

***Shared Values and/or Shared Faith:
Conflict Maker or Confidence Builder?***
Reflections from personal experience with the United Nations
in about a dozen countries

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2 April, 2023

When you ask people about the link between religion and war or conflict – almost everywhere there are two opposite reactions: religions cause war, and religions are about peace.

Some examples of the link between religion and conflict are:

- Especially since 9/11, in subsequent conflicts, or most recently after the events of Afghanistan the last year and a half (that began to happen after I was last there in August 2021) many people think there is something in Islam that creates terrorism.
- When I arrived in Sri Lanka in 1984 – I saw how some Buddhist monks had supported brutal attacks on Sri Lankan Tamils that was the main spark for a 30 year war.
- The partition of South Asia in 1948 and the terrible attacks and killing between Hindus and Sikhs on one side and Muslims on the other.
- In the early 1990s I saw the land where my father was born, Bosnia-Herzegovina brutally torn apart on what seemed religious grounds – Muslim vs Christian Orthodox vs Christian Catholic.
- Even in Ukraine recently Vladimir Putin portrayed the war as one to protect traditional Orthodox values from the contamination by the liberal west and “deviant” ideas of individual rights for all people – regardless of gender, or sexual orientation.

But when I was growing up I saw examples of the link between religions and peace. Much of the peace movement against the Vietnam war came from Christian churches...including UUA. And links to “peaceful” eastern philosophies become more common eg. “give peace a chance”, Let It Be, My Sweet Lord, Imagine ... just to quote music from the Beatles.

So what is it??? Does faith, mainly through religions create conflict or does it build confidence? I will focus on the Christian set of beliefs, then Islam and finally Buddhism as those are the religions I have had the most exposure to – but similar issues apply to Judaism, Sikhism,

Hinduism, Confucianism plus the many variations in those big religions and to an extent also to indigenous people's beliefs.,

To start with Christianity and how it has created conflicts

- Rome – the example of how Emperor Constantine used Christianity to justify violence
- St. Augustine
- The Crusade of the Middle Ages.
- Ideology of Colonialism, the doctrine of discover and – Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English use of religion to justify conquest and control
- More recently in the Balkans wars of the 1990s
- Some of the language used by Bush and Blair to justify the Iraq invasion

Islam and conflict

- The rapid expansion of Islam even in Mohammed's time... to Arabia and in the next few hundred years to Spain, N. Africa, India was done largely through religious war.
- Idea of jihad
- How religion is used in the Palestine/Israel conflict (though not so clearly, since Palestinians are a mix of religions, Muslim and Christian)
- Indian partition of 1947
- By Al Qaeda, Islamic State, the Taliban, and groups in other countries...

Buddhism and conflict

- Least intuitive to think of this, but even Siddhartha had links to Kings who drew power from conflict
- Asoka and the empire in India/Pakistan/Afghanistan
- Duttugemenu in Sri Lanka and the war against a Tamil Hindu king.
- For example Duttagamenu showed sorrow for killing Tamils, but was assured by the monks that, because his opponents were not Buddhists, their deaths were equivalent to those of beasts and equaled only one-half a Buddhist. In other words, using violence as a means to create peace. This teaching allowed kings to wage war even against other Buddhist kings.
- Recently in Sri Lanka the last years

So a case can be made that indeed religion causes conflicts....

Holy war is a basic ingredient for Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Both the devout and those who want to exploit the traditions for political ends will find in the “canon” fodder for another kind of cannon.

But in fact the terrible wars of the last century that have killed the most have had little to do with religion.

World Wars One and Two... empire, politics, class

Chinese Civil War 1945-1949

Sino-Japanese war 1930-1945

Iran-Iraq war 2002

Vietnam war:1963-1975

Overall in this period, most people died from wars and conflicts that are not caused by religions

And, there are also strong examples of religions playing a role in defusing war...

- Christian – the quaker tradition. Pugwash. The Northern Ireland peace: the Good Friday agreement
- Word of Jesus
 - Those who make Christianity approve war face the difficulty that Jesus did not fight, died a non-resistant, forgave his crucifiers, and advised love of enemy and martyrdom. He held no political office, rejected worldly power, and offered no explicit political advice beyond paying taxes and the ambiguous “Give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and unto God what belongs to God” – though not saying what belongs to each.
 - Multi-ethnic tolerant traditions of the Balkans music)
- Islam
 - In Islam, all humanity desires peace which means submission to God and doing so brings the believer peace. When the whole world submits to the rule of God as contained in the Quran, then the whole world is at peace
 - The tradition of Sufi Islam was predominant in Asian, Central Asian, Malaysia; Indonesia Islam with a focus inside rather than outside.
 - Built confidence (example of Sufi shrines in Sindh)
- Buddhism

- The Buddha taught non-killing and detachment, accepted no political office, and dismissed war as of no importance.
- Dalai Lama has applied non-violence to Tibetan issues
- Mahatma Gandhi (though a Hindu too) pioneered non-violence based in faith

So religion has been a factor in conflict but also a factor in confidence building in the past. Rather it is how people have applied it that matters more than the religion itself.

But what about now and the future?

Polarization within countries and polarization among countries – made worse by climate change

- Examples from Sri Lanka
- Examples from Pakistan (blasphemy – Malala, other students...)
- Examples from the USA (evangelicals vs others – and an apparent shrinking space for listening)
- So the risk of religion being misused as a conflict creator is more than ever before now. Can religion be used to reduce that polarization and rebuild confidence?

We should look at the examples of the United Nations Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours”& “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

- The UN’s Engagement with the Orthodox priests in Belarus with HIV positive people.
- Pakistan work on acceptance of transgender... resulting in a legal recognition of rights.
- Sri Lanka – the senior monk of the Dutegemenu shrine who helped build trust with the military and extreme monks – helping us to reach more people with humanitarian assistance and to help

with the returns of hundreds of thousands of displaced/distressed people

- Sri Lanka – multi-ethnic demonstrations/shared protests and the sharing of the Muslim Iftar by all faiths.

How people apply their faith matters. The words of this church are a good guide

This church was founded on the faith that love is a more positive force for good than fear. It exists as a haven of religious freedom, offering fellowship, knowledge and inspiration to all who would seek truth, live responsibly and courageously, and be of service to humanity.

End

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Suggested Hymns:

#347 Gather the Spirit

~)-| Words & music: Jim Scott, 1946- , © 1990 Jim Scott

GATHER THE SPIRIT

#1068 Rising Green

~)-| Words & Music: Carolyn McDade 1935- , © 1983 Carolyn McDade

~)-| arr. Jim Scott, 1946 -

#318 We Would Be One

~)-| Words: Samuel Anthony Wright, 1919-

Music: Jean Sibelius, 1865-1957, arr. from *The Hymnal*, 1933, © 1933, renewed 1961

Presbyterian Board of Christian Education

FINLANDIA

Notes for UU talk

That religion can be so markedly different in the hands of the power-hungry, as opposed to the altruistic and virtuous, really says more about human psychology than it does about religion. That's why so many human conflicts unfortunately involve religion.

Among the people there is he whose discourse on the life of the world pleases you, and he calls on God as witness to what is in his heart, yet he is an unyielding and antagonistic adversary. When he turns and leaves, he walks about corrupting the earth, destroying crops and livestock – God loves not corruption (Q2:204–205)

I've been guilty of claiming religion is the source of the world's evils, but it's a careless comment. It's far too easy to blame the Muslim faith for honour killings. I'm under no illusion about the fact that religion is routinely used to justify the more heinous crimes. But the 20th century is filled with examples, namely Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China, that didn't need God as an excuse to commit genocide against a state's own people

Gods have been used to justify almost any cruelty, from burning heretics and stoning adulterers to crucifying Jesus himself.

As 14 year-old Malala Yousafzai sat on a bus in the grounds of her school in Pakistan's Swat Valley, a gunman shot her in the head. After proudly claiming responsibility, the Taliban told the world that the teenage education activist's work represented "a new chapter of obscenity, and we have to finish this chapter". The "obscenity" was the education of girls. The Taliban felt no shame. They know that what they have done is right because their god tells them so

I heard somewhere (I've never been able to discover where) that terrorism occurs when you combine a sense of military and economic inferiority with a sense of moral superiority. Religion is very good at conferring a sense of moral superiority on its followers.

Indeed, while the religious have murdered throughout history in the name of their god, I've been unable to find any evidence of atheists killing anyone in the name of atheism

So, while I don't agree that only religion causes conflict, I'd argue that all mass murder and war are fought in the name of a bigger-than-self philosophy or idea. [Atheism](#), simply lack of belief in a god, has not yet proved compelling enough to motivate murder. So far no one has gone into a crowded public space and blown themselves up while shouting, "No god is great!"

Religion has been implicated in all sorts of conflict and violence throughout human history. There is blood on the hands of the faithful, and no avoiding the fact that in the service of the wrong people, religion can be a force of great harm. This includes Christianity. If we consider the sins of the Christian past critics have plenty to work with – witch-hunts, the Crusades, Christian support of slavery.

Likewise the idea that most of the wars of history have been caused by religion is demonstrably false. The vast majority of wars have been conducted in the pursuit of profits or power, or waged for territory or tribal supremacy, even if religion has been caught up in those pursuits. But there is a very real sense in which religion can moderate those forces. David Hart notes that, "Religious conviction often provides the sole compelling reason for refusing to kill ... or for seeking peace ... the truth is that religion and irreligion are cultural variables, but killing is a human constant".

The answer, Volf argues, to violence perpetrated in the name of the Cross, is not less Christianity but more – Christianity that is not depleted of its meaning but full of its original moral content, which is at its heart non-violent and a force for good.

When Martin Luther King Jr confronted racism in the white church in the South he called on those churches not to become more secular, but more Christian. King knew that the answer to racism and violence was not less Christianity but a deeper and truer Christianity. King gained his inspiration from the one who said that those who follow him must turn the other cheek, love their enemies and pray for those who persecuted them. His leadership of the civil rights struggle remains a fine example of love triumphing over hate; of costly and courageous resistance of evil and of religiously inspired social action that made the kind of difference that everyone can appreciate.

Does religion cause war? It's a firm yes from British zoologist and vocal atheist Richard Dawkins, who sees a direct correlation between the two. According to Dawkins, "[religion causes wars by generating certainty](#)". American neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris agrees with Dawkins, stating that faith and religion are "[the most prolific source of violence in our history](#)". Harris and Dawkins are not the only ones to espouse these views about religious ideologies, with many others believing that religious conviction can be a dangerous thing which leads to violent conflict.

But WW1 and WW2 were not caused by religion nor the Russian civil war, nor the American Civil War, nor the Sino Japanese war

Yet as we reflect upon the many wars which have been committed throughout history, it is clear that politics, competing ideologies, ethnic conflicts and power struggles are just as culpable.

As religious commentator and former nun Karen Armstrong states, "[We have seen that, like the weather, religion 'does lots of different things.'](#) [To claim that it has a single, unchanging and inherently violent essence is not accurate.](#)" She says that religion is often a presence in armed conflict, but it is not the cause, and that leaders who seek power or wealth often use religion to achieve their own ends.

But the God that I've read about in the Bible isn't anything like the picture that Dawkins draws. The book of [Exodus](#) describes God as "compassionate", "slow to anger", "abounding in love" and "forgiving".

The book of Psalms describes a God who "[gives food to the hungry](#)", "[watches over foreigners](#)" and "sustains the fatherless and the widows".

Jesus said that one of the two greatest commandments was to "love our neighbours as ourselves". I can only imagine how many wars we might stop if we followed these principles!

Ultimately the root cause of war is our human selfishness. Whether it's for political power, ideological control or even in the name of religion, it's our desire for the things that we don't have which lead us to go into battle.

"What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them" ([James 4:1,2, NLT](#)).

Let's not make religion a reason for war. Instead, let's make religion a chance to show compassion, an exercise in self-control and a light in the darkness.

A first requisite in answering these questions is to define the terms: religion, facilitates, war. Religion as a concept works rather well in defining modern Christianity but less precisely for Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Native American spirituality.

religion becomes potent when it is so mixed with nationalism that they become indistinguishable and now appear as the dominant force of our day (although nationalism is as difficult to define as religion).

Still, there can be religious wars. Michael Sells of Haverford sees the Serbian war in Bosnia as becoming a religious war, even though none of the populations at the beginning were particularly devout. A religious war is 1. led by clergy. 2. fought by groups defined by religion against other groups also defined by religion. 3. the clergy justifies the war, vilifies the opponent, and absolves guilt for killing. 4. the goals are religious – strengthening or purifying the religious group and driving out or subordinating the other group. 5. martyrdoms. Even using this stringent definition, a religious war could also be an ethnic or a nationalistic war and apply to one side but not the other.

Those who make Christianity approve war face the difficulty that Jesus did not fight, died a non-resistant, forgave his crucifiers, and advised love of enemy and martyrdom. He held no political office, rejected worldly power, and offered no explicit political advice beyond paying taxes and the ambiguous “Give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and unto God what belongs to God” – though not saying what belongs to each.

Even the love of neighbor supported war, because – according to St. Augustine – a man should not pick up the sword for oneself but could to protect a neighbor. Until he obtained true peace in heaven, a Christian soldier had an obligation to support the fragmentary peace of a well-ordered society.

In Islam, all humanity desires peace. True peace will come only after submission to God and this is accomplished through personal struggle or jihad. Muhammad taught that an individual’s internal striving for submission is the greater jihad. The lesser jihad is the military struggle to make the world submit to the rule of God, which is the natural law as described in the Q’uran. The spread of the faith can be done peacefully or by the sword. The use of military force is not to convert a person (this submission must be voluntary) but to create a government of Muslims that will rule in accordance with sharia, or God’s law.

As will become apparent shortly, the teachings of Muhammad were interpreted to create a kind of holy war as well as justice in the conduct of war similar to medieval Christian just war theory.

Buddhism seems the least likely of a major religion to legitimate war. The Buddha taught non-killing and detachment, accepted no political office, and

dismissed war as of no importance. Yet Siddhartha came from a warrior caste, accepted kings as his followers, and allowed them to build and endow monasteries as a way of earning merit.

A normative pattern of kingship, exemplified by Asoka in India and Duttagamini in Ceylon was for a claimant to the throne to wage war against evil men and, after victory, to donate to the monks as expiation while promoting the dharma realm. Duttagamini showed sorrow for killing Tamils, but was assured by the monks that, because his opponents were not Buddhists, their deaths were equivalent to those of beasts and equaled only one and one-half a Buddhist. In other words, using violence as a means to create peace. This teaching allowed kings to wage war even against other Buddhist kings.

This brief survey illustrates that built into the formative documents and practices of the five major religions of world is an acceptance of war. There may be countervailing emphases as well, but frequently in history religious and political authorities have called upon traditions that legitimate war. No matter how often we may emphasize the teachings about the value of peace in early traditions and canonical documents, the potential for making war a religious duty will always be there. Holy war is a basic ingredient for Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism and both the devout and those who want to exploit the traditions for political ends will find in the canon fodder for another kind of cannon.

Rulers benefit from having a supportive religion. Kings or presidents praise religions because they provide a divine sanction to their governance, legitimate the social order, and can be used to establish boundaries keeping apart or establishing links among people

o conclude, here is my list of factors predicting when religions will facilitate wars:

- Sacred texts portray violence in an approving manner whether done by a god or by paradigmatic men and women who make war and whose successes the god guarantees. Imitation of such warriors is approved behavior.
- Rituals and prayers are designed to enlist the help of the god in war and the blood sacrifices in rituals prefigure the martyrdoms of those fighting for a holy cause.
- The risk of losing life in war for a holy cause is compensated for by the promise of salvation in the next life. Martyrdom becomes the highest mark of religious devotion.
- A group defines itself as a holy or chosen people with special obligations and privileges, particularly involving a right to a land. Such chosen people are more likely to war if

1.

- socio-political divisions are justified and enforced on religious lines.
- the religious group feels persecuted in the present or past and unable to obtain justice.
- the religious group is cohesive enough to unify politically and sees the possibility of gaining power to achieve autonomy or dominion.
- the land itself is sacralized and contains sites of special holiness.

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Backward areas used religion: examples included Islamic resistance to French colonialism in W. Africa or the Mahdi versus the British in the Sudan; Muslim against Hindu in the partition of India; Muslim vs. Russian in Chechnya; various Christian groups against the Turks in the Balkans.

But religion, when utilized by a state, makes war seem moral by legitimating it as just in cause, asserting that killing is ethically justified, and providing consolation to the bereaved. After all, killing outside of a state or religiously sanctioned war is just murder.

The books of Luke and John talk about Peter, one of the disciples, cutting off a soldier's ear in anger and Jesus rebuking him, before healing the soldier. Peter's hot temper and rash action could easily have become a reason to start a fight but Jesus' intervention calmed things down.

Most often, peace is not created by humans, but is a gift bestowed by God when individuals respond in obedience to Jehovah's revealed law. Seeking the will of God, finding it, and responding appropriately is the key to the Peace of God.

Virtually all of these meanings are carried over into the New Testament. Peace is proclaimed by the angels at the nativity, advocated in the Beatitudes, and is the desired condition among the followers of Jesus before the resurrection and in the early church. The biggest change is that the Old Testament prophecies about the coming age of peace are applied to Jesus. Jesus in his teaching, suffering, and resurrection is the bringer of peace. The peace is not political, however. Jesus explicitly rejects worldly power in the temptation scene on the mountain at the beginning of the ministry and the gospels make clear that his kingdom and rule are not at least at present in this world,

The concept of salaam or peace in Islam is more like the Old than the New Testament; that is, there is an explicit political as well as a religious dimension. In fact, they are almost one. Islam means submission to God and doing so brings the believer peace. When the whole world submits to the rule of God as contained in the Quran, then the whole world is at peace

While scholars can debate whether there is a social ethics of peace in ancient Hinduism, certainly Gandhi created one and his satyagraha campaigns are now a prominent feature in modern Hinduism within India as well as the diaspora. Gandhi took features from classic Indian, Buddhist, Jain, and even Christian writings to create his satyagraha campaigns. He reinterpreted the Bhagavadgita so that Arjuna became the model for a satyagraha warrior – a detached soldier who could be male or female prepared to struggle or even die while using non-violence and compassion in a search for truth or God – the terms became the same.

Biblical scholars insist that the formative period of the Jewish people was the Exodus events, symbolized by the destruction of Pharaoh's force in the Red Sea, and memorized poetically by Marian's song that proclaims "Yahweh is a man of war." Elohim or El who fights was a war god leading the heavenly hosts who fought with Joshua for the Hebrews in the conquest of the promised land

The petition in the Lord's Prayer for "thy kingdom come" is for the reign of God after the final conflagration

modernist or liberal Christians seeking to reconcile the warrior, judge Jesus with their image of a non-violent peaceful Savior have to do a selective exegesis.

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The primary contribution of just war theory was the belief, even if often violated, of the immunity of civilians. Soldiers were and are to be the target of other soldiers, not those who do not carry weapons. This portion of the ethics of war was not dictated by military needs of soldiers, but by religious and moral insight.

Emile Durkheim insisted that in religion we create idealized images of ourselves and then ascribe ultimate value to our society. So, in essence, the nation worships itself. Again, religion could not stand against a society at war. (religion and peacebuilding)

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The irony for students of religion in thinking about this positive development is that the old warring Europe was a far more Christian place than the new peaceful Europe where secularism, as defined as the declining influence of religion in all areas of life, is rampant.

The most extreme, and therefore very popular with my students, variant of the peace/justice theory is by Johann Galtung, who defines a peaceful society as one in which everyone can achieve to the limits of his or her

capacity. A disease not caused by poverty or lack of intelligence would not in Galtung's scheme be considered as war, but a disease caused by lack of money for a vaccine would disrupt peace.

On the other hand, ahimsa or non-violence to living things is a prominent element among the Jains, Buddhists, and Hindus. While scholars can debate whether there is a social ethics of peace in ancient Hinduism, certainly Gandhi created one and his satyagraha campaigns are now a prominent feature in modern Hinduism within India as well as the diaspora. Gandhi took features from classic Indian, Buddhist, Jain, and even Christian writings to create his satyagraha campaigns. He reinterpreted the Bhagavadgita so that Arjuna became the model for a satyagraha warrior – a detached soldier who could be male or female prepared to struggle or even die while using non-violence and compassion in a search for truth or God – the terms became the same.

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Finally, religion has played a major role in inspiring individuals and groups working for peace. From St. Francis to male and female Nobel Laureates – Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama and Jimmy Carter, Quakers Jane Addams and Emily Greene Balch, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, and Rigoberte Mechu Tum of Guatemala - these and many obscure individuals working in church peace groups whose efforts do not lag in spite of years of discouragement show the strong correlation of religious devotion and work for peace. There are also religious and secular peace organizations throughout the world: Roman Catholic, Sant Egidio, Jewish, Peace Now in Israel, Buddhist, Savodaya in Thailand and Sri Lanka, the originally Christian, Fellowship of Reconciliation and secular, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, War Resisters League.

So religions facilitate peace when

- Their scriptures and paradigmatic figures proclaim the value of peace, with peace having a heavenly and earthly dimension.
 - They provide a source of ultimate value, often termed a God, beyond the immediate people and a culture that provides a means of judging and establishes restraints upon behavior.
 - They inculcate ethical norms of, compassion, honesty, charity, and social justice. These norms apply to all peoples, including rulers.
 - They question the value of transitory worldly goods and political power and rebuke inordinate ambition.
 - They provide spiritual solace helping people to endure the ills of the political and economic system.
 - They legitimate the political order by preaching against anarchy and accept the present boundaries of the state.
 - They promote forms of devotion that ignore the state.
 - They bring moral perspectives to bear upon the causes and conduct of a war. Religious leaders must have sufficient autonomy so that they are free to speak out in opposition to the state and a war.
1. Our faith calls us to create peace, yet we confess that we have not done all we could to prevent the spread of armed conflict throughout the world. At times we have lacked the courage to speak and act against violence and injustice; at times we have lacked the creativity to speak and act in constructive ways; at times we have condemned the violence of others without acknowledging our own complicity in violence. We affirm a responsibility to speak truth to power, especially when unjust power is exercised by our own nation. Too often we have allowed our disagreements to distract us from all that we can do together. This Statement of Conscience challenges individual Unitarian Universalists, as well as our congregations and Association, to engage with more depth, persistence, and creativity in the complex task of creating peace.

Present-day Unitarianism also grew out of the Universalist movement, made up mostly of farmers and poor people in North America who rejected the belief in original sin and a punishing God. Universalists believed that a loving God would not condemn people to everlasting punishment. Some of our congregations call themselves Unitarian Universalist and the denomination in the United States is known as Unitarian Universalism.