

The role of religion in conflict and conflict resolution

Professor Katherine Marshall, Georgetown University

The question of religion has been fairly systematically neglected in international affair studies and diplomacy. This has been for some good reasons, as it is extremely complex. But it is important in many situations of potential and actual conflict to have a more thoughtful and rigorous analysis both of religion as a contributory factor to conflict, and also a potential factor for conflict prevention and resolution.

Recently the President of Nigeria was forceful in saying the Nigerian conflict has nothing to do intrinsically with religion, that religion is used as an excuse by politicians. That is one factor we need to keep in mind. And yet the same day a large survey by the Pew forum showed that more people in Nigeria than in any other African country believe that religion is a major source of conflict. What this brings us to is the need for more thoughtful appreciation of how and where religion contributes to conflict, and a more sophisticated understanding. Someone did a survey of over 1,000 academic articles on conflict, and only three had given systematic attention to the role of religion.

Looking to the other side, to religion as potential source of conflict prevention and resolution, there are at least four places that we can look.

The first is individual leadership. The gifts of a Desmond Tutu, of a Gandhi, the gifts of many of the people who have been drawn into religious leadership have more potential to communicate than social media (though some use the social media) for good and for evil. I notice that in Egypt Amr Khaled has 3 million Facebook followers, and tremendous influence with young people. These personalities need to be drawn much more into this discussion, but few are here.

Then there are some very interesting initiatives and ideas and examples on specific intervention techniques. In Sudan, interfaith groups intervene when a church or mosque is burnt, and try to deflect conflict.

The third is through education. Obviously there is education which consciously provides religious literacy from kinder through to the training of diplomats about religion so people are more comfortable in finding ways to speak about it.

Lastly, we have talked about reconciliation and forgiveness. In many senses the ethical and often the intellectual grounding for trauma healing, for healing memories can be found in the beliefs and practices and theologies of the people concerned. I was fascinated to see in the documentary *The African Answer* that this was an ethnic conflict in Kenya, and the Muslim imam and the Christian pastor who worked for reconciliation did not approach it religiously. Yet the rituals and the healing techniques echoed both the Christian and Muslim traditions which were deeply engrained in that population. Ignoring them would have missed a major set of opportunities, emotionally and spiritually.

We should not neglect a rigorous analysis and a creative and nuanced approach, which takes a positive approach to engaging religious leaders, communities and ideas in conflict prevention and resolution.