

# Moving Trends in Peace and Conflict Studies: The Nexus between Religion and Peace Building

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## Abstract

*In moving abreast with the global trends in the field of peace and conflict resolution, religious practitioners are found at every level of the peace-building processes. The role of religion in the modern era cannot be underestimated since it has remained a resilient force in society. Religion transcends geographical boundaries that can be used to reach a majority of its followers, it teaches peace and love, even when the condition seems horrendous. The motivational factor for writing this paper emanated from the realization of the continuous surge in religious movements linked with acts of extremism and the many series of conflicts. This is a qualitative study based on the analysis of the available literature on religion and peace building. The overarching question was: What is the nexus between religion and peace-building? It was found out that despite religious extremism, including the extremism that courts war and conflict, religion remains key in peace-building. We recommend the need for tolerance, religious pluralism and strong partnership between religion and peace-building initiatives.*

**Key words:** religion, peace-building, conflicts, intervention strategy, nexus

## Introduction

Since the anti-colonial non-violence movements of Mahatma Gandhi and Abdul Ghaffer Khan in the 1920s up to the 1940s, the religious peace-building initiative has become an increasingly important phenomenon (Sampson 2007). Rehman (2011: 58) observed that the role of religion in peace-building is mainly anchored on conflict transformation, that is: “the replacement of

violence with non-violent means of settling disputes” and structural reforms. Bartoli (2007: 63) also agrees by indicating that religion contributes enormously towards peace-building through maintaining connections that keep communication open between nation-states despite changes in the international order.

Hoddie and Hartzell (2010) postulated that religion has a strong and perhaps growing significance as a key source of identity to millions of people, especially in the developing world. As such, there is a strong call for making sure that such a huge movement is actively involved in peace-building initiatives. The evidence is manifest that religion has the potential to double or triple its current efforts in the coming decade. Redekop cited in Bartoli (2007: 61) argues that Christianity has been in the forefront in enhancing Peace-building through preaching tolerance, inclusive, democratic and peaceful expression of rights among other things; and has gone ahead and contributed towards the formulation of these human rights.

Before delving into the main discussion of this paper, we sum up this section by stating that religion has great capacity to interface with politico-socio-economic movements, ideologies or programmes. Religion has the potential to either resolve or perpetuate the world's most complex conflicts. It is against this background that this paper proposes the harnessing of powerful religious forces to play constructive roles in peace-building and conflict resolution (Nicholas 2014).

### **The purpose of the study**

The main purpose of this study is to generate new understanding in the nexus between religion and peace-building. The following research questions will be used as guides towards the attainment of this purpose:

- (i) *What is the inter-connection between religion and peace-building?*
- (ii) *How powerful is the role of religion in resolving or fuelling conflicts?*

(iii) *What are the causes of religious strife?*

(iv) *How can religion be harnessed as an intervention strategy in peace-building?*

## **Methodology**

This is a qualitative study solely based on the analysis of available literature on religion and peace-building. Critical text analysis was used because, as Polit and Becky (2010) argue, it helps in ironing out inconsistencies and ambiguities. Objectivity, and exclusion and inclusion were the parameters applied during text analysis of available literature. Objectivity, according to Yin (2009), is important for the researcher not to follow instincts while exclusion and inclusion of the content were necessary because, in some cases, the authors exclude or include materials even when they are useful for the study.

## **Conceptualizing religion and peace-building**

Religion is a complex concept that has been in existence since time immemorial. Its definition varies from scholar to scholar, and is based on different contexts. Religion is a system of beliefs and practices (values, norms, and roles) by which people recognize the existence of one or more supernatural being(s). Beliefs are strong passions that people hold about matters they regard beyond the realm of normal thinking while practices are ways in which people express their religious beliefs (Rugyendo 2005). Brewer, Higgins and Teeney (2010) argue that religion is a set of beliefs, symbols, and practices oriented towards and demarcating the 'sacred'. Appleby (1999) further argues that the term religion is used to refer to how human beings respond to the reality that they perceive as sacred. This includes the creed, a given code of conduct, among others, which operates at various levels of society. As part of culture, religion gives people a sense of identity and discrimination against those of the out-group (Hertog 2010).

Based on the error management theory of Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, religion is an obstacle to religious tolerance and religious diversity (plurality and pluralism), as it gives people a worldview to deal with the fear of death and to give meaning to life. This makes it difficult for people to embrace or take seriously those who hold a different worldview.

Similarly, peace-building is a concept that has varying definitions based on different institutions, different schools of thought and the context in which it is being explored. There is the persistent complexity of reaching a conclusive definition of peace-building which continues to pose a serious challenge in realizing peace. Lederach (1997), for example, defines peace-building as a wide range of activities and functions that both precede and follow formal peace accords. Similarly, Porter (2007) defines peace-building as the processes that involve building positive relationships, healing wounds, reconciling antagonistic differences, restoring esteem, respecting rights, meeting basic needs, enhancing equality, instilling feelings of security, empowering moral agency that is democratic, inclusive and just. In addition, it is seen as all efforts required to create sustainable peace zones (Reychler and Paffenholz 2001).

An important point from these definitions is the creation of peaceful zones through mobilized efforts. This requires an understanding of the concept of religious peace-building, which entails a range of activities performed by religious actors and institutions for solving and transforming deadly conflicts with the goal of building social relations and political institutions characterized by the ethos of tolerance and non-violence.

Even with this understanding, the role of religion remains a contested one. It is not clear whether religion is all about promoting peace or fuelling conflicts. Nevertheless, Rehman (2011) and Sampson (2007) observe that the role of religion in peace-building is mainly anchored on conflict transformation. Similarly, Bartoli (2007) argues that religion has contributed enormously towards peace-building through maintaining connections that keep

communication open between nation-states despite the many changes in the international order. The role of religion cannot be doubted as it remains at the heart of achieving reconciliation due to its capacity to foster unity, healing, consoling and giving people relief (Rehman 2011). Similarly, religion provides a cultural foundation for peace in society (Appleby 1999). In addition, religious institutions play a critical role by engaging in conflict prevention and conflict resolution programs.

### **Religion as a force for peace**

Religion has the potential to either reduce or to intensify conflict. Religion plays a powerful role in influencing individual and group attitudes. Religious conflict and prejudice are evident across the globe, for example, the conflict in northern Nigeria between Muslims and Christians, Jews and Muslims in the Middle East (Hunsberger and Jackson 2005). Several factors have been cited in relation to religious strife, for example, inequality and prejudice, religious politicization, power structures, competition, among others. These emanate from two major factors, namely religious intolerance and religious pluralism. Plurality is a description of the actual diversity of religions. It is related to a context of secularization, privatization, and the individualization of religion where people are increasingly exposed to a variety of ideas, values, ideals, among other things (Appleby 1999; Puett 2013).

The ambiguities in religious teachings continue to shape the social behaviour of followers. This has been infiltrated by what Boulding (1986) cited in (Sampson 2007) refers to as a culture of “holy war” and the “kingdom of peace”. Such teachings continue to be misinterpreted by religious institutions. In the Qur’an for example, it has been interpreted to mean *jihad* implying spiritual warfare or holy war waged against oneself which is not clearly defined (Appleby 1999). This poses a challenge, especially on how to de-link this concept with the evil practices

that have continued to take place in modern society. Such interpretations lead to religious extremism and the practice of intolerance (Appleby 1999; Coward and Smith 2004).

There is also a high level of competition for power which generates and intensifies open hostility, discrimination and aggression, not only for groups which compete for contradictory rationalities at a societal level, but also at the individual level, whose identity is a matter of choice (Skeie 2002). Pluralism is the ability to acknowledge diversity and engage in open dialogue to challenge and reconsider one's views. Pluralism arises from intrinsic orientation – associated with maturity, internalized, committed and sincere faith, as Hunsberger and Jackson (2005) posit. Pluralist proponents have the ability to engage in dialogue with the purpose of ensuring new discovery (Appleby 1999). They are more objective regarding religious diversity, and not influenced by status but by belief systems. On the other hand, where extrinsic viewpoints or religious orientation exists, religious participants are less tolerant because of the level of immaturity which blocks people from a wider perception of religion (Allport and Ross 1967; Thompson 2004).

On the contrary, religious tolerance is the capacity to live alongside a different religious tradition or a belief from one's own (Neusner and Chilton 2009). Tolerance is also viewed as the ability to refrain from the use of force, violent actions against opposing individuals or groups (Appleby 1999). Although tolerance and accepting diversity are more welcome ideals, personality traits have influenced people to continue holding on to varying degrees of ability to change and be open to divergent others. In an ideal society, religion provides a frame of reference for individuals to interpret reality and set personal goals (Hertog 2010; Hogg, Adelman and Blagg 2010). Self-understanding is key to sensitivity and diversity of religions and an objective interpretation of the reality.

Arguably, high religious fundamentalists view reality in their own way and have a different way of interpreting it as opposed to low religious fundamentalists who, given new information, are more likely to be accommodative (Thompson 2004; Hogg, Adelman and Blagg 2010). The principles of tolerance and acceptance may not be achieved in the light of developmental psychology, social identity, terror management and personality. This is because of the information that we are exposed to which in most cases teaches us to be tolerant to in-group and intolerant to out-group.

Due to religious fundamentalism, intolerance emerges in the sense that many zealots are more subjective in their worldviews and belief systems. They believe that they are always correct and such people hold on to the “absolute truth” resulting in prejudice. A crucial question to pose is: “Can there be absolute truth?”. When much emphasis is put on religious fundamentalism, inequalities become more entrenched resulting in religious prejudice.

### **Role of religion in peace-building**

Even with inadequate religious tolerance and religious pluralism, religion still plays a crucial role which should not be taken lightly. This is evidenced by the surge in numbers of people who are turning to religion (Koeng et al., 2012, cited in Omayio (2015). Religion continues to act as the anchor that inspires life, individuals, communities and even nations. In this context, defining conflict and peace, therefore, means that a religious perspective cannot be omitted since it has an imperative conflict transformation role in society.

Religion acts as a source of identity in addition to its potential for tapping into a narrative, historical and personal ability to transcend ethnic conflicts successfully (Pearce 2003; USAID 2009; Powers 2010). Given this standpoint, religion is a vital source of status. People are more likely to conform to intrinsic orientation and accept religious teachings that pertain to the principle of the golden rule. Religious participants conform to sacred teachings because they

want to be viewed as virtuous affiliates. In Kenya, for example, the Al-Shabaab campaign which was degenerating into a terrorist conflict was given a new complexion by religious participants. This is due to the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Kenya which is more of tolerance rather than pluralism. The two religions respect each other and they did not seek to antagonize the relationship (Omayio 2015).

Religion also plays a major role as a basis for mobilization. Two-thirds of the world's population identify with religion. Actors in conflicts, therefore, use religious authorities or religious language and symbols to mobilize support and interpret reality (Hertog 2010; Powers 2010). Correspondingly, military and some movements may use religion tactfully as a tool for recruitment or as a safeguard from defection (USAID 2009). This has been the trend in Kenya, Zimbabwe and elsewhere, especially when nearing elections. Politicians use religious language to gain popular support (Sachikonye 2010).

In contemporary society, religion continues to be politicized and sacred texts and other doctrinal teachings have been cited as a justification for conflicts (Sampson 2007). This is crucial, especially when in a conflict zone (Power 2015). Kidwai, Moore and FitzGibbon (2014) concur that religious sects continue to align themselves with political groups for the sake of strategic positioning. That seems to be a deviation from the normal religious ethos which earlier on called for a clear distinction between politics and religion. As a powerful source of identity, the emergence of religion in a conflict raises the chance of the conflict's outcome. From the Kenyan experience, leaders have shared and respected a set of values on different sides of the conflicting parties. This helps to foster meaning, identity, and emotional support that increases resilience in coping with adversity and facilitate mobilization to overcome it (Bartoli 2007). Religion instils feelings of empathy and compassion that can sustain reconciliation and problem-solving across divisions (Sampson 2007).



Values, norms, and motivations that support non-violent approaches to raising and confronting differences are also instilled by church leaders. For example, Luke 6: 31 talks about love: and as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them (Golden rule). This is emphasized in John 13: 34 – 35, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have the love for one another”. Mark 11:25 emphasizes forgiveness: “and whenever you stand and pray, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” This is also emphasized in Quran where we encounter three key values: justice (*adl*), beneficence (*ihsan*) and wisdom (*hikmah*), which are the original principles in peace-making strategies and framework in Islamic religion (Bartoli 2007).

These are some of the teachings that can inspire the conflicting parties to change their attitudes and their perception by replacing violence with non-violence means of settling disputes and structural reforms as observed by (Rehman 2011).

Religious actors and institutions are highly considered as trustworthy and credible by the local population (Sampson 2007; Powers 2010). It is this trust that helps religious institutions to influence a situation. This also allows them to maintain principled neutrality and a philosophical sensibility that puts people, their sufferings, and their struggles above principle (Bartoli 2007).

Further experience indicates that religious people work closely with the local community which gives them an idea of how their followers operate. During conflicts, therefore, it is easier for them to intervene and help change the mind-set of the community for successful conflict transformation.

Due to their location in terms of power, religious leaders are well acculturated, an indication of how they have established a complex web that maintains a positive relationship that cuts across all sectors (Powers 2010). They have first-hand experience and information since they are able to address conflicts at local, national, and international levels. They have information on the conflicts as it emerges, hence successful conflict transformation (Bartoli 2004). Religious leaders work closely with community members and they are in constant interaction with them. This is evident in Uganda among the Acholi religious leaders peace initiative that mediated over the conflict between Lord's Resistance Army and the government (Powers 2010).

Religion remains a vital cog in conflict transformation although it may not always bear positive results during conflict transformation. Utilizing religion in some cases can worsen or create new social and political conflict (Gopin, 1997). The language used and the interpretations accorded to the scriptures may instigate conflict (Hertog 2010). A critical point to make is that religion in itself does not promote injustices/conflict but the interpretations accorded to it do.

### **Peace-building through religious institutions: The Kenyan Al-Shabaab case**

The relationship between Al-Shabaab and Kenya can be traced back to the 1990s. During this period, there was a link between Kenyan Islamic charities and the radical clerics (Hansen 2013). Hansen (2013) adds that sympathy, financial support, and recruitment for Al-Shabaab was made possible through these charities and clerics who exposed the Kenyan government, especially the police department, as appendages of the United States of America (USA) and the European Union (EU) in fighting Islam all over the world. Al-Shabaab started recruiting youths from a non-Somali origin and took them to Somalia for training. Most of the recruits were jobless youths who were promised scholarships and jobs in Somalia only to be forced

into the group military training (ibid). Hansen (2013) reports that 10% of membership of Al-Shabaab currently are of Kenyan origin.

In making its impact more prominent, Al-Shabaab has attacked and kidnapped local citizens and tourists, especially from the coastal and northern areas of Kenya, causing harm to the Kenyan tourism industry (International Crisis Group, 2012). This prompted the Kenyan government to deploy its army to secure Kenya's borders and interests. In October 2011, the Kenyan Army invaded Somalia to combat the Al-Shabaab militant group in an operation termed "*Operation Linda Nchi*" meaning "*protect the country*" (Gettleman 2011). Later, the Kenyan soldiers joined the African Union Mission in Somalia-AMISON (International Crisis Group 2012). This invasion was for self-defence purpose under the international law Article 51 of the UN Charter (Daley 2013).

Since the deployment of the Kenyan army in Somalia, the Al-Shabaab declared war on Kenya which has been accused of playing puppet to the Western powers in their "global struggle against Islam" (Hansen 2013). Kenya has since remained a target of the religious extremists with attacks taking different angles including killing police, abducting government officials, killing aid workers, attacking bus stops, restaurants, the Westgate Mall attack, and lately the Garissa University attack that killed over 140 students (Miller 2013), (Allison 2013).

The conflict slowly transformed from a war on terror to a religious one. According to Odhiambo et al. (2013), Kenyan churches have since experienced numerous attacks by Al-Shabaab including a grenade attack at Garissa's Pentecostal Church on November 5, 2011, that left two people dead and five seriously injured. One person killed and 11 others hospitalized when God's House of Miracles Church at Ngara Estate in Nairobi was attacked on 29<sup>th</sup> April 2012. Simultaneous attacks on two churches in Garissa on 1 July 2012 left 17 people dead and 50 others injured. On July 21, 2012, police in Kitale (a town in Western Kenya) arrested two

terror suspects who were allegedly on a mission to bomb the Umoja Catholic Church, a busy parish in the Eastlands of Nairobi. On 20 September, a 9-year-old boy was killed when a grenade was hurled to Sunday school children at St. Polycarp Anglican Church along Juja Road in Nairobi. All these cases are traced back to issues of intolerance. When religions begin to teach tolerance, issues of inclusion and exclusion can be accommodated making it possible for conflict transformation.

### **Key factors that necessitated effective Al-Shabaab – Kenyan conflict management**

The success of the above conflict management was made possible by both Muslims and Christians. This was made possible through communication and interreligious forums, thus, demonstrating the importance of communication as a critical tool in conflict. Kenya is a multiculturalist nation with forty different ethnic communities encompassing more than five different religions. These ethnic groups have lived together relatively well without any religious strife. Christians constitute the majority of the population followed by Muslims. In his speech, former Pope Benedict XVI, encouraged followers of different religions to have dialogue by echoing the need for different religions "to learn to accept the other in his otherness and the otherness of his thinking" (Benedict XVI, 2012). This has helped reduce the strife between Muslims and Christians.

As pointed out by (Powers 2010), governments play an incredible role in any conflict. When the Kenyan attack took place, the affected people did not take the law into their own hands; instead, they turned to the government. Experience shows that the government responded by deploying the military forces to the scene and these were able to take effective measures. At that time, security for churches in the risky areas was intensified with security checks being introduced and that resulted in the restoration of peace and calm in the country.

According to Omayio (2015) and (Powers 2010), religious leaders have garnered peoples' trust in society. As can be seen from the Kenyan experience, there is support for Omayio's assertion since the majority of the population in Kenya highly trusts its religious leaders. After the attack, leaders from the two religions came forth and strongly condemned the attack, calling for peace and calm. They urged their followers not to revenge and emphasized this using the scriptures and Qur'an, for example, Romans 12: 19: Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

Counselling is crucial as it helps one to understand himself/herself and to come to terms with what has happened (Koenig et al., (2012) cited in (Omayio 2015). This is another critical role that religious leaders with other counsellors undertook in managing the Al-Shabaab attack. Since people associate religion with healing (Rehman 2011), it was quite easy for members to cope. Religious doctrine and spiritualization of the conflict played a key role in managing the situation. Christians believe that when such an evil act happens, it is the work of the devil to challenge God.

### **Summary, conclusion and recommendations**

This discussion has demonstrated that the issue of religion and peace-building is quite complex. At the end of it all, it is important to acknowledge that religion has a role to play in peace-building. Religion has been infiltrated by some opportunists who are seeking fame and money. The world should be wary of such undesirable elements that use religion for personal gain and in the process, create an element of fanaticism among their followers. It is these religious fanatics who have caused all sorts of problems and have brought a bad name on religion.

There is also the need for religious leaders to desist from the practice of promoting violence among their subordinates, and governments to strategize on how to deal with these religious

conflicts. Promotion of unity among different religious communities must remain high on the agenda.

Open communication channels and interreligious forums are crucial mechanisms in managing conflicts and should be supported by any means to expedite conflict resolutions. In Kenya, for example, these two factors played a vital role in preventing retaliation by Christians against the Muslims after the Al-Shabaab attack, a scenario which could have exacerbated the conflict.

Matters of justice should not be compromised where atrocities have been committed; perpetrators of violence should be investigated and prosecuted without fear or favour, irrespective of the religious background.

As ambassadors of peace, religious leaders should challenge themselves first by changing their mindset towards other people's religions, culture, and values. Ultimately, religion will be able to judiciously sow the seeds of love, non-violence, peace, tolerance, inclusiveness, unity and togetherness.

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