

A Critical Analysis of the Role of Religion in Fueling or Healing Conflict

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This article addresses religion as a concept and its role in fueling and healing conflict. The broad parameters of what we mean by religion and its relationship to conceptual understandings of conflict, particularly behavioral and structural¹, are critiqued. The realism and implications of different religions justifying conflict interventions or not is appraised. Building on this basis, dangers confronting religion regarding its relevance to society, human dignity and rights, and religious freedom are elaborated on, in order to enhance understanding of the role of religion as a catalyst in fueling and healing conflict. The paper concludes with a variety of caveats and suggestions for further exploratory research to assist religion to constructively promote peace and mitigate the negative aspects of behavioral and structural conflict.

Introduction

Conflict and religion are inseparable realities, which have been profoundly intermingled throughout the history of humanity's evolution. There is an extensive literature available on the subject of religion and its definition, particularly from the theological, philosophical, psychological and sociological perspectives.² Religions hold the potential for conflict primarily because of differences based on profound divergences in their central tenets of core values and absolute truths.³ These facets can become more conflictual when a religion's belief structure demands their universal implementation.

¹ Makumi Mwagiru, *Conflict in Africa: Theory, Processes and Institutions of Management* (Nairobi: Centre for Conflict Research, 2006), 24-25

² Ezekiel M. Kasiera, "The Scope of Comparative Religion," in *A Comparative Study of Religions*, ed. J.N.K. Mugambi, (Nairobi: Nairobi University Press, 1993), 3-10.

³ Joshua S. Goldstein, and Jon C. Pevehouse, *International Relations*, 8th Edition (United States of America: Pearson Longman, 2008), 164.

While extensive research already exists on various aspects of the relationship between religion and conflict, the following three aspects require ongoing investigation. First, the question of whether there is something inherent in religion's innate essence that mandates or legitimizes conflict is subject to debate and needs to be appraised further/in greater detail. Second, whether to consider analyzing religion as a distinct independent variable, or one of many variables, contributing to the intractable nature of conflict, is also open to discussion. Finally, another matter that necessitates careful consideration is clarity of the conceptual and existential parameters of what constitutes different forms of conflict in relation to religion.

Threaded throughout all these perspectives are the questions of whether and how religion is capable of supporting universal human rights; an area crucial to equality and freedom both in and outside a religious framework. In modern society, rarely a day passes that the issue of religion is not implicitly or explicitly linked to the exacerbation of inter-group conflict in some part of the world. It is vital to understand why is this the case, and to try to distinguish the underlying root causes of conflict.

The Religion-Conflict Conceptual Nexus

While acknowledging religious differences, in general the essence of all religions is about God, humanity and creation living in a state of inter-connective harmony and mutual interdependence, epitomized by and spiritually oriented to a communion of peace at a transcendental and human level. In this whole interaction of the sacred, the human and the cosmos, religion's relationship to conflict is existentialized with mankind as the core actor. Of critical importance to this paper is the dynamics concerning how humankind's psychology is constructed: whether on the one hand it is religiously formatted or orientated towards reconciliation and positive peace or on the other hand, towards hatred and negative conflict. David Carroll expands on this inter-relatedness;

The history of human societies is replete with people attempting to comprehend the world about them and to understand the possible relationship that this might reflect with some

creator or Supreme Being. Attempts to codify and institutionalize their beliefs have led to a diversity of religious systems around the globe,... They have become identified with groups and in some cases have become integral elements within specific nation-states. In some instances, religion is inextricably interwoven into the very psyche of a people.⁴

Conflict is a multi-dimensional social phenomenon; dynamic, unpredictable and endemic within all layers of everyday relationships.⁵ Conflict emerges as a product of incompatible goals between two or more parties.⁶ As a feature of social interaction it can be destructive or constructive, violent or non-violent. Many authors combine these aspects together and assume that conflict is always something negative and violent. However, progress is frequently the result of constructive conflict which, as will be argued, can involve both violence and non-violence. There have been numerous calls for greater dialogue among religions to foster increased understanding of each other. Comprehension of religion's interplay with different conflict typologies and the need for new forms of conflict management are essential components to this dialogue and process in order for it to be rooted in the praxis of reality; dia-praxis.⁷

The discipline of conflict management is also crucial to assessing religion's link to conflict in debates vis a vis religious stance on the just war tradition and the philosophy of pacifism. As Scott Appleby points out, "In most religions, for example, there is tension between the use of violence and its sublimation or outright rejection".⁸ This fact is evident in the considerable divergences and commonalities between what are the substantive political and religious requirements for a just war in

⁴ David Carroll, *Religion-Cure or Cause of Conflict* (2004),

<http://www.cnewa.org/bulletin-speech-body pg-us-ispix>, Retrieved October 3rd. 2008.

⁵ Kalevi J. Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis* (Englewood: Princeton Hall, 1983), 435.

⁶ Anthony De Reuck, *The Logic of Conflict: Its Origin, Development and Resolution*, in: Michael Banks ,eds., *Conflict in World Society: A New Perspective on International Relations*, (Brighton Wheatsheaf Books 1984), 96-111.

⁷ David Smock , "Religion in World Affairs: Its Role in Conflict and Peace" February 2008 | *Special Report No. 201*, in <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr201.html>. Accessed October 7th 2008.

⁸ Appleby, "Religion as an Agent of Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding" in Chester Crocker et al., eds. *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict* (Washington D.C.: United Institute of Peace Press, 2001), 823.

Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and many other world religions.⁹ There are striking differences also in the understanding of pacifism in various religions, a propos conceptual understanding and pragmatic application, such as Jainism and Christianity.¹⁰ Certain religions, in various circumstances, do legitimize and ethically justify war, conflict and violence, as well as positing moral rules of engagement centering on issues of distinction between combatants and civilians, avoidance of discrimination and proportionality regarding the limits of military coercion used. In this scenario it is open to debate whether religion should be judged as fueling conflict or justified in utilizing conflict to attain peace.

In some respects, it appears that religion's conflict justificatory theories are sanctioning a functional form of violence to achieve order and overcome chaotic dysfunctional violence. Bauman provides the insight that "Modernity can live without coercion about as well as fish can live without water."¹¹ Regardless of the polemics, these wars are only justified when considered as the lesser of two evils and upon fulfilling certain ethical requirements concerning justifiable cause, the end desired and the means used. This stance has led to governments and political elites manipulating and politicizing religion to legitimize conflict throughout history. Raymond G. Helmick contends that,

All governments have caught on to the fact that churches are the custodians of the Just War theory. When the war begins, every government appeals at once to the church to get up in cheering section and proclaim that, "God is on our side".¹²

Many denominations of Christianity will justify war so long as it fulfills the following strict criteria: there is just cause, legitimate authority proclaims it, there is the right intention, war is

⁹ Thomas Massaro and Thomas Anthony Shannon, *Catholic Perspectives on Peace and War*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 1-13.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1-13.

¹¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in the Fragments; Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 139.

¹² Raymond G. Helmick, "Does Religion Heal or Fuel Conflict", in Raymond G. Helmick & Rodney L. Petersen eds., *Religion, Public Policy, and Conflict Transformation* (London: Templeton foundation Press, 2001), 87.

undertaken as a last resort, the prospects for success must be high, and the means used be proportionate to the given circumstance. Undoubtedly questions do arise concerning the authoritative and objective basis for defining legitimacy and ethical ‘justness’ which Duane L. Candy states as:

Broadly speaking, the just war tradition consists of two distinct but interrelated themes: the moral justification for going to war and moral limits of fighting a war. The first is called the *jus ad bellum*. It consists of principles that offer guidance on when a resort to war is justified. The second theme, the *jus in bello*, offers principles that outline the moral limits or restraint required in the fighting of a just war.¹³

In contrast, there is profound opposition from groups, such as the Christian Pacifists, who hold that the just war tradition in reference to the teachings of Jesus Christ, is the abuse of casuistry and theological disquisition, in addition to acquiescing to political expediency and thereby prostituting the Gospel.¹⁴ Similar rebukes come from pacifists in other religious traditions. In Islam a just war may be based upon the preservation or spread of their religion while for Judaism it may be tied to the issue of protecting their homeland. These are only some of the many different examples in major religions of the world of what can constitute a just war.¹⁵ Pacifists attract the condemnation of realists who accuse them of immorality because they are shirking responsibility and displaying blatant disrespect for human life:

Other realists think that the pacifist rejection of war is not only imprudent but immoral as well, since these realists think that the distinction that common morality draws between doing and allowing harm cannot be sustained. Pacifism should be morally condemned because in refusing to use force to prevent the ruin of some, it allows the ruin of all.¹⁶

In most world religions one confronts the oxymoron or ironic paradox of the concept of ‘fighting for peace’ being justified in one way or other.

¹³ Duane L. Cady, *From Warism to Pacifism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 24.

¹⁴ Cf. David Carroll, *Religion-Cure or Cause of Conflict*, op.cit.

¹⁵ Thomas Massaro and Thomas Anthony Shannon, *Catholic Perspectives on Peace and War*, op.cit., 1-13.

¹⁶ David R. Mapel, “The Ethics of War and Peace: Religious and Secular Perspective,” in Terry Nardin ed., *Realism, War, and Peace* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 57.

In the case of conflict there is general agreement on the differences between structural and behavioural conflict concerning their respective forms of violence. The structural perspective centers its attention on latent non-manifest conflict, which may escalate into behavioural violence if not transformed. Structural violence, as defined by Galtung¹⁷, “present when human beings are influenced so that their somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations” and as such, it is used “To describe situations where unequal, unjust, and unrepresentative structures prevent humans from realizing their full potential thus extending the definition of violence beyond direct physical harm to the organization of society.”¹⁸ While keeping in focus the debatable issues of utopianism or idealism of religion, its contribution in healing, fueling or justifying conflict is dependent on whether one is addressing structural or behavioural violence.

From the 19th century onwards, the aspect of latent conflict, endemic to the structures of society, has come under increasing scrutiny within the fields of sociology, politics and religion, especially in relation to justice, peace, basic and ontological human needs and the integrity of creation. This development has been significantly influenced by the writings of Karl Marx¹⁹ on social systems and the role of religion and specific social teachings of the Catholic Church²⁰. It has also been heavily influenced from the 1950s onwards by expositions by various schools of social analysis regarding distortions in society’s structural composition, with considerable input from theology and religious philosophy in the process.²¹

¹⁷ Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 3 (1969): 167-191.

¹⁸ Saferworld, *Conflict-sensitive approaches, to development, humanitarian assistance and peace building: A resource pack*, produced by Africa Peace Forum, Center for Conflict Resolution, Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, Forum on Early Warning and Early Response, International Alert (London: Saferworld, 2004): 2-7.

¹⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. Edited by L. M. Findlay (Broadview Press, 2004)

²⁰ Joseph M. Candela, *Catholic Social Thought. Online Resources*, (Saint Mary’s College, Religious Studies 240) at <http://www.saintmarys.edu/~incandel/cst.html>.

²¹ John R. Pottenger, *The Political Theory of Liberation Theology: Toward a Reconvergence of Social Values and Social Science* (New York: Published by Suny Press, 1989), 172.

Key perspectives were illuminated relating to the role of religion in interrogating, conflictually, cultural-political-economic systems and their mechanisms of institutional enforcement. This ongoing process while appealing is also compelling all religions to apply the same standards to their own internal structures. For example, liberation theology and its social analysis have contributed enormously to both facets. Our use of the term liberation theology draws on an understanding that can find resonance in many religious systems. In his writings Paul Gifford states;

I have been using the expression ‘liberation theology’ in a general sense or as an umbrella term for any kind of ‘utopian’ Christianity, and Christianity that refuses to focus exclusively on privatized morality and individual sanctification, but also looks at the social structures within which Christians operate, aware that men and women have created those structures and are, therefore, responsible for the evil and injustice inflicted by them. It is this approach that liberation theologians have in common, not specific conclusions or programmes.²²

From this social analytical perspective, it is necessary not only to assess the impact of religion in terms of healing or fueling conflict but also to explore how it can foster constructive conflict, preferably of a non violent type, to bring about healing. In the same vein the debate centers on whether religion should be a private and confessional affair, or overtly operative in the transactions of society’s civic affairs. In general, this heightened awareness and prevalence of structural conflict, with its inherent violence, has activated some religions, especially in the latter half of the 20th Century to actively confront religious, political, social and economic abuses, especially where human rights and the common good are being violated.

Human Rights and Religion

This progression should not obscure religion’s previous and some continuing, catastrophic failures regarding its contribution to the historicization of human rights and the common good, as

²² Paul Gifford, *The Religious Right in Southern Africa* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1988), 99.

elucidated by Ignacio Ellacuria.²³ In this context it is perfectly justifiable to ask, are religious traditions capable of supporting universal human rights or are they likely to exacerbate intergroup conflict? This question is not about defending religion's existence; the fact of having faith or not, nor the historical relevance of religion in the past. The focus is on today's religion and its traditions, in all its world-wide variations of organizational structures and creeds, and its relationship to universal human rights and intergroup conflict. The diversity of content emanating from religion's creeds and from a multiplicity of institutional forms of governance structures, are critical volatile towers in this cross examination. Religious differences, while signifying the existence of a certain degree of conflict, do not necessarily mean it is inevitably a source for exacerbating conflict. This point brings us to the critical issue, namely respect and tolerance for the human right to be different, within the accepted legal parameters of the common good based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is not indecipherable or infallible.

We recognize in this debate that religious traditions can have internal institutional issues concerning conflict and human rights (including religious rights and freedoms) and in their external relations with world society.²⁴ In upholding human rights the challenge is not only to avoid contradictions and abuses in both domains, but also to appraise what echelon of universal human rights should be pro-actively actualized in world society, external to one's own tradition. This is the indispensable measuring rod of the potential of religious traditions to exacerbate intergroup conflict or not. Pertinent within this context is the issue of religious freedom's relationship to universal human rights and the common good.

²³ Ignacio Ellacuria, "Human Rights in the Americas: The struggle for Consensus", in Alfred Hennelly and John Langan, eds. *Human Rights in a Divided Society* (Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data, (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1982), 59-65.

²⁴ Martin E. Marty, "Religious Dimensions of Human Rights," in John Witte, Jr. and Johan D. van der Vyver, eds., *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1996), 4-6.

Herein lies the theoretical conflict field of the religious absolutist or insular fundamentalist versus the stances of the relativist, accommodationist or the all tolerable protagonist. In other words this debate can be seen to take place along an impulse continuum from the stance, our way is the only way and the right way of the transcendent existentialized, to the other extreme of non-exclusive mutual respect, reinforcing the authentic human rights and revelation held views of other religions. Emerging from this continuum are what Albert Schultz calls different, “universes of discourse,”²⁵ the derivatives of impulses emanating from the vertical dimensions of religious experiences. In the semantics of religion, beliefs and ideological differences can generate violent conflict;

They issue from God or the heavens before respondents connect them with the horizontal elements. On that secondary plane, humans interact with each other both within and beyond the boundaries of religious communities. Because of their transcendent and absolute source, these are seen as non-negotiable.²⁶

This is the perspective where religion as a concept, and religions as institutional structures, generate conflict and in the process forfeit adherence and respect for the declaration of fundamental human rights and religious freedom. To overcome these dangers, dialogue is a crucial prerequisite for mutual understanding and accommodation of differences. The boundaries of different religions are not impermeable and do provide scope for the sharing of mutual goals, interests and creation of alliances, on issues, faith perspectives and the upholding of human rights. The key concept that religion can draw from its heritage and own orthodoxy to implant into the universal human rights sphere, is the virtue or ideal of toleration.

Tolerance is vital for the respect of human rights, religions own cultural evolutionary freedom, and for countering the root causes of intergroup conflict. The link between the causes of intergroup conflict and issues of intolerance is not subject to severance. To counteract inter-group conflict and human right violations, religions need to expose the quintessential meaning and

²⁵ Marty, “Religious Dimensions of Human Rights,” 7.

²⁶ Ibid., 9.

actualization of tolerance. It is critically important to comprehend the issue of tolerance in its idealized essence. Gabriel Marcel epitomizes tolerance conceptually and practically through the lens and term, “counter-intolerance,”²⁷ based on actively assuring the rights of each other.

Perhaps a better term for all advocates of the need for tolerance is to adopt a position grounded in paradoxical terminology, such as an ‘intolerance of intolerance.’ This requires a much deeper understanding of the concept of tolerance than mere apathy, indifference, or non-confrontational acceptance. When the religious traditions attain this level of intolerance in the defense of tolerance for religious and universal human rights, they transpose conflict out of the intergroup realm to a ‘common good’ podium of proactively insisting on, and unreservedly defending, the ‘other’s’ universal rights and freedoms. In reality this would require religions to incorporate a doctrinal ethical principle of assuring the rights of ‘the others’ to be different. Without this optimum goal religion will continue to be a factor causing, or contributing to, the exacerbation of conflict and incapable of holistically supporting religious and universal human rights.

Even today's issues pertaining to the enshrinement of caste segregation and stratifying gender inequalities are hard pressed to be seen as anything other than a breach of human rights and examples of structural violence. Religion, from a prophetic dimension also finds it difficult to exonerate itself from blame concerning wars, the holocausts, and its role to prevent and counter structural violence within and outside its own institutions.²⁸ Questions such as whether religion should be apolitical or not, whether it should be a private or a civic affair delving into all aspects of social reconciliation, human rights and the common good, are appropriate to ask in this context. The role of religion in South Africa’s history epitomizes this point and evokes reflection;

²⁷ Ibid., 13.

²⁸ Aquiline Tarimo, *Applied Ethics and Africa’s Social Reconstruction*, 2nd Edition, (Nairobi: Acton Publishers Kenya, 2005), 40-42.

It is not true that whereas challenging structures is a political act, refusing to challenge them is an un-political stance, . . . those Christians who refuse to confront the apartheid system are equally political: it is just that their vote is for the apartheid system, whereas the vote of the first group is against it.²⁹

The significant distinction between religion scrutinizing the political affairs of life and that of religions attempting to gain control of political power has to be kept in mind. Religions have an objective, critical role to play concerning the social-political milieu, without becoming part and parcel of its institutional political power establishment. This was the basis for damning accusations leveled against religion during the Rwandan conflict. This compromising temptation is ever present for all religions and its leadership, even for a few shekels. The malevolent facets of religion's interaction with human and group psychology dynamics leading to manifest and structural conflict is an ever present danger.

Religionization and Politicization

The challenges within this large societal and cultural framework provide the basis for postulating that the degree to which religion will negatively fuel conflict in the future depends largely on two factors, the politicization of religion and the religionization of politics. For the sake of peace, both extremes have to be avoided while at the same time respecting that institutional separateness does not exclude functional interaction. The fundamental separation of church/religion and the state, in most of the western world was as a result of a distinct historical process which occurred over a number of centuries. Therefore, while allowing for disagreement on moral and ethical questions, both institutions need to avoid being coerced into becoming an instrument of the other. All religions need critical self-awareness about the purity of their religion's essence, and the political variables involved. Aquiline Tarimo and Paulin Manwello emphasize some of these dangers, "If we allow religious groups to participate in the public forum, it could be problematic

²⁹ Paul Gifford, *Christianity To Save or Enslave?* (Harare: Ecumenical Documentation and Information Centre of Eastern and Southern Africa, EDICESA, 1990), 22.

because some of them may encourage their believers to this opportunity to advance their religious view of life and, if possible to impose it on others.”³⁰

Thus, religion can have a variety of different orientations; conflict resolution, conflict generative, or both simultaneously. There is no doubt that religions at times, in the name of God, have adhered to supporting outrageous ideologies such as racism, sexism and imperialism.³¹ On the other hand religion has countered violence when highlighting a whole range of religious, human, environmental rights plus promoting new research into conflict’s transformative processes.

It should not be overlooked that religions themselves, their beliefs and internal institutional dynamics, may be centers of destructive conflict processes, either of a behavioural or structural typology. It is debatable whether or not religions are consciously aware of their constructive or destructive contributions to conflict prevention and escalation as noted by James Carroll:

Religion, like everything else of the human condition, is ambiguous - partly good and partly bad; part solution, part problem . . . easily confuses the object of its worship with itself, often prompting human beings to make absolute claims that lead inevitably to disaster.³²

This is piercingly obvious when one assesses, historically and morally, religion’s content and political role in the Crusades, the wars of Jihad, religious persecutions, inquisitions, conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Balkans, in Indian-Kashmir-Pakistan and other such conflicts. Some religion’s historical expressions and alignments with racism, sexism, colonialism and slavery are other expressions of the same phenomenon that needed, or still do, immediate redress.³³

³⁰ Aquiline Tarimo and Paulin Manwelo, *African Peacemaking and Governance* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers 2007), 87.

³¹ Ibid., 87

³² James Carroll, “Religion: Problem or Solution?” in *The Boston Globe* (October 9, 2001), 11.

³³ Ibid., 87.

Conflict and religion, and their existential institutionalism, should never be divorced from their potentialities to be either negative or positive forces on conflict dynamics. In any evaluation of these concepts and processes the moral imperatives relating to the ends or goals to be achieved, and the means applied, can never be relegated to the periphery. Clarity on all these concepts and factors is vital in order to appraise the substantive impact and ethical implications of religion as a resource for healing or exacerbating conflict.

Scholars such as Paul Ricoeur have probed religion's intrinsic violent essence conceptually and in its realism. They posit that "violence is inscribed in the origin of things" and is sanctioned by or resulting from the creative divine.³⁴ Rene Girard, while acknowledging that religion may have many benevolent traits, also holds that it is imbued with an intrinsic quality of innate violence, evidenced and epitomized in venerational reverence for sacrificial acts of a violent form.³⁵ Many such acts, still carried out under religion's banners such as character assassinations, sacralized victimization, martyrdom justification, and the elective beliefs of numerous cults, lend credence to this critique. The primary holy books of the main world religions provide substantive scriptural support for this position laden with their historical mesh of religion, conflict, blood and violence.

The insights of Girard and Ricoeur provide an avenue for analysing the profound inherent connectiveness of religion, violence and conflict. In so doing, they dispel the myth that religion, in its innate essence per se, is devoid of a violent module. Religion, in respect to its beliefs and values, finds its birth in the heart and depth of humanity's soul, whose objectives are worth fighting and even dying for. It is arguably the most profound foundation of values within a culture and it is precisely this psychological religious-value nexus that can lead to peace or fury, healing or turmoil. Thus there is an immense amount of ingredients, many not venerable, cultivating the debates and

³⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 182-183.

³⁵ Rene Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 32.

controversy concerning religion's essence and conflictual role in society. Religion is a prominent topic in public and political debate particularly with regard to its role in fueling and healing conflict, and its deleterious force affecting political order, human rights and ethnic conflict.³⁶ The solution cannot avoid delving into the complexities of religion's essence and its integrative psychological process link to negative or positive conflict transformation. The question arises, how can religion's transcendental essence avoid being violated and politically exploited in its existential role of uniting the Divine and the human. As Richard Helmick says, "it is always an abuse of religious faith to make it an instrument for something else".³⁷

Religion, Psychology and Institutionalism

Joseph Monteville's emphasis on the dichotomizing aspects of the intersection of religion and mass psychology also leads us to the pivotal human point where religion can be a force for healing or fueling conflict.³⁸ The drive to dichotomize is in society, partly due to mankind's limited nature, creating religious and identity groups which can in turn lead to scapegoating and dehumanization, exemplified in Christian-Jewish-Islam-Hindu relationships for so long. The power of religion as an identity factor should never be underestimated. Valmik Volkan's 'Enemy System Theory', contributes immensely to the process of understanding how the religion-psychology dynamic interplay engages the healing or fueling of conflict through highlighting identity factors and a religion-paranoia-hypergroupism interconnectivity. He emphasizes that,

This particular approach requires a penetrating examination of how the human mind is reflected in the process of decision making by a large group. It explores the following

³⁶ Appleby, "Religion as an Agent of Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding" in Chester Crocker et al., eds., *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict* (Washington D.C.: United Institute of Peace Press 2001), 821.

³⁷ Helmick, "Does Religion Fuel or Heal Conflict," 82.

³⁸ Joseph.V. Monteville, "Religion and Peacemaking", in Raymond G. Helmick and Rodney L. Petersen, eds., *Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Religion, Public Policy, and Conflict Transformation* (London: Templeton foundation Press, 2001): 99-106.

phenomenon: the psychological need to have enemies and allies (Volkan 1988); the intertwining of the individual's sense of self and that of the group's identity with their logistical planning are connected to man's primitive and unconscious impulses. In terms of large-group interaction most of these processes are involuntary.³⁹

Religion's role in healing or fueling conflict, either overtly or indirectly, or, as the case may be, deliberately or unintentionally, ultimately has to critique its own institutional politicization. This is where its institutionalism faces the real danger of usurping the focal point of religion and using or positioning God as an additive to justify the institution. This is evidenced somewhat in the Crusades, Jihad, modern extremism and certain forms of fundamentalism underpinning the Hindu BJP in India, movements of the Christian Right in Europe/USA and the September 11th terrorism attacks in the USA. These are all clear indicators of the politicization-religionization interplay. When the institution becomes the revered epicenter of reverence rather than adherence to its sacred message, it frequently, and far too often, tends to seek justifying arguments for its own violence, defending cases ranging from the child-abuse level, to suicide bombers and to mass killing. In this context Carl Evans highlights the significant responsibility that institutions have vis-a-vis scripture, through its interpretation and conflict.⁴⁰ It is also here that the identification of religion with ethnicity/civilisation/culture gets frequently reinforced, as emphasized by Samuel Huntington in his book 'The Clash of Civilisations',⁴¹ and in James Turner Johnson's discussions on morality and contemporary warfare where he develops the idea that:

³⁹ Vamik D. Volkan, "An Overview of Psychological Concepts Pertinent to Interethnic and/or International Relations" in Volkan et al., eds., *The Psychodynamic of International Relationships: Concepts and Theories* Vol. I (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990), 31.

⁴⁰ Carl Evans, "The Scriptural Basis for Peace Among Islam, Judaism, and Christianity," <http://www.cres.org/specials/dtf/DTFrptRev.pdf>. Accessed October 5th 2008

⁴¹ Samuel P. Huntington et al., *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate: A foreign Affairs Reader* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1993), 10.

Normative belief systems, including those of institutional religion, are closely tied to the establishment of personal and group identity, a factor which has obvious importance for understanding how cultural differences can translate in to enmity, hostility and conflict.⁴²

Furthermore, it is within this context that the essence of religion can be violated and transition into a mindset of non-negotiable fundamentalism on what is right and wrong, and even become a state religion and/or closed theocracy; hence resulting in the religionization of politics.

Here one finds the basis for exclusivity, where mutual respect and religious-cultural accommodation are suppressed, leading to intolerance, human rights violations and extremism. This was evident in the subtly religious fundamentalism dimensions of apartheid rule in South Africa and has transformed into a new category of extremism in regimes like the Taliban in Afghanistan, including the forces underpinning movements like Al Qaeda. Fundamentalism and extremism are two different dimensions of religious institutionalism, but both are grounds for fueling conflict to various degrees.⁴³ This extremist dimension wishes to employ violence to purge its community of intrinsic or extrinsic threats. It is arguable that the philosophical enlightenment, political liberalism, agnosticism and atheism are partly or predominantly mirrors of disillusionment with the hypocrisy and failures of religious institutionalism in fulfilling its faith content, and secondly in frequently neglecting to practice its core message of being a force or conduit for peace, justice, tolerance and openness to the evolutionary role of God's creative revelation.

On the other hand, religion, or perhaps more precisely faith, can be a major force for conflict resolution, capable of supporting universal human rights and indeed can be seen to be a major agent of positive societal transformation throughout history. This fact is visible in recent examples of Track II conflict resolution in Northern Ireland, various conflicts in the Middle East-Asia, St

⁴² James Turner Johnson, *Morality and Contemporary Warfare* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 167.

⁴³ Appleby, Religion as an Agent of Conflict Transformation and Peace building in Chester Crocker et al., eds., *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict* (Washington D.C.: United Institute of Peace Press 2001): 822-824.

Egidio's role in the Mozambique conflict, and the role of individual Christians such as Bishop Tutu in South Africa and the role of John Paul II in Eastern Europe. It is therefore difficult to reject the assertion that, "in each of these instances that the good influences of religion has sprung directly from their own premises of faith."⁴⁴ Still the core question remains as to why is religion not always operable in this way?

In this regard, the religious-psychological nexus is a key exploratory avenue needing further research if religion is to decrease as a contributory cause of conflict and become the life-giving force that it should be. All the major religions have to examine where their institutionalism and leadership has fostered or abused peace, subordinated the primacy of their transcendental message of peace, or have a narrow narcissistic comprehension of the 'peace' concept. Carroll reminds us of how psychological motivation can be distorted by a negotiable spirituality and institutionalism, within religion:

The threads of religious truth have become tied to economic and/or political imperatives. Religious rituals have become entangled with social ideologies. Does religion so intertwined with these aspects of society cause conflicts? Is religion one of the causes of conflicts? Or is religion being used as a cover for other causes that might be cultural, economic or political? It is at this level that we deal with the complexity of human motivation.⁴⁵

The spirituality and governance dynamic in religions institutionalism is the critical investigatory factor for generating an environment of conflict or peace building. Religious leaders have an individual and special collective responsibility to sound the alarms when 'God's Children' are threatened, and secondly to avoid being instigators of conflict themselves. Helmick gets to the heart of the matter when stating, "we should see what poisons have been in the mix, let's not pretend they have not been there, and ask how we might get to the healing and reconciling role that we would

⁴⁴ Helmick, "Does Religion Fuel or Heal Conflict," 95

⁴⁵ David Carroll, *Religion-Cure or Cause of Conflict* (2004), Retrieved October 3rd. 2008.
Website: <http://www.cnewa.org/bulletin-speech-body pg-us-ispix>.

expect of religion”.⁴⁶ Religions need to confront this poison, if they want to be effective facilitators of a peace building framework centered on human rights and the common good. This entails addressing problems of objectivity, insularity and institutional issues of power and control in reference to the ‘religious rightness’ of their religion and faith content. Scott Appleby emphasizes this crucial dimension:

Religions actors stand the best chance of being effective as facilitators of peace processes and as mediators when they are perceived as acting independently from the state, on their own authority, and beholden to no larger governmental, cultural, or religious power.⁴⁷

Conclusion

This paper addressed the broad parameters of what we mean by religion and its relationship to conceptual understandings of conflict, be they behavioral or structural and has appraised the realism and implications of different religions justifying conflict.

Religion as a concept and its role in fueling conflict has been interrogated. On this basis, I have highlighted existing and pending dangers confronting religion with regard to its authentic relevance to society, human rights and religious freedom. It is within this framework that religion is critiqued discussing how it can be a catalyst in fueling and healing conflict. The paper concludes with a variety of caveats and recommendations for further exploratory research to assist religion to constructively promote peace and mitigate the negative aspects of conflict.

While accepting that conflict is a complex and multifaceted concept, existentialized in a multiplicity of forms, there is the danger that some people will unjustifiably hold religion culpable for causing conflict in a variety of circumstances, when in fact the underlying, proximate or trigger causes may be located elsewhere. The peril of this unjustness exists especially when opposing actors have religious identity differences as experienced in Northern Ireland, Sudan-South/Sudan, the

⁴⁶ Helmick, “Does Religion Heal or Fuel Conflict,” 84

⁴⁷ Appleby, “Religion as an Agent of Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding,” 834.

Balkans and the Indian sub-continent, among others. The origins of war and conflict are rarely, if ever, mono-causal, and in identifying religion as a factor, there is need to cross examine factors of state and international governance, environmental context, politics, culture, economics, ethnicity, and historicity, in order to uncover the complex causes of structural and behavioural conflict.⁴⁸ Complexity oversimplified is in itself conflict generating; it's an arrogance of ignorance, and or an ignorance of arrogance, especially as shown in the diatribes of the fundamentalism, non-violent extremism and manifest extremism operationalized in terroristic acts. To avoid institutional narcissism, intrinsic and extrinsic interrogation of religion's implicit and explicit role and functionalism in society is a constant necessity.

Religion's interaction in and with conflict, including its justification of violence, is a profound and complex issue confronting all religious traditions. The healing role of religion depends largely on an '*intolerance to intolerance*', grounded in restorative justice for its past failures, and recognizing that every human being is 'God's Child', deserving peace and freedom based on the dignity of human life, human rights' advocacy, the common good and mutual respect. However, this role must take cognizance of the fact that religion is limited in respect to its content, structures, leadership and other related spheres of human interaction, but it does have an eternal import for humanity.

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⁴⁸ McGarry, O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 221-225.

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