny, violence, irrationality). When such a transformation has been accomplished, the great existential struggles of each individual's personal and cultural existence become props for a cosmic, worldly drama that must be forced to a resolution now. The protracted inner battles of peoples' lives become externalized. No longer do they seek transformation within themselves through checking their own unsettling thoughts and impulses and embracing aspirations that are higher. Instead, they seek transformation through attacking these unsettling thoughts and impulses as they manifest through projection in the symbols of the "other."

7. 7. During a visit to Cyprus in 1999, the author was struck by the fact that most Greek and Turkish peacebuilders whom he met were secular, yet when members of each

group articulated fears about the "other side," religious factions (Greek Orthodox clerics, "fundamentalist" Turkish peasant immigrants from the mainland) were often mentioned. Engagement with dialogue participants in a Middle Eastern initiative revealed a similar pattern: religion was recognized as a factor in the conflict, yet religious actors and conversations were not integral to the process.

8. 8. Western peacebuilding initiatives should not restrict dialogue to those Muslims who are most likely to be conciliatory, and peacebuilders working on the ground in conflict environments do not have the luxury of working only with religious liberals. Yet substantive engagement with religious progressives is an excellent starting point for efforts to learn about the full range of interpretations and creative possibilities that are latent in any religious and cultural tradition.

9. 9. For examples of different Islamic perspectives on peace, see Abdul Aziz Said, Nathan C. Funk, and Ayse Kadayifci, P*eace and Conflict Resolution in Islam* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2001).

10. 10. For a profile of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, see Eknath Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam: Badshah Khan: A Man to Match His Mountains*, 2nd ed. (Tomales, California: Nilgiri Press, 1999).

11. 11. Nathan C. Funk and Abdul Aziz Said, "Islam and the West: Narratives of Conflict and Conflict Transformation," *International Journal of Peace Studies* 9:1 (Spring/Summer 2004): 1-28.

12. 12. In some cases, of course, building trust may be easiest without direct governmental involvement. The Mennonite Central Committee, for example, has become engaged in interreligious dialogue with Iranian clerics who are widely understood to represent more conservative positions within the clerical establishment. This dialogue includes a range of theological and religious topics, including the ethics of peace. Though the ultimate peacebuilding significance of this relationship has yet to be determined, it would appear to be in the interest of governments to expedite such interactions legally and administratively (i.e., granting visas) without directly intervening.