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Religion and Conflict Resolution

*Douglas M. Johnston **

In years past, the political-military aspects of international relationships have been the dominant theme. More recently, the term "national security" has been broadened to include considerations as diverse as the environment and migration patterns. With the breakdown of the old East-West confrontation, though, deep-seated hostilities, which were previously suppressed under communist domination, have surfaced and are exerting an increasing influence in national and international affairs. These problems are peculiarly resistant to diplomatic compromise and it is becoming clear that the old ways of doing business are no longer sufficient. Military action is increasingly less acceptable as an answer. Instead, a new approach is needed that focuses on interactions at the community level and that bridges differences through the emerging discipline of conflict resolution.

As the twentieth century draws to a close, one is struck by the degree to which the relative calm in the West of the last forty years contrasts with the unprecedented brutality of the first fifty. Clearly, the sobering constraints of nuclear deterrence represented a major watershed in the relations of nations. Now a watershed of a different sort is emerging; the composition of conflict itself is changing.

With the decline of the East-West confrontation, few of the conflicts that remain will have ideological roots. Instead, most will derive from clashes of communal identity on the basis of race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion. Such disputes tend to occur either at the fault lines of rival nationalities or where there are strains borne of economic competition and rising expectations. These are the most intractable sources of conflict, and they are the sources with which conventional diplomacy is least suited to deal.

The classical tools of diplomacy typically include an exchange of information, the often manipulative signaling of positions, and

* Douglas M. Johnston is executive vice-president and chief operating officer of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Copyright 1992 by Douglas M. Johnston. All rights reserved.

one or more forms of negotiation. Such measures are normally quite suitable for dealing with conflicts that relate to tangible material interests which are inherently divisible and for which it is usually possible to forge some sort of compromise (such as territorial expansion at the expense of a competing ideology). Nonmaterial "identity-based" conflicts, on the other hand, are often not well understood by practical-minded diplomats accustomed to operating in an East-West context of nation-state politics. What is required is not a shrewd understanding of the interests of both sides, but rather an understanding of the emotional stakes of the parties and their respective interpretations of first principles such as self-determination, justice, and freedom.

This challenge to diplomacy is heightened by the restrictions that international organizations have placed upon themselves against becoming involved in the internal conflicts of their member states. Because of this vacuum and because of the changing nature of conflict, there has been an observable expansion of the role of religious figures and spiritually motivated lay persons in the conduct of various forms of mediation and conflict resolution. Such persons are often better equipped to reach people at the individual and group levels—where inequities and insecurities are most keenly felt—than are most political leaders who occupy the corridors of power. They are also better attuned to dealing with basic moral issues and to speaking to spiritual needs, at times extending beyond the boundaries of their own faith traditions.

Among the more prominent spiritual leaders of our times are those who have led significant nonviolent movements for political and social change, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bishop Desmond Tutu, or the exiled Dalai Lama of Tibet. There is, however, a growing core of spiritual actors at a different level—those who are seeking to promote peace "from the middle." Sometimes in the realm of public diplomacy or sometimes in the anonymous, behind-the-scenes realm of unofficial diplomacy, these third party interveners are making their mark in the world of negotiation and conflict resolution. While the divisive character of religious influences is widely appreciated and understood, their obverse contributions to resolving conflict are all but totally unknown.

Over the past two years, the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., has been examining the ways in which religious doctrine can be harnessed to build confidence and trust. Toward this end, seven case situations from around the

globe have been examined in which religious or spiritual intervention has contributed to the successful prevention or resolution of actual or incipient conflict. These include: (1) the leadership of the Catholic Church in the peaceful transition to democracy in the *Philippines*; (2) the role of the churches in the recent revolution in *East Germany*; (3) the contribution of Moravian Church officials in resolving the conflict between the Sandanistas and the East Coast Indians of *Nicaragua*; (4) the instrumental role of Moral Rearmament, a global network of spiritually motivated people, in reconciling differences between the *Germans and the French* following World War II; and (5) between blacks and whites thirty years later in the peaceful transition to independence of *Rhodesia*; (6) the role of the Quakers in promoting a conciliatory aftermath to a bitter civil war in *Nigeria*, and finally; (7) the contribution of the South African churches to the abolition of apartheid.

The Center's goal is to derive practical guidelines for practitioners that will enable them to recognize and help facilitate situations where religious or spiritual factors can play a positive role in promoting social change on a nonviolent basis. These practitioners include foreign service officers, those working with religious organizations, or simply individuals operating on a personal basis.

In terms of future possibilities, there are at least four ongoing conflicts where similar approaches are being attempted with varying degrees of success: Northern Ireland, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, and the Punjab.

I. NORTHERN IRELAND

The history of the conflict in Northern Ireland is well-known. While the social and cultural strife in this country finds its genesis in the complex ethnicity produced by successive Celtic, Roman, and later Saxon invasions, most view the conflict as a religious confrontation between Catholics and Protestants. Northern Ireland, however, is not the battleground for a classic religious war in which one party seeks to force the conversion of its opponents. Beneath the religious labels are communities professing rival national identities and political objectives.¹

The attitudes and perceptions of both groups are shaped by mutual distrust and suspicion. The Catholics want a united

¹ EDWARD MOXON-BROWNE, *NATION, CLASS AND CREED IN NORTHERN IRELAND* 3 (1983).

state with the English out, while the Protestants fear being subsumed by the Catholics in a united Ireland.² In effect, these deep-seated suspicions, fueled by a vicious cycle of violence, have become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Despite its many attempts to do so, the British government has been unable to present itself as an objective party in resolving the conflict.³ As a result, many have turned to the churches and church leaders as mediators and catalysts for negotiation. Indeed, the clergy and lay church leaders have been active since 1968 in their attempts to defuse the situation, with two initiatives in the mid-1970s particularly standing out.

The "Feakle Initiative" of 1974, initiated by officers of the Irish Council of Churches, brought representatives of Sinn Fein (the reputed political arm of the IRA) in contact with representatives of the British government for negotiations. Among other accomplishments, these negotiations resulted in a short-lived IRA cease-fire lasting from Christmas of 1974 until Easter of 1975.⁴

During this same time frame, a Leaders Peace Campaign was initiated by official church leaders. This public campaign of newspaper advertisements, rallies, and petitions, resulted in meetings between church leaders and government officials from Ireland, the United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland.⁵

Although these efforts soon broke down, throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s church leaders have persisted in their attempts to bring the diverse parties together to build confidence and provide a context for reconciliation in the face of ongoing acts of violence. Even with the recently renewed violence of late 1991 and early 1992, unprecedented in intensity since the mid-1970s, many church efforts continue apace. These range from providing relief services to public campaigns for peace and understanding, to interdenominational working groups to address the various social ills confronting the citizenry.

The paradox remains that while religious persons and groups continue to be active in promoting peace, objective analysts consider religious institutions to be major contributors to the continuing division in Northern Ireland.⁶ Although institutional church

2 John McGarry & Brendan O'Leary, *Northern Ireland's Future: What is to be*, CONFLICT Q., Summer 1990, at 147, 151.

3 *Id.* at 149-50.

4 LYBE SHIVERS & DAVID BOWMAN, MORE THAN THE TROUBLES 142 (1984).

5 *Id.*

6 MOXON-BROWNE, *supra* note 1, at 3.

leaders meet, issue statements against violence, and urge prayers for peace, these same leaders are criticized for resisting peace initiatives that would alter their own institutions, such as the formation of ecumenical bodies that would involve both Catholics and Protestants, integrated schooling, and mixed public housing.⁷

Northern Ireland is a unique microcosm for understanding the role of religion either as a source of conflict or as a means for resolving conflict. It is not a matter of "the church" standing for something in opposition to society; the majority of the people in Northern Ireland have an active connection with a church. As in South Africa, the institutional churches represent their parishioners and reflect many of the same divisions that plague society. Thus, there is no simple separation of politics and religion in society. Again, like South Africa, church initiatives that help break down the psychological barriers will be a critical prerequisite to breaking the political stalemate.

II. MOZAMBIQUE

In 1962, the *Frente de Libertacao de Mozambique* ("FRELIMO") was founded to free Mozambique from Portuguese colonial rule. After Portugal's withdrawal, FRELIMO became the natural powerbase from which an independent Mozambique was born. Within six months of Mozambique's independence, however, the insurgent *Resistencia de Nacional Mocambicana* ("RENAMO") was formed with the backing of South Africa and Rhodesia. By the late 1970s, the increasingly radical orientation of the FRELIMO leadership led to the adoption of Marxism-Leninism as the guiding ideology and to the signing of twenty-year treaties with both Cuba and the Soviet Union.⁸ As this transpired, RENAMO shifted its headquarters to the Transvaal, the South African province adjacent to Mozambique. The civil war in Mozambique has now cost over a million lives and caused extensive destruction of property and infrastructure.

The ascendance of Joaquim Chissano to the presidency in 1986, following the death of President Machel, has effectively moderated FRELIMO's program. Unlike his predecessor, Chissano believes that only negotiations can end Mozambique's plight. His

7 Interview with Duncan Morrow, Professor of Political Science, University of Ulster at Jordanstown, in Belfast, Northern Ireland (May 18, 1992).

8 Witney W. Schneidman, *Conflict Resolution in Mozambique: A Status Report*, CSIS AFRICA NOTES, February 28, 1991, at 1.

strategy has been threefold: to counter RENAMO's military gains through nonmilitary measures; to prepare his own constituency for negotiations that will likely involve the making of concessions; and to determine how a negotiation process can be structured that will have adequate appeal to RENAMO.⁹

In 1990, both sides agreed to talks in Rome mediated by the Santo Egidio Community, a Catholic lay organization associated with the Vatican. The Catholic Church was a logical mediator because both FRELIMO and RENAMO respect its influence and motives.¹⁰ Although both sides have now entered into negotiations with the Church's help, the violence persists. In the fall of 1991, the Mozambican government and RENAMO signed an agreement committing both sides to a cease-fire. Within days of the agreement, however, RENAMO rebels had killed thirty people. Despite these actions, Church leaders remain confident that they can facilitate a negotiating process. The challenge ahead is to convince both FRELIMO and RENAMO that they are not engaged in a zero-sum struggle. The stature accorded the Catholic Church by both sides will hopefully make that task less difficult.

III. SRI LANKA

For a number of years, the violence on the island of Sri Lanka has resulted in a de facto separation of the island into two regions. In the North, the Hindu Tamils, who make up only eighteen percent of the population, are resisting the Buddhist Sinhalas, who predominate throughout the country. Because the Sinhala majority has characteristically excluded the Tamils from all facets of Sri Lankan society, including the government, civil war has raged between the Sinhalas and various Tamil rebel groups since 1983. The largest and most powerful rebel group has been the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ("LTTE"). The rebels are supported by the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, severely complicating Indian efforts to mediate an agreement.

In 1987, as the Sri Lankan military appeared to be gaining the upper hand, the Indian government put considerable pressure on Sri Lanka to accept an Indian-mediated peace agreement and the establishment of an Indian peace-keeping force. The Indian forces encountered stiff resistance from the Tamil rebels who

⁹ *Id.* at 2.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 7.

refused to give up their armed struggle; by February of 1988, India had committed 50,000 troops to the peace-keeping operation. In August of 1989, as Indian casualties mounted and domestic political support waned, India and Sri Lanka agreed to a withdrawal of Indian forces by the end of March, 1990. The withdrawal was completed on schedule, but violence between the Tamils and Sinhals continues.

A religious group, which shall remain nameless, has been attempting to mediate the conflict.¹¹ It has injected itself where official efforts at diplomacy have failed. Serving largely as message carriers, the group has had some success in bridging the gap between the two sides. The group itself has credibility with both sides because its only motive is to quell the violence.

The situation has grown even more complex with the recent formation of a new Sinhalese marxist insurgency. Nevertheless, the religious interveners continue to convey messages back and forth across the lines in their ongoing effort to facilitate negotiation. The mediators stress, however, that they themselves do not have the wherewithal to influence a settlement. The parties alone can achieve peace.

IV. THE PUNJAB

The ethnic and sectarian strife that predominates throughout Indian society is highlighted by the conflict between the Sikhs and the Hindus in the northern province of Punjab. Through the years, a Sikh separatist movement has attempted to establish an independent state in the Punjab. The central government, dominated by Hindus of the National Congress Party, believes that India, an unnatural conglomeration of ethnic groups speaking a myriad of languages, will quickly unravel if it grants the Punjab independence.¹²

The situation in the Punjab took an interesting turn with the involvement of a Jain monk called Guruji ("enlightened spiritual guide on the path of self-realization"), who is dedicated to nonviolence. He toured the areas of the Punjab hardest hit by the violence in 1986, and in the spring of 1987, issued an appeal for peace in the region. In this appeal, Guruji called on the various

11 The nature of the group's activities requires that its identity remain confidential.

12 James C. Clad, *India: Crisis and Transition*, WASH. Q., Winter 1992, at 91, 93-94.

Sikh leaders as well as Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to end the violence.

Guruji's mediation efforts were well received. In May of 1987, he initiated a gathering in the Golden Temple at Amritsar, a holy site claimed by both Hindus and Sikhs, which has been occupied by Sikh militants. At Amritsar, Guruji met with the head priest, Darshan Singh Ragi, and other Sikh leaders to create an atmosphere of peace and facilitate dialogue between the Sikhs and the central government.

These talks resulted in the formulation of a four-point plan involving: (1) the release of innocent prisoners from both sides; (2) the rehabilitation of army deserters; (3) a permanent withdrawal of the Central Reserve Police Force which had been deployed around the Golden Temple since 1984; and (4) the dismissal of all court cases against underground youths. Unfortunately, the Punjab government sabotaged the burgeoning peace process, fearing a loss of prestige if religious leaders succeeded where it had failed.

Guruji's peace initiative in the Punjab reflects the possibility of having an honest dialogue between people with strongly differing opinions and world views. His accomplishment is extraordinary: An avowed apostle of nonviolence met with terrorists and engaged them in dialogue with the central government, which heretofore had refused to talk. The final word on the issue has not yet been spoken, and sadly, violence continues unabated. But the full potential of this monk's belief in nonviolence and his perseverance in pursuing dialogue has yet to be felt.

V. CONCLUSION

Marshalling the resources of the world's religions in the management of tension is an ambitious undertaking. It does not, however, call for some artful synthesizing of the discrete faiths of humankind—which would be both impossible and ill-advised. Rather, it calls for rigorous analysis and exploitation of the points at which the religious underpinnings for conflict resolution intersect. It also suggests a need to strengthen the "universal" aspects of the different religions, while at the same time preserving those specific rites and symbols without which religion cannot meet the needs of the human condition.

As one looks through the 1990s and beyond, the challenges are likely to prove even more formidable than they have in the past. If the goal of achieving peace in meaningful terms is to

prove any less elusive, far greater attention will have to be paid to the spiritual dimension of international politics.

