

WHY RELIGION IS NEEDED IN POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION?¹

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ABSTRACT: THIS PAPER BRINGS INTO QUESTION THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION PROCESSES, BEING A RESEARCH APPROACH BY WHICH WE INTEND TO CAPTURE INTERACTIONS AND DISAGREEMENTS BETWEEN THE TWO. ON THIS LINE WE WILL FOCUS ON VIOLENT CONFLICTS BASED ON DIVERGENT RELIGIONS AND RECONSTRUCTION PROCESSES, BY EMPHASIZING THOSE ASPECTS ANSWERING TO THE QUESTION WHY RELIGION IS NEEDED IN POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION?. MUCH MORE, WE WILL ANALYZE THE ROLE PLAYED BY RELIGION FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES AND IN ACCORDANCE WITH DIRECT INTERACTION BETWEEN LOCAL AND EXTERNAL ELEMENTS.

KEYWORDS: RELIGION, CONFLICT, POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION, DEMOCRATIZATION, PEACE

Conflictuality has been and still is a present reality. Over time as in the future this occurrence in human interactions will still be a multidimensional social phenomenon, a catalyst for transformation and change and a defining characteristic of human being. All these are due to its naturalness and omnipresence, in time and space of each individual. From a wider perspective, if we observe interactions between different entities, like groups, classes, social categories etc. these turned into conflictual situations and this because actors, regardless of their nature, are based on humans. Thomas Hobbes argues in his book *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiasticall* that the state of natural human nature is a state of „warre, as is of every man, against every man“³, the individual living in a „continual feare, and danger of violent death“⁴. Therefore, all human conflicts are owed to individuals and their selfishness, which they demonstrate in the protections of property, ideas or principles that joined or who have assumed.

Even today, in a globalized and internationalized world, religion among other elements (ethnicity, race, collective memory and so on) represents a core element in

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³ Thomas Hobbes, „Leviathanul“, 1991, pp. 88-89 apud. Pärtel Piirimäe, `The explanation of conflict in Hobbes's Leviathan', *Trames Magazin*, 10 (2006): 3.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

communities self defining process, being a practical form of representing traditions and present. Much more, it helps the social group to situate as against or relate with others on the local, regional or international context. With all these, people reporting to religion and individual's perceptions towards this element has changed over time, knowing various stages and developments. The latest change is the vision occurred after September 11, when the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center marked the international collectivity in an irreversible way. Thus, after this moment, religions and religious actors began to be associated more often with the idea of religious extremism and inter-religious conflictuality. This perception occurred mainly among the masses.⁵

Throughout history it has been demonstrated that religion can be used to mobilize people and to promote conflict and violence, in an equal manner as the support it may provide for peace building. Also it is not necessary that religion to be the main cause of conflict, even when the warring groups are different in terms of religious identity. (For instance the conflictual situation from Northern Ireland where the differences between Catholics and Protestants are not the main cause of conflict). However, religion has been and continues to be a major contributing factor to certain violent conflicts, while providing a basic reason or a tool in achieving political aspirations, as happened in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Balkans, Sudan, Indonesia or Kashmir. Over time, religious activists involved in interfaith dialogues revealed that „*religion, unfortunately, is often the most visible difference between contesting groups and, as a result, frequently is blamed for conflicts*”⁶.

It was proved that religions can be handled and processed in such a way as to represent a mask for violence, as Beatrice Pouligny found in his work *Peace Operations Seen from Below: U.N. Missions And Local People*. Furthermore, recent developments in the international scene showed an increasing use of religious beliefs in violent conflict and that is particularly hard to identify whether reasons for disputes are due exclusively to religious differences or strives arose because of disagreements on the distribution of resources, ethnicity or historical past.⁷

Daniel Philpott found in one of his papers that religion can fuel a confrontational stance in two ways: first is capable of forming identities or affiliations and can determine joining one side or another in battle, and secondly can change political reasons, becoming indirect cause of disputes. Moreover, in some situations, religions can determine the purpose of fighting without interfering with community identity, as has happened in disputes between Muslims in Iran and Algeria.⁸

Returning to the first approach emmited by Philipott, it is easy to observe that using religions actors can mobilize the masses in such a way that they support or/and adhere to some of the views promoted by political actors. In the second case it is proved the role played by religion throughout history in all social and political changes. As a proof, the research conducted nowadays on the role held by religion in democratisation processes is more intense then the studies on violence in the above mentioned context.

⁵ Kalin Ibrahim , *Roots of misconception: euro-american perceptions of islam before and after 9/11*, www.muslimphilosophy.com/.../roots_of_misconception-final.doc. accessed December 1, 2013.

⁶ Arthur Schneier, "Religion and Interfaith Conflict: Appeal of Conscience Foundation" in *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, ed. David Smock (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2002) 112.

⁷ Daniel Philpott, "Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion," *American Political Science Review* 103 (2007): 518.

⁸ *Ibidem*, passim.

Over time, actors and religious movements involved in social political radical changes demonstrated leniency regarding violence, accepting it as a necessary evil.⁹ We think that this happened because economical, political, social or cultural frustrations can be easier transformed in identity related complaints, to which, through religious faithfulness, can be given a central role in each individual life. This process, once completed, can be used by political or military actors to reach a certain objective: commencement of large-scale violence.¹⁰

The result obtained consist in a large-scale fight, extended to all level of society, in which are invested important or even vital resources. Moreover, the individuals are reasoning only in terms of short term and fragility of social construction increases exponentially. The fights that arise and are inspired and legitimized by religious reasons and options are accorded to Hans Küng „*the most fanatical and cruelest political struggles*”.¹¹

Religion in combination with conflict situations, we consider, involve and imprint judgments about the nature of good and evil, most of the times changing the collective thinking that any resolution or finality is impossible as long as one of the warring parties exist. From this perspective, in this situation (post-conflict contexts) religious actors may represent a bivalent position: on the one hand, they are part of the problem, because they made alliances or were manipulated by other actors, and on the other hand they are a local resource that must be taken into account and properly managed.¹²

In an analysis process on the relationship between religion and post-conflict peace building, peacemaking and peace-enforcement processes we have to take into account three stances:

- Religious beliefs can become essential components of the peace process;
- Religious actors can facilitate the peace process;
- Religious actors play an extremely important role in what concern civil society¹³, as considered in the work conducted by HPCR International in partnership with the United Nations Peace building Support Office and in cooperation with the Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research at Harvard University.

Moreover, in the same work is stated that for understanding the religions` contribution to peacemaking it is essential to remember and understand that *"there is variety in all religion, in its forms, interpretations, practices, authorities; also in the existing religions in each country (which generally include both institutionalized churches and traditional religious actors). In fact, it is often in a connection between two religious registers that the role of those actors should be understood."*¹⁴

In past years, the role played by religion has been intensively analyzed and explored. Much more we have got clear examples in which religious representatives were directly involved in mediation or pacification processes. Also, they used to involve in keeping a safe and stable security environment. Usually they acted by using diplomatic instruments, especially those belonging to informal diplomacy. For example, religious actors alongside

⁹“Peace, Conflict and the State“, Chr. Michelsen Institute Research Group, <http://www.cmi.no/research/> accessed October 25, 2013.

¹⁰ Beatrice Pouligny, *Peace Operations Seen from Below: UN Missions and Local People* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2006), 24-25.

¹¹ Hans Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (Garden City: Doubleday Press, 1986), 442.

¹² “Psycho-social recovery: Religion & Peacebuilding: Religion & Peacebuilding Processes“, http://www.peacebuildinginitiative.org/index.cfm?pageId=1827#_ftn29, accessed October 25, 2013.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴Beatrice Pouligny, *Peace Operations Seen from Below: UN Missions and Local People* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2006), 81-82.

with NGOs are seeking to develop a favorable dialog environment, which will facilitate conflict resolution or will increase trustiness between actors directly involved in conflict. This had been done in Middle East, where simultaneously with official demarches, has been sent effectives to ease inter-religious communication.

Taking into account that religion is both explanatory (why the reality is like it is) and normative (how reality should be) it is capable to educate or manipulate followers. In our context, this capability can be seen as a huge advantage in shaping people`s view on the nature of conflict or on the external elements conducting peace processes. Because the normative basis constitutes „a system of meaning for its adherents, making sense of and legitimizing a particular social order”¹⁵, religion can determine a new or improved socio-cultural order. In this new context, the international elements can be transformed so to be considered as a necessity or as a natural way of changing things.¹⁶ This will result in acceptance, willingness to cooperate and support foreign efforts, which will facilitate and speed up the reconstruction process.

Also, the religious actors can define and enforce specific meanings for concepts as „just wars” or „just cause”. This will result in two behaviors: one in which followers will agree, adhere and endorse the conflictuality and eventually the violences, and another one in which the individuals will disagree and oppose with the events occurring. This first stance would happen if the meaning (of the concepts mentioned above) promoted through religion will be the same as the ones sustained by political and military actors. The second behavior, obviously will take place if the visions are different.

Religion is or can be a powerful tool in the construction of norms, values and principles both at a social and cultural level. That being given, it addresses the most profound aspects of human existence and plays a key role in individual and community views regarding the concept of peace.¹⁷ That's because, through laws and customs imposed by religion, people from several communities have developed or not an affinity for accepting foreigners, ego suppression, human rights, forgiveness, humility, selflessness and accountability of the past, which may give rise to a general belligerent or conciliatory vision.¹⁸ Based on the teachings and practices of specific religious denominations, in all cases are promoted spiritual and moral values that support peace, social justice, reconciliation and harmony between individuals and between them and divinity. For example, all three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) promote empathy / compassion and forgiveness as essential qualities in a lasting and effective conflict resolution.¹⁹ On this basis, actors and religious organizations can promote non-violence and they can educate their parishioners to support a peaceful form of resolution in case of differences, with the focus on reconciliation, just because of the beliefs promoted by the pacifist religion whose followers are.²⁰ Moreover, the peacekeeping programs coordinators must take into account just the local perception on peace, especially if it is formed on the basis of elements of

¹⁵Kristian Berg Harpviken et al., *Mapping the terrain: The role of religion in peacemaking* (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 2005), 8.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*

¹⁷Abdul Aziz Said, Nathan Funk, "The Role of Faith in Cross-Cultural Conflict Resolution" (paper presented in front of E.U. Parliament for the European Centre for Common Ground, Belgium, Brussels, September, 2001).

¹⁸Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13.

¹⁹Richard Solomon, "Forward," in *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, ed. David Smock (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2002), viii.

²⁰David Smock, *Faith-Based NGOs and International Peacebuilding* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2001), 15.

religion and through local religious representatives. However, there may be a difficult situation if the religious heads have deviated from the dogma and imposed a personal vision of peace or a vision in accordance with their political and economic ambitions.

Researches in recent decades have shown that the perception of what a possible reconstruction process in a post conflict area may be is directly affected by the distortion made by local religious officials. Just as mentioned above, from another perspective, Cynthia Sampson states that we have to identify the reconstruction visions in each phase of this work, because the distribution of power in the region may affect the religious leaders, instance in which the perception regarding the peacekeepers can radically change.²¹

In other words, the socio-political and economic changes that are intended to be brought into the reconstruction process can be affected by the interests of some actors supported by religious heads, so that those of them who are re-settled in the region will not be approved and they will lose support. Such situations may arise even because international actors who engage in peacekeeping and reconstruction actions do not have the patience and resources to understand the local context and they do not have the power to implement programs that were previously prepared and who were not adapted to local realities.

Moreover, it is well known that religious belief systems are a potential reason for identity transformation, both at individual and community level. Kristian Berg and Hanne Eggen Rislien have stopped their attention to this phenomenon in their book called *Faithful Brokers? Potentials and pitfalls of Religion in Peacemaking* and they are saying that: "*Religion is not just individual; it is also social, offering each believer a sense of belonging to a community of fellow believers. With its reference to a transcendent source of truth and codification of shared norms, religion serves as a compass for the individual and the religious community alike, locating all believers within an extended ontological setting. An identity with a religious source may, therefore, be exceptionally robust: religion tells you where you belong and where to proceed.*"²² In other words, religion provides each adept with a sense of belonging to a community. With this advantage, the system of religious beliefs can inspire the believer views on the place and the position they hold in the community, along with eventual behavioral attitudes. Even if religion is formed by a reduced set of identity elements, along with those represented by citizenship, ethnicity, language, social and economic status, and so on, they interact and the result is an important element for any process of pacification / reconstruction. For example, most Muslim members of Hamas are primarily considered Palestinians, leading to feelings of belonging linking between them and the Christians from the same region. A different case is found in Sri Lanka, where Muslims identify themselves primarily as Muslims, differing from other citizens.²³

In addition, religion can provide social, moral and spiritual resources necessary for the reconstruction / peace building. That's because such a process is not really effective and complete only when individual perceptions are changed, aspect which will produce changes at a social and political level. This should not be seen as a waiver of the defining elements of traditional community concerned, but as an indispensable necessity for the reconstruction of social and political structures. Of particular importance for the religion - in post-conflict reconstruction relation - is the spiritual support offered by religious institutions, which instills a sense of change, development and transformation for the community. Any rituals

²¹ Cynthia Sampson, "Religion and Peacebuilding," in *Peacemaking in International Conflict: Methods and Techniques*, ed. William Zartman et al. (Washington, United States Institute of Peace, 1997), 277.

²² Kristian Berg Harpviken, Hanne Eggen Roislien, "Faithful Brokers? Potentials and Pitfalls of Religion in Peacemaking" *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 25 (2008): 354-355.

²³ *Ibidem*.

can turn individual visions and raise new vision of the conflict. Moreover, proponents of peace ritual techniques can be used to build the necessary support to peace and justice. The social impact comes not just from the nature of the uninvolved but from the example provided, which generates a reflection of the situation, in many cases transforming individual perceptions in an indirect and unperceived as intrusive manner.

Moreover, as Daniel Philpott noted, religion potential for social reintegration of warring communities and for providing power comes from two elements: connectivity - the ability of religious actors to bring together various sectors of society, and holism - the ability to turn a transformational process in one addressed to the whole community and not to the individual.²⁴

From all these perspectives, the promotion of religion and spirituality may constitute a basis for the reconstruction process components, possibly democratization, even though it does not adduce sufficient elements, only the necessary items. The durability of this approaches based on a religious tools is superior to the political and economic approaches.

From the social perspective, the researchers identified four basic functions performed by religious actors²⁵: the role of placeholder for the partisan political organizations, especially in times of crisis or decline of political space. This function is fulfilled by their role as political advocates and as providers for a properly debate space, particularly regarding human rights issues; integration - for the great mass of excluded and disadvantaged social categories, being materialized through humanitarian and socio-economic development projects: egg retraining, rehabilitation of prisoners, etc. reintegration; socializing function performed by educational and training programs, targeting both the elite and those without financial means, particularly in disadvantaged areas. (egg in areas where violence has experienced the increased intensity - Srebrenica - after the genocide in 1995); mobilization - the religious representatives and the cult itself, through practice, ritual and rules they can mobilize masses for deepening conflicts but also to endorse or promote peace.²⁶

With all these attributes, religions can consistently contribute in a pacification and reconstruction process, "*by empowering the weak, by influencing the moral-political climate, by developing cooperation and providing humanitarian aid.*"²⁷In this respect arose a multitude of non-profit religious organizations involved in reconstruction activities, especially through actions aimed to reducing poverty, eliminate economic disproportionality between social classes, through reintegration and community development programs, but also by financial and logistical assistance for family reunification. Next to these are added the illiteracy rate reduction programs, education and monitoring of human rights.

Also, it is found that in recent years increasing attention was paid by these entities at elements of conflict prevention and peacekeeping, which are integrated into programs undertaken even in areas with minimal conflict potential²⁸.

As a result of the above, from empirical perspective, religious actors and non-profit organizations can be found today in every stage of conflictuality, from the crisis, escalation, then the conflict itself and finally the achievement and maintenance of peace, reconstruction

²⁴ Daniel Philpott "Religion, Reconciliation, and Transitional Justice: The State of the Field" *Social Science Research Council Working Paper* (2007), 2.

²⁵ Beatrice Pouligny, *Peace Operations Seen from Below: UN Missions and Local People* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2006), 82.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Luc Reyhler "Religion and Conflict: Introduction: Towards a Religion of World Politics?", *International Journal of Peace Studies*, 2 (1997): 12-14.

²⁸ David Smock, *Faith-Based NGOs and International Peacebuilding* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2001), 55.

and possibly a democratization process. Religious elements are working in the field of peace education, conflict prevention, inter-religious dialogue, in building networks of leaders for peace, in post-conflict social reconstruction, in the courts to condemn human rights violations and so on, giving legitimacy, spiritual and inter-cultural vision to all these sectors.
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In conclusion, we consider that is necessary to reiterate the important role that religion, regardless of denomination, can play in facilitating increased efficiency of processes of pacification and reconstruction in post-conflict zones situation. However, in the same way, religion can be a hindrance and a destructive element, especially if they do not agree how to handle violence or defeat. Furthermore, management of areas in which different cults are present implies new challenges and requires more involvement, both as resources and as approach from those who are trying to establish a secure environment. The religions regardless of areas to which we refer is an important element in the social life, providing feelings and values, values that the political and cultural elements are not able to provide. Belonging to a community, identification with a group, sharing visions and values, integration into public space, and the sense of security provided by the community are difficult issues, harder to be substituted by economic or political resources. Therefore, regardless of the perspective from which religion is viewed in relation to the reconstruction of post-conflict areas, it will play a very important element irrespective of the nature or purpose of conflictuality.

²⁹ Scott Appleby, "Disciples of the Prince of Peace? Christian Resources for Nonviolent Peacebuilding," in *Beyond Violence: Religious Sources of Social Transformation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. James Heft (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004) 137.

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