Religion and Peaceful Conflict

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Jesper Garsdal is guest editor of this cluster of articles from "Understanding Conflicts: Cross-Cultural Understanding of Conflict, Cross-Cultural Perspectives," an international conference held in August 2008 in Aarhus, Denmark. Garsdal is Associate Professor at VIA University College in Aarhus, Denmark, where he teaches religion and philosophy.

The discussion about the role of religion in the surge of cultural conflicts during the last two decades has become quite ramified, but the main controversy centers on the alternative of a "primordialist" versus an "instrumentalist" position.[1] The primordialists claim that the very fact of plural religion, each making an exclusive claim to the truth, presents a social constellation that is intrinsically laden with violent conflict. Here the content of religion and especially the forceful exclusivist pronouncements of monotheist religions especially are taken to be the very root of the recent rise of cultural conflicts. In contrast, instrumentalists maintain that the conflict potential of religions does not stem from their content but from the way in which they are instrumentalized for political purposes.

The articles of this special issue address this debate from a new angle. Instead of analyzing past religious conflicts to decide on the factual role of religion, they explore the question whether religion, any or some, offers any new approach to the situation of being in conflict. Pithily put, one might say that instead of exploring the conflict-potential of religion, the articles explore the peace-potential of religion, but only insofar as the notion of peace is here taken to contrast with violence, not with conflict. This is a promising approach, as it alters the game of presentation and representation of the relation between "the religious self" and "the religious other." As the articles illustrate in different ways, such an approach opens up new ways of conceiving the intersection between religion and conflict, the interaction between adherents of different faiths, and also to some extent how we conceive the religions themselves.

Such a project of viewing religion as a space for peaceful conflict or peaceful interaction requires that we address three questions: 1) Is religion per se a mindset that allows for the diversity of religious convictions? 2) Does religion in general already contain the principles

and practices to acknowledge, tolerate, and sustain conflicts in order to enable patient and authentic conflict transformation? 3) Finally, how can peace (alternatively "peaceful conflict") be implemented? How can the citizens of the global village be invited to enter the zone of peaceful coexistence, and what is the role of religion in this? The articles of this issue address all three of these questions.

Three articles published here—those by Dorothee Schlenke, Susan Robson and Abbas Yazdani—were first presented as papers at the interdisciplinary international conference "Understanding Conflicts: Cross-Cultural Understanding—Cross-Cultural Perspectives," August 2008, Aarhus, Denmark. The conference was itself an intercultural meeting where 400 researchers from 49 countries presented 110 papers on the relation between culture and conflict. The fourth article, by Peter Berliner, Ernesto Anasarias and Elena de Casas Soberón, is a part of an ongoing research project on how to implement "spaces for peace" in concrete contexts, and how to conceive the relation between such spaces for peace and the UN declaration on cultures of peace.

Dorothee Schlenke is focused on the first question, arguing that the recognition of diversity is constitutive of religious consciousness as such, but she also offers concrete proposals for the third question—how to implement tolerance—here worked out in the context of religious education. Based on the insights of nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, Schlenke sketches a conception of religious "consciousness," that is, of religion taken as the experience of an individual and also a phenomenon of social and cultural history. Religious consciousness, Schlenke argues, is characterized by "perspectivalness": it is essentially a "consciousness of differences" that knows both about the certainty of an individual religious experience and the fact that the conceptualization of this experience is embedded in a contingent historical, cultural frame and thus always articulates only one of many possible manifestations of the phenomenon of religion. In other words, religious consciousness is always characterized by a bifocal vision of an internal and an external perspective; the religious subject is both certain about the "absoluteness" of her or his experience and aware of the relativity of its manifestation. Thus, in Schlenke's view, religious consciousness is constitutively "dialogical," committed to pluralism by the very nature of religious experience as the experience of something that eludes definite or absolute articulation. The plurality and diversity of the manifestations of religion as a phenomenon is thus a direct consequence of the characteristic "content" of religious

experience. Once we are clear on the fact that religious consciousness has this bifocal nature of being both aware of its certainty and the contingent manifestation of this certainty in a plurality of perspectives, we also, so Schlenke's argument continues, get a better understanding of the status of interreligious dialogue and the way it should be conducted. The fact that interreligious dialogue or interfaith dialogue has reached a problematic juncture, which some have even proclaimed as the "end of dialogue," can be connected to the fact, Schlenke argues, that interfaith dialogue so far has pursued a strategy of quick consensus-building and harmonization that fails to appreciate the constitutive "difference structure" of religious consciousness. Furthermore, the "difference structure" of religious consciousness also implies that we view religious competence from the very beginning as a complex competence, including the accommodation of diversity. Schlenke surveys the educational policies of different European countries and argues that religious education should leave behind the traditional alternative between "learning about religion" (prioritizing the external perspective on religion) and "learning from religion" (prioritizing the internal perspective on religion). Rather, religious education should enable students to develop both their capacities for religious certainty as well as their capacities to accommodate diversity.

The second question, that is, the question of whether any specific religion contains the principles and practices required to address conflict peacefully without forced harmonization, is addressed by the next two contributions to this issue. Susan Robson and Abbas Yazdani investigate, partly on empirical and partly on theological grounds, whether specific religions contain principles of religious tolerance or constructive approaches to conflicts as potentially productive processes that do not call for violent reactions nor brute force harmonization.

Robson presents a reflective analysis of the treatment of conflicts within the Quaker community. Even though, as she emphasizes, her findings are geographically restricted to British Quakerism, a particular cultural variation within the Quaker community worldwide, her observations are systematically and highly significant for anyone concerned with the viability of pacifist organizations. British Quakers represent a community that is explicitly committed to the preservation and restoration of peace among individuals and groups, but at the same time has very few positive strategies for conflict resolution or conflict mitigation. Robson characterizes the Quaker approach to conflict—as she encountered it in empirical

research based on interviews and also observation as a participant—as a policy of "don't ask, don't tell, don't even think about it." She explains the various aspects of this "aversive" approach to conflict and points to the fact that it generates a profound paradox: if diversity is dodged for the sake of unity, an equally strong commitment to truth, honesty, and integrity is compromised.

Of particular interest for readers outside the Quaker community is Robson's analysis of how members of the community accommodate this paradoxical situation and, in fact, perpetuate it. Partly, conflicting norms are distributed to different areas of Quaker identity so that conflict aversion and emphasis on unity are combined with the identity of Quakers as a community, while the norms of integrity and honesty are associated with the identity of Quakers as individuals. In this way the lack of a constructive approach to conflict is experienced as a problem for the individual Quaker, not the community. In connection with her analysis of extant practices in the British Quaker community, Robson also considers the question of how the community might achieve a different relationship to the phenomenon of conflict within the community and points to the possibility of developing new narratives of Quaker virtues. To illustrate which directions such new narratives could take, she points to the theological self-understanding of Mennonites, another pacificist religious community.

azdani in his contribution claims that religions are not the primary causes of war and violent conflicts, but at the same time he points to the fact that religions often have used belief to legitimize violent conflicts, claiming "their faith is the one and only true faith." The instrumentalist view of the relation between religion and violence can accordingly be seen to connect to and be grounded in a critical attitude toward exclusivist reactions to religious diversity. It therefore becomes crucial to question the presuppositions of religious exclusivist positions; Yazdani does this by presenting different epistemic objections to such positions. During his discussion he presents two central approaches to religious pluralism, namely John Hick's and Muhammad Legenhausen's presentations of religious pluralism. Drawing from Kant, Hick distinguishes between religious experience, or the interpretations arising as human answers to encounters with ultimate reality, and that ultimate reality itself, which remains unknowable. Yazdani criticizes this view for being a form of reductive religious pluralism, as "correct" belief is reduced to those beliefs that are held in common in all the world's religions. Instead he follows Legenhausen's idea of a non-reductionist religious pluralism. This approach implies a methodological focus on the religions' (here more specifically Islam's) own internal presentations of the notion of religious pluralism.

Yazdani therefore focuses on religious pluralism as it can be found inside Islamic teachings and presents several examples of this position in the Islamic tradition, notably in the works of Ibn al-Arabi and Mawlānā Jalāl-ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, as well as in the Koran itself.

The article by Peter Berliner, Ernesto Anasarias and Elena de Casas Soberón addresses specifically the third set of questions; that is, how can peace—alternatively peaceful conflict—be implemented, how can citizens of the "global village" be invited to enter the zone of peaceful coexistence, and what is the role of religion in this? This question is discussed in light of strategies for creating "spaces" for peaceful interaction between adherents of different faiths. The article is, as mentioned, part of an ongoing research project. This project combines studies in local community psychology with reflections on the United Nations declaration on a culture of peace and the template to measure the level of a culture of peace. In previous articles, the authors have described the history of the establishment of the space for peace and the impact of the war on a particular sitio. In this article, however, they focus on ways in which the different religions have been used as a resource for peacebuilding in the designated Space for Peace, and thus to the community resilience of seven small Filipino villages that form the Space for Peace. The research paradigm behind this work is a form of action research, as it builds on data collected through interviews with various focus groups in Mindanao. Interviews were conducted through the human rights organization BALAY using local research assistants, historical sources, and active participation in the rehabilitation and peacebuilding processes. The article starts with a personal, nearly poetic, account of the context for the Space for Peace, which is Mindanao, the most southern of the major islands of the Philippines. The conflict there revolves around the Moros (Muslims), the Settlers (Christians) and tribal people (called Lumads) and is further complicated by the intervention of government troops. Some of the central actors in the Space for Peace and some personal accounts by the participants are also presented. The articles theme, namely how the different religions can be used as a resource in the peacebuilding process in the Space for Peace, is then illustrated through a discourse analysis of the meaning units in a declaration signed by more than five thousand inhabitants of the seven barangays (villages) in the Space for Peace in 2004. The authors present their analysis of the declaration in the form of a two dimensional matrix. One dimension plots four focal points drawn from the "understandings" in the declaration: religion, discourse, social interaction, and living. The other dimension presents a timeline from the prewar culture of peace, through the present war, to the ongoing peacebuilding or construction of a new

culture of peace as a response to war. The analysis of the meaning units in the declaration is then deepened by presentations of participants' views at the peacebuilding process. This local Space for Peace is then compared with the UN declaration of a culture of peace and its template for measuring such a culture before pointing at the end to a number of risk factors that may influence the sustainability of the Space for Peace.

1. 1. For further references and distinctions, see the contribution by Schlenke in this issue.