

Faith-Based Diplomacy: An Opportunity to Prevent Conflict

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Abstract

Religion has the power to be a force of both war and peace as it can be used to begin a conflict or to mitigate one. Faith-based diplomacy to incorporate religion into peacemaking and diplomatic practice is not a modern concept but has recently begun to receive more attention. Faith-based diplomacy sets itself apart from traditional diplomacy as it highlights the ethical claims, and the reconciliation of individuals and social groups. This kind of diplomacy can be understood as a kind of track-two diplomacy, which comes from religious institutions or individuals, and religious-affiliated NGOs. This article focuses on the role of faith-based diplomacy in the past, the theory and practice of interfaith diplomacy, and the opportunity in Kashmir and, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Keywords: faith-based diplomacy, dialogue, diplomacy, religion, peace building

Introduction

Today there are around 10,000 distinct religions worldwide, with more than 50% of the world's population affiliated with Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and others. Religion is part of what binds humans together by a series of truths that enable identities and ideologies to develop. Therefore, it is essential to analyze its role in the conflict when looking at religion. Interreligious dialogue between Jews, Christians, Hindus, and Muslims is crucial, not as an objective, but to achieve coexistence and cooperation among all people. From the crusades to recent disputes over who is following the right set of values, it has been seen since the beginning of time that religion has become a central role around peacebuilding or conflict instigation. The interfaith dialogue has been a valuable tool in serving peaceful goals within religious faith and giving populations a tool to move towards conflict resolution through nonviolent means. Faith-based diplomacy can be carried out in a variety of ways. It can bring a new perspective on old problems and build bridges in conflict. Aside from this it can facilitate mediation and help to heal wounds from history. Therefore, faith-based diplomacy offers a unique approach to ending conflicts worldwide as it creates an opportunity for the common cause of coexistence.

Faith-Based Diplomacy Over the Years

Often in the realm of international relations post 9/11 or the Balkans wars, the term faith is associated with interfaith conflict. However, on the flip side of religious conflict, religion can positively impact peacemaking, as seen in past cases of mediation and peacemaking by institutions and leaders. Throughout the years, faith-based diplomacy has become more common as the cases of religious faith-based dialogues have continued to influence peacemaking. For example, in 1893, the Parliament of the World's Religions has been known to be the first attempt to create a global dialogue of faiths with the intent of 'educate participants for global peace and justice' by examining religious conflict and globalization, budding community and cross-cultural networks and addressing issues of religious violence.¹ Among the attendants were an Indian delegate, Swami Vivekananda, who called for religious tolerance, and thousands of other delegates who came to engage in the faith-based dialogue. Almost 80 years later in Sudan, the World Council of Churches and the All-Africa Conference of Churches played a vital role in the arbitration of the 1972 peace agreement². On the other side of the world, the Rome-based Community of Sant'Angelo achieved the successful mediation that aided to cease the conflict of the civil war in Mozambique in

¹ '1893 World's Parliament of Religions.' The Art Institute of Chicago, <https://www.artic.edu/1893-worlds-parliament-of-religions>.

² Smock, David R., ed. 2010. *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking*. Hauppauge: Nova Science Publishers, Incorporated. Accessed November 2, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

1992³. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, religious relations and tensions gained a new focus as think tanks, universities, NGOs, religious institutions, and businesses all engaged in faith-based gatherings in the months and years after.

Overall, in recent years, the interfaith movement has gained worldwide attention in the diplomatic field with organizations like the United Nations passing various resolutions on 'the promotion of religious and cultural understanding, harmony and cooperation' (2003) and 'the promotion of interfaith dialogue' (2004) ⁴. Aside from the United Nations, the emphasis on faith-based diplomacy can also be seen in the State Department training arm, the U.S Foreign Service Institute, in their programs which now consider religion in the political sphere.⁵. The interfaith movement has grown to be recognized as an asset for peacekeeping as it offers an alternate channel for communication. Douglas Johnston, the president of the International Center on Religion and Diplomacy, describes religious leaders and institutions have a sizable influence in peacekeeping in terms of building a persuasive influence in a community, bringing leverage for reconciling conflict parties,

³ Ibid

⁴ Enrique Corredera Nilsson. (2021) Confessional public diplomacy? Bernardino de Rebolledo's defense of Catholicism in Denmark, 1655–1656. *The Seventeenth Century* 36:3, pages 463-483.

⁵ Johnston, Douglas. *Faith- Based Diplomacy Trumping Realpolitik: Trumping Realpolitik*. New York: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2008. Accessed November 2, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

and mobilizing the community at a national and international level for support for a peace process⁶.

Therefore, religious leaders and institutions can offer credibility through a trusted institution, a respected set of values, a sense of calling among community members, and overall, the spiritual dimension into the peacemaking process. Gerrie ter Haar associates these features as the content of belief, ritual behavior, religious community, and experiences used in peacemaking.⁷ Empathy and compassion are the two central values for peacemaking. These attributes can be practical in religious peacemaking. An example, Pope Francis in 2013 addressed ambassadors from 180 countries in the matters of building bridges among all people by fighting poverty, building peace, and establishing 'true links of friendship between all people'⁸. While religion can play a positive role in peacemaking, it is essential to note that it might also be a double-edged sword as it can cause conflict or contribute to its solution. However, even if religion is seen as the issue of conflict, it cannot be denied that religion can be a valuable tool in peacemaking as it concerns itself with neighborly concern and the betterment of humanity. Although peacemaking strategies exist among world religions, it is essential to analyze

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Gerrie ter Haar, 'Religion: Source of Conflict or Resource for Peace'? p.29 in Gerrie ter Haar and James J. Busttil, editors, *Bridge or Barrier: Religions, Violence, and Vision for Peace* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004).

⁸ Povoledo, Elisabetta. 2013. 'Pope Francis Urges More Interreligious Dialogue.' The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/23/world/europe/pope-francis-urges-more-interreligious-dialogue.html>.

their development and articulation to assess their practical approaches in conflict prevention and resolution.

Religion and Mediation: Interfaith Dialogue

Building bridges among faiths to create faith-based diplomacy to solve conflict requires understanding religious dynamics, the means to engage religious ideas, actors, and institutions to build peace, which is often done in the shape of a dialogue. As people from religious cultures, there should be a higher emphasis on better communication, creating a new vocabulary for dialogue, and exchanges for respective spiritual legacies. In examining how faith-based diplomacy works, diplomatic practices need to reflect an understanding of religious culture through interfaith dialogue. Interfaith dialogue is best defined as a methodology for interreligious understanding and builds mutual respect and trust, making it the primary tool for faith-based diplomacy.⁹This interaction is more likely to take shape in terms of a 'conversation' which is not intended to be a debate but rather aimed at mutual understanding to mutual problem solving among participants. According to David Smock, interfaith dialogue takes form the following way: elite religious leaders gathering to speak collectively to promote peace, elite interfaith organizations engaging in conflict mediation, grassroots

⁹ King, Sallie B., and James Madison. n.d. 'Interreligious Dialogue - Oxford Handbooks.' Oxford Handbooks Online. Accessed January 31, 2022. <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195340136.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195340136-e-8>.

mobilization of participants across religious sects to encourage cross-community relationship building and development of participants as reconciliation agents.¹⁰

This dialogue has been organized during conflict or post-conflict as a toolset of reconciliation and peacebuilding. However, for this dialogue to be effective in achieving its aim of conflict resolution, inter-religious groups are strongly encouraged to undertake conflict resolution training and be religiously literate across the spectrum of various faiths. When violence erupts, an individual in the peacemaking process must consider the quality of dialogue. Through understanding, respectfully speaking, and reciprocal dialogue to avoid the 'otherness' of the sides of the conflict, all parties may be able to reach clear communications that can lead to peace. As seen in the cases of Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Mahatma Gandhi, compassion is essential to lead a dialogue with 'presence.'¹¹

By mutual understanding, participants can listen to others, pay attention to their reactions, speak honestly and directly in a respectful manner, speak for themselves rather than others, and allow forgiveness to themselves and others when making mistakes. Also of note, this dialogue can take shape in forms of storytelling for understanding (psychodynamic model), exploring attitudes and behaviors (cognitive-behavioral dialogue, famous in the United

¹⁰Ibid

¹¹ Schmid, Muriel. *Religion, Conflict, and Peacemaking: An Interdisciplinary Conversation*. University of Utah Press, 2018. Accessed November 4, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

States), communicating feelings (experiential dialogue), and talking from the spiritual dimension, which is highlighted in faith-based diplomacy (transpersonal dialogue)¹². In the case of spiritual dialogue, individuals can explore socially shared rituals, beliefs, and doctrines to find common ground to find an agreement to come to peace. By articulating a narrative vision, participants in interfaith dialogues can use their storytelling and communication skills for effective leadership.

When undertaking interfaith dialogue, for faith-based diplomacy to work smoothly at an individual level, protocol or etiquette must be considered. An example of this may be types of clothes being worn (assessing respectful clothing), serving the appropriate food (referring to religious laws), and a general reflection of the understanding and respect towards a religious culture of all members.¹³.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Constantinou, Costas M., Kerr, Pauline, and Sharp, Paul, eds. p.583 *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy*. London: SAGE Publications, 2016. Accessed November 3, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Inclusion of Women

Along with a multi-religious exchange and dialogue, given the complex roles of religion in peace and conflict, it is essential to consider the role of women. When included in conversations that target religious leaders, religious women can have unique perspectives and represent diverse priorities. Having women involved in faith-based diplomacy is influential because their participation benefits in different ways, not only local women, and girls but the population. From the point of view of negotiation, peace agreements that arise from equitable processes respond better to the diversification of interests of the population, thus providing a more stable and lasting peace. For this reason, the most successful political transitions have come hand in hand with peace accords that included a gender perspective, almost always put on the table by women. In many territories affected by the armed conflict, and in most cases after being denied a seat at the negotiating table, women worldwide have led movements in favor of peace using nonviolent means. Women take the reins of their families, who depend on them for their subsistence and form communities that, in addition to calling for an end to hostilities, provide support and protection to other women and children. The success and impact of these movements vary between countries, but all, in one way or another, have driven a change in their respective societies.

In recent years, scholars have paid attention to religion in the conflict resolution realm and have recognized that these peace efforts tend to be

dominated by male perspectives and leadership. By only focusing on this perspective, women's engagement in religious peacekeeping has been of little focus. One of the biggest challenges religious women continue to face has been being excluded from the conversation as they are not included in the traditional practices. However, recognizing the value of their viewpoints and different audiences can lead to new approaches to peacebuilding. Noting the importance of women in religious peacemaking, the Center of Religious Tolerance in 2007 created a women's interfaith leadership in Jordan. A few years later, among other organizations, women's role was highlighted in the context of faith. In July 2010, the United States Institute for Peace, the World Faith Development, and others began a project to fill this gap in understanding the role of women in religious peacekeeping.¹⁴ The main highlight of this initiative was that in drawing the focus on women involved in religious peacebuilding, the traditional views of peace were broadened. Some of these aspects were women's ability to engage in different tense environments, conducting nonviolent protests, and community mobilization along the lines of theology.

Recently, there has been a breakthrough in this field as women have been given a more significant role in diplomacy. For instance, in November 2020, one thousand five hundred women participants gathered for a four-day conference as part of the Assembly on Women, Faith & Diplomacy of the

¹⁴ “Women, Religion and Peace.” n.d. United States Institute of Peace.

interfaith non-governmental organization Religions for Peace.¹⁵ This conference enabled women leaders to explore how to promote inter-religious dialogue as a diplomatic tool. Discussing approaches to shaping politics and society, representatives of Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and other faiths engaged in numerous dialogues to emphasize the role of faith as a central component of conflict resolution. As General Secretary Religions for Peace Azza Karam stated, 'multi-religious female voices create new and important ways of conducting diplomacy, which is necessary in today's world.' Many women of different religious backgrounds worldwide are working to create peace in their communities and around the world. Through their efforts of religious peacebuilding, women leaders can begin a conversation to redefine their role in society and have contributed to improving the peace process. While more research is to be completed in this field, it cannot be denied that women can be critical contributors to faith-based diplomacy.

¹⁵ 'Assembly on Women, Faith & Diplomacy.; n.d. Ring for Peace. Accessed January 31, 2022. <https://ringforpeace.org/projects/women-faith-diplomacy/>.

Assessing Toolsets of Interfaith-Diplomacy

On a collective level, the relationship of religion and diplomacy identity must be assessed on whether a nation's identity is linked to their religious identity. An example of this is Saudi Arabia with the House of Saud following a direct link with the Wahhabism interpretation of Sunni Islam or Russia and Serbia being linked to Orthodox Christian identities. Aside from national identity, religious literacy should be at the forefront of diplomatic relations. Religious studies scholars have identified religious literacy ability as acknowledging the internal division within religious traditions, interpreting how cultural symbols and artistic representations are used in religious contexts, and understanding how the experiences and histories of individuals, communities, nations, and regions are shaped by religion.¹⁶

By conducting religious literacy assessments in the diplomatic field, diplomats may be better equipped to understand the role of religion in conflict resolution. By understanding the normative, traditional components of religious tradition, members can establish common ground. As a non-governmental body, not subject to constraints of nation-states in some cases, representatives can bring sides of the conflict to enter an open-ended process to discuss methods of coercion in a conflict. An example of this in practice was the Italian Catholic Community of Sant 'Egidio's role in the mediation

¹⁶ Bowling, Renee L. "Religious Literacy and Interfaith Cooperation: Toward a Common Understanding." Religious education ahead-of-print, no. Ahead-of-print (n.d.): 1–15.

efforts that led to the end of Mozambique's civil war, the peacemaking efforts in Algeria, the Balkans, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹⁷

For more than 25 years, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) has been working on enhancing the peacemaking capacities of individuals and faith-based organizations to foster meaningful dialogue within and across faiths with their Religious Engagement in Peace-building program. Among the core tenants of this program, the USIP emphasized researching religion's influence and shaping policy and developing practical resources for religion and conflict analysis such as mediation, reconciliation, and gender-inclusive religious peacebuilding.¹⁸ When focusing on research, all states need to create a strategy to interpret the religious landscape in conflict-affected states for peace actors to analyze and track the impact of religion and aid policymakers in determining the best approaches for establishing sustainable peace. Through the investment and application of practical resources for training and educating, faith can build a bridge to connect diplomats in peace efforts in future endeavors at a larger scale.

¹⁷ Giro, Mario. 'Sant'Egidio's Diplomacy of Friendship.' *Unesco courier* (Paris, France) 53, no. 1 (2000): 33

¹⁸ 'Women, Religion and Peace.' n.d. United States Institute of Peace. Accessed January 31, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/programs/women-religion-and-peace>.

Faith-Based Diplomacy: Opportunity in Kashmir

Examining the role of religion in making peace, faith communities can aid in healing and enabling peace within deeply contested regions such as Kashmir, in which traditional diplomacy has fallen short in considering religious factors. For more than half a century, Jammu and Kashmir's political status has been under constant dispute. They are undergoing several wars between India and Pakistan and ongoing violence costing several thousands of lives since post-independence. As a result, the Kashmir region in India has an extensive history in conflicts related to politico-religious and socio-economical disputes. In addition, Kashmir has three significant religions, with Islam being the dominant one. According to a census conducted by India in 2011, Muslims comprise 68.31 percent, Hindus 28.43 percent, Christians 0.28 percent, Jainist 0.02 percent, Buddhist by 0.90 percent, and Sikhs 1.87 percent out of 12.5 million total population.¹⁹ In the past, traditional diplomacy has failed to prevent conflict between both nations over Kashmir. However, faith-based diplomacy can offer another outlook at ensuring mutual understanding.

In recognizing the complex nature of Jammu and Kashmir's state composition, each religion opens a window of opportunity to promote better relations between people of different communities. While there has been an

¹⁹ Jammu & Kashmir Tourism Development Corporation, n.d., Religions in Kashmir, Accessed November 4, 2020, from <https://www.jktdc.co.in/Religions-in-Kashmir.aspx>.

oversight of the central role in religion in the past, policymakers need to acknowledge the role that religious leader can play in promoting peaceful settlement and dialogue to sustain peace in the long term. By focusing only on political and economic factors, policymakers need to recognize the necessity to drift their focus into faith-based diplomacy, given that religion and religion-based identities are at the heart of the Kashmir cause. Tipping the scale towards inclusivist interpretations of religion focusing on bringing community representatives from the Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jainist, Buddhist, and Sikh faiths can play a vital role in creating a peaceful resolution to Kashmir's conflict.

In examining a possible role for religion ameliorating the Kashmir conflict, it is also essential to understand religious dynamics in the region, consider peacemaking capacities of faith-based organizations/leaders to foster meaningful dialogue, and evaluate their capacity to mobilize their faith-based community to reach mutual understanding. For instance, faith can play a positive role in peace when considering the following: understanding religious dynamics, the religious leader's ability to create a dialogue built around human dignity and compassion, and the mobility of the faith community towards understanding to bridge differences underlie the conflict. Religion plays a central role in shaping discourses in the conflict over Kashmir, with Muslims and Hindus pinned against each other. However, recognizing diversity in beliefs and interpreting truth opens a possibility for

understanding which can promote more progressive politics in the region. Considering the religious context of the region of Kashmir, it is imperative to consider history in the context of faith diplomacy in terms of moving forward. At an individual level, faith-based diplomats should consider the protocol aspects such as appropriate clothing to wear food (referring to religious laws) and express a general understanding of religious cultures. Aside from this example, it is fundamental to understand the sects and divisions of faith to ensure that faith-based diplomacy avoids misunderstandings. Furthermore, by understanding the intra-faith relations, diplomats can get a foundation on establishing common ground among other diplomats or individuals from different belief systems. Another opportunity that can help analyze the role of women in regional-political militancy in Kashmir. While in the eyes of conservatives, women are not supposed to play a role in politics, it has been found that women have made remarkable political contributions to religion-political projects in recent years.

Efforts until now to address Kashmir have been made at a political level; however, understanding the role of religion at the individual and collective level can shape the discourses of the conflict through inter-faith dialogue and alternative toolsets to promote the understanding of religion in civil society. This, therefore, entails the involvement of religious leaders in promoting communal harmony and the state-level promotion of education programs that incorporate narratives with inclusive perspectives on multiple religions. The

media should also highlight alternate religious education that stresses the importance of interfaith dialogue and communal harmony. In addition, state-level textbooks could incorporate a broader dialogue of people from various religious backgrounds to avoid stereotyping or prejudice for any religion.

Faith-Based Diplomacy: Opportunity in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Since its emergence, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has been a multi-ethnic and multi-religious polity with an opportunity for faith-based diplomacy to contribute to the resolution of its frozen conflict. Evolving into a kaleidoscope of traditions, the Bosnian (BH) Church, the Catholic Church, and the (Serb) Orthodox Church offer an opportunity to contribute to peace when arriving at an understanding. After the conflict in the 1990s, Bosnia has been going on several inter-religious dialogue strands varying from clerical, civic, faith-based organizations (including women in the dialogue) and other NGOs.

Among one of the critical developments in interfaith diplomacy was the ecumenical dialogue between Serb Orthodox Church and Catholic Church which took place in Vatican City from November 4 through 6th in 2008²⁰. Consisting of 29 religious experts and delegates, the Catholic-Muslim Forum became a landmark for the possible resolution of differences among both religions and a promising step for reconciliation. Aside from the Catholic-

²⁰ 'Head Of BiH Islamic Community Meets Pope Benedict XVI.' 2008. A Common Word. <https://www.acommonword.com/head-of-bih-islamic-community-meets-pope-benedict-xvi/>.

Muslim Forum, the International Forum Bosnia (IFB) has become an essential pillar to creating an inclusive and peaceful society. Founded in 1997, the IFB focuses on overcoming the divisions in BiH's political and social ideologies based on ethnicity or religion. Through community organizing in the form of educational gatherings, IFB contributes to the understanding of Bosnian unity in diversity with projects such as International Conference Unity and Plurality in Europe, International Youth and Heritage Summer Camp: ĆUPRIJA, International Summer School, and Project 'Bosnia: research and development (BOSRED)²¹..

Despite the transformative achievements in interfaith dialogue, BiH needs to implement further faith-based diplomatic initiatives to counterbalance its challenges. Inter-faith dialogue plays a vital role for those within religious traditions and tackling issues of common concern. Through understanding and cooperation, faith-based relations in BiH are vital for diverse approaches to peace. Faith-based dialogues in the context of BiH may prove beneficial in exploring areas of difference and finding ways forward to address issues where there may be historical or current disagreement—because traditional diplomatic channels have been critiqued for their effectiveness to create change in building in an inclusive society. By looking for ways to work

²¹ 'International Forum Bosnia (IFB) — Peace Insight' n.d. Peace Insight. Accessed January 31, 2022. <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/international-forum-bosnia-ifb/?location=western-balkans&theme>.

together for the common good and on a sound foundation of understanding, faith-based diplomacy gives a chance to correct misconceptions among faith or beliefs and may result in a pursuit to build empathy.

Conclusion

When employed effectively by religious actors, Faith-based diplomacy can provide another additional diplomatic channel for conflict mediation. When used to unite individuals based on values and the better of humanity, faith can be used as a bridge between the sides of the conflict to agree. What determines whether faith can be used as a positive toolset of conflict mitigation is how religious actors are trained to engage with one another. Politicians, diplomats, and religious leaders should contribute to transmitting a message of tolerance and respect. For instance, these efforts should build on a message that emphasizes what unites people and respects what divides them. Similarly, these actors should prevent religion from being monopolized by unscrupulous extremists who seek to use it for their benefit and populists who propose powerful solutions that are almost always based on misery.

Politicians and diplomats should take a more active role in promoting interreligious dialogue to overcome cultural and religious antagonisms. This should be one of the top goals on your agenda. We cannot ignore the potential for the positive influence of religion on people's consciences. Although religions have been the catalyst for bloody conflicts, they can contribute to

solving them. Religions should play a primary role in promoting dialogue and coexistence between different peoples and communities. Politicians and diplomats should find ways to resolve conflicts and tensions between religions, which go beyond the mechanisms currently in place to address the source of the conflict itself. Politicians and diplomats should recognize the constructive role in building peace between religions.

If politicians and diplomats are aware of the importance of religion in building peace, they will be able to establish means, formal and informal, to cooperate with religious leaders. This objective represents a significant challenge for diplomats. It offers new opportunities to 'break out of the traditional frameworks of international diplomacy towards the new goals imposed by a new and unpredictable era, in cooperation with religious leaders to promote peace with justice. From looking at where traditional diplomatic channels have failed, the quality of interfaith dialogue, the engaged actors, and future opportunities, faith can serve the purpose of completing the final piece of the diplomatic puzzle.