

MEDIATION IN THE FACE OF SECTARIANISM

Oliver McTernan

THE DANGERS OF SECTARIANISM

Writing in the *Financial Times* in November 2013, prior to the agreement reached between Iran and the international community on curbing the former's nuclear activities in return for sanctions relief, David Gardner expressed the hope that such an accord 'would help to drain the poison of sectarian strife'⁷⁷ in the Middle East. His argument was that given the intensity of the bloodletting, there is more to what we are witnessing in Syria than what some would say is 'merely an interstate struggle for regional power between Saudi Arabia and Iran'.⁷⁸ According to Gardner, this is a primordial struggle: a Sunni–Shia subplot.

The Turkish president, Abdullah Gul, seems to have made a similar analysis: that the Syrian conflict risks having a long-term negative impact on relations within the region. He warned the Istanbul Forum at the beginning of October that 'ethnic and sectarian identity politics that are based on shallow geopolitical interests will usher in a period of medieval darkness in the region'. 'It is a scenario', he claimed, 'that will lead to a "clash within the civilization" that will be more detrimental than a "clash of civilizations" [and] is the disaster scenario where everybody loses'. The only alternative, he declared, is 'to transform their region into a space of peace, stability and welfare by meeting along common values and interests'.⁷⁹ The question that both these analyses present is whether or not theological differences are a direct causal factor of regional or communal conflict, and if so, what is the ultimate goal of mediation in such conflicts?

It is often argued, especially by secularists, that after years of religio-political conflict, progress and pluralism took root in Europe only when the Treaty of Westphalia removed religion from the international agenda and the Enlightenment drew a clear division between the realms of religious and political authority. In contrast, Muslim scholars argue that progress and pluralism advanced furthest in many Muslim societies when religion and politics were deeply integrated, and tyranny and injustice arose largely as a result of the sidelining and subsequent exploitation of religion for social and political purposes. I believe there is an element of truth in both these positions, however the relationship between religion and conflict is much more complex.

77 David Gardner (2013). 'Accord would help to drain the poison of sectarian strife', *Financial Times*, 10 November 2013.

78 *Ibidem*.

79 Verda Ozer (2013). 'Farewell from President Gul to the Clash of Civilizations thesis', *The Daily News*, 8 October 2013.

RELIGION MATTERS

In his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel P. Huntington argues that in the post-Cold War era, cultural and religious differences replaced ideology as the more probable cause of conflict. The old divisions of the First, Second and Third Worlds, drawn up along ideological lines, gave way to new civil differences, which could prove even more menacing.

Nationalism and communism are essentially artificially constructed belief systems, whereas culture—the defining factor in a civilisation, Huntington argues—is about identity itself. It shapes the basic perceptions that people have about life and their understanding of their relationships with God, each other, authority and the state. The differences between the major cultures that are re-emerging as key factors in the reshaping of the contemporary world are more profound than those created by the discarded ideologies of the 20th century. Huntington accepts that people can and do redefine their identities, but his basic premise is that: ‘Civilisations are nonetheless meaningful entities, and while the lines between them are seldom sharp, they are real’.⁸⁰ This is particularly true of religion, which he regards as ‘possibly the most profound difference that can exist between people’.⁸¹

His second theory is that globalisation created greater opportunity for interaction between these diverse civilisations, making people conscious of their differences and, as a result, more anxious about where they fit into this new global design. His conclusion is that the possibility of conflict, especially along what he describes as the ‘fault lines’ where different civilisations meet and have to compete for resources and influence, is therefore greatly heightened.

Huntington gives particular attention to the role of Islam in the remaking of the world order. He refutes the argument that the West does not have a problem with Islam itself, only with violent Islamist extremists. Relations between Islam and Christianity have often been ‘stormy’, he maintains, with Islam the only civilisation that has twice threatened the survival of the West. The cause of what he sees as an ‘ongoing pattern of conflict’ is deeper than any transitory phenomena and is rooted, he believes, in the nature of the two religions and the civilisations based on them. Missionary in nature, both Christianity and Islam aim to convert non-believers to their version of ‘the one true faith’. ‘From its origins’, Huntington argues, ‘Islam expanded by conquest and, when the opportunity existed, Christianity did also’.⁸²

AN ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS

Whilst others would acknowledge there can be a religious factor in many conflicts, few political and social scientists consider religion a serious enough actor to merit particular

80 Samuel P. Huntington (1997). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 43.

81 *Ibidem*, p. 254.

82 *Idem*, p. 211.

interest in their research. They offer paradigms that reflect the reductionist approach to conflict, prevalent within the social and political sciences. Reductionists always seek the simplest explanation for conflict: religion is considered to be a redundant factor in life, an epiphenomenon that is incapable of having its own independent impact on the social and political level, and therefore does not merit being taken seriously as a real cause. To focus on religious motives, many political and social scientists would argue, is to risk masking the real cause, which they claim is more likely to be a mix of grievance and political ambition.

Paul Collier and Ted Gurr, for example, consider that grievance or greed alone are at the root of contemporary civil conflicts, not some ancient hatreds or religion-shaped identity. Jack Snyder, meanwhile, claims the rush to democracy that was promoted in the 1990s is greatly to blame for the increase in conflict. These theories provide important insights, but hardly explain what Gardner described as the ‘intensity of the bloodletting’ seen on the streets of Syria and Iraq. It is true that economic and political discrimination, injustice and unequal access to scarce essential resources are genuine causes of many ethnic and nationalistic regional conflicts we have witnessed over the past two decades, but they do not fully explain the hatred reflected in the rhetoric and actions of some of the key protagonists.

The promotion of democracy, power sharing and economic growth will undoubtedly help to lessen the likelihood of ethnic or religious conflict in a multi-ethnic, religiously diverse society. Yet these factors in themselves are insufficient to guarantee against the kind of violence that is motivated solely by religious conviction, which justifies killing in the name of a higher cause. History shows that religion has always demonstrated a propensity for violence, regardless of the social and political conditions of its devotees.

RELIGIOUS AMBIVALENCE

Given the secular, reductionist understanding of the causes of conflict and the ambivalence, past and present, of the world’s different religious traditions towards the use of violence, it should come as no surprise to us that in the immediate aftermath of September 11 we witnessed a coming together of liberal commentators, religious leaders and politicians—all of whom were keen to exonerate religion from any form of responsibility for what had happened. At the time, it reminded me of the response to the first outbreak of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. In 1970, church leaders were united in declaring that, whatever may be the causes, religion was not to blame. Liberal and academic opinion endorsed this view, pointing to Britain’s colonial record in Ireland as the real explanation for the conflict between Catholics and Protestants. It took several hundred deaths before an inter-church working party finally acknowledged that religious identity and centuries of unchallenged sectarianism were, and for that matter still are, a real issue in Northern Ireland.

The eagerness of religious leaders to repudiate and disclaim atrocities committed by their co-religionists is no doubt prompted by an understandable fear that violence linked

to religion portrays a distorted image of their faith. The scapegoating of the perpetrators, by labelling them as political criminals or misguided fanatics, has become a common mechanism used by leaders of all faiths to protect what they believe to be the purity and integrity of their religion. The denial that there is a problem, be it conscious or unconscious, is in itself part of the problem. It allows religious leaders to circumvent the fact that all the main faith traditions have a violent and bloody record, which needs to be acknowledged and addressed to avoid the risk of repetition. Today's faith-identity linked violent activists have numerous exemplars within their own faith traditions that provide the kind of religious sanction they need to justify their use of violence. Reactions that either over exaggerate or underplay the role of religion in conflict fail to do justice to the complexity of faith-associated violence. While claims that we are witnessing a rejection of modernity and globalisation, or the pursuit of a kind of 'apocalyptic nihilism', are partial truths that fail to address the core of the problem, which lies within how these militants perceive their religion and, in particular, how they understand the process of revelation that lies behind their sacred texts.

Whatever their particular religious beliefs and customs, today's faith-inspired violent activists hold in common the belief that their scriptural or foundational texts were dictated verbatim by a divine authority, and as such are beyond interpretation. The word as it is written must be obeyed. The fact that they are always selective in their choice of texts and tend to focus on passages that underscore their exclusive claim to truth and superiority over others, whilst ignoring passages that stress the universal nature of divine love and compassion, seems not to perturb them.

A man named Vivekananda, a Western-educated disciple of the 19th century Hindu mystic Ramakrishna, said whilst addressing the Parliament of Religions (an assembly representing various religious bodies) in Chicago on 11 September 1893: 'Sectarianism, bigotry and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it time and again with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair'.⁸³ A century earlier, the French philosopher Voltaire had reached a similar conclusion. Acutely aware of the injustices and cruelty committed in the name of religion, he concluded from his reading of history that 'the differences between religions constituted the single most important cause of strife in the world'.⁸⁴

A historical overview of the world's mainstream religious traditions highlights how, without exception, each faith community—when under threat of extinction or given the

83 Cited by Kana Mitra (1990). *Outsiders—Insiders: Hindu Attitudes Toward Non-Hindus*, in Leonard J. Swidler and Paul Mojzes (eds). *Attitudes of Religions and Ideologies Toward the Outsider: the Other*. Lewiston, New York: E. Mellen Press, p. 113.

84 Voltaire and Simon Harvey (2000). *Treatise on Tolerance*. Cambridge, UK, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 9.

opportunity to expand—has interpreted its fundamental teachings to accommodate the changing circumstances, sanctioning the use of violence to protect and secure its own sectarian interests. In each faith tradition, one can find sufficient ambiguity in its founding texts and stories to justify killing for the glory of God. Each tradition has also its heroes who saw themselves as acting on divine authority when they plotted the destruction of those whom they perceived to be enemies of God. Today's religious extremists can find their rationale for inflicting terror in the name of their god in the ambivalence towards violence that is found in each faith tradition. In this article, I will focus by way of example on Christianity and Islam.

THE CHRISTIAN DILEMMA

It is true that the Christian scriptures portray Jesus as a messiah who rejects the sword: 'Put your sword back in its place for all who draw the sword will die by the sword' he tells Peter, who tried to resist the group that had come to arrest Jesus (Matthew 26:52). Neither does he make claim to political power: 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews', he tells Pilate, the Roman governor (John 18:36). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is even more explicit on rejecting violence: 'You have heard that it was said to people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement". But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement' (Matthew 5:21).⁸⁵ The Letter to the Romans endorses Jesus's non-violent teaching by counselling against taking revenge and articulating the ideal that evil should be overcome by good (Romans 12:21). The founding texts are not, however, without ambiguity. The image of Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers as he drove them from the temple (Matthew 21:12); his words: 'I have not come to bring peace but a sword' (Matthew 10:34) and 'If you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one' (Luke 22:36); as well as the violent images in the Book of Revelation, such as the four angels who were released 'to kill a third of mankind' (9:15), have led some to question the non-violent credentials of the Christian scriptures.

It has even been suggested by some that it was Jesus's sympathy for the Zealots' cause that gave the Romans reason to execute him.⁸⁶ But, despite the apparent ambiguities in the texts, there is clear evidence that for at least the first century and a half of their existence, Christians adopted a strongly pacifist approach, condemning the use of violence in any situation. War and military service were regarded as totally incompatible with Christian beliefs.

85 See *The Holy Bible, New International Version*.

86 David Little (1991). 'Holy War' Appeals and Western Christianity: A reconsideration of Bainton's Approach in Just War and Jihad, in *John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson (eds.). Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions*. New York: Greenwood Press, footnote 7.

It was the fifth century Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo who attempted to put a positive spin on the morality of war, seeing it as an unavoidable necessity in checking evil in a fallen world. His sanctioning of violence had a profound influence on shaping the Christian attitude to the use of force in the post-Constantine era. It did not, though, totally eclipse the uncompromising Gospel message of non-violence. In the eighth century, for example, the Synod of Ratisbon expressed an unequivocal condemnation of clergy participating in any kind of warfare. Eusebius's concept of a two-track vocation, lay and clerical, with higher expectations and moral codes of conduct applying to the clergy, had clearly become deeply rooted in the Christian psyche. It was a compromise that allowed the Church to function as an institution in the real world while at the same time maintaining some form of witness to the high ideals of the Sermon on the Mount.

By the latter part of the 11th century, there is evidence to suggest that the pacifist mood of the pre-Constantine Church was reasserting itself. Canonists and papal courtiers alike were outspoken in their opposition to the sanctioning of violence and the use of force for whatever reason. Cardinal Peter Damiani wrote that: 'In no circumstances is it licit to take up arms in the defence of the faith of the universal church; still less should men rage in battle for its earthly and transitory goods'. Cardinal Humbert condemned the use of force against heretics, claiming that Christians who used the sword in this way themselves became hardened in the ways of violence.⁸⁷ In light of this clear reassertion of pacifism, both in practice and thought, it seems incongruous that Pope Urban II should have used the same occasion in which he officially promulgated the Truce of God as a law of the Church to launch the First Crusade, a holy war aimed ostensibly at regaining the holy places from infidel control. Urban II's sermon at the Council of Clarendon in 1095 marked a turning point, a new era in papal-sanctioned brutality.

THE CRUSADES: A RADICAL SHIFT TOWARDS VIOLENCE

It was Urban II's predecessor, Gregory VII, who masterminded the radical shift in official Church teaching on the use of violence. Driven by the desire to impose a Christian-dominated order on a fragmented world, Gregory VII sanctioned aggressive warfare, provided of course that it was waged under the banner of St. Peter. He identified the spiritual combat against the flesh—in which St. Paul encouraged all Christians to engage—with an earthly warfare that was undertaken for the sake of Christ. What had previously been regarded as sinful, even when prosecuted for noble reasons, became meritorious when men 'dedicated their swords to the service of Christ and of Saint Peter'.⁸⁸ Gregory VII himself had planned to lead a Christian army, ostensibly to relieve Byzantine-

87 Herbert Edward John Cowdrey (1976). *The Genesis of the Crusades: The Springs of Western Ideas of Holy War*, in *Thomas Patrick Murphy and Ohio State University, Columbus, Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. The Holy War: [papers]*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, p. 19.

88 *Ibidem*, p. 20.

rite Christians from the infidel threat. His real motive was probably to re-impose papal supremacy on the Christian world, divided after the schism of 1054. Although he failed to mobilise adequate support to fulfil his personal ambition, his reformulation of traditional Christian thinking on warfare—the thought that the sword could be used to further the cause of Christ—gained sufficient hold on the Christian imagination to ensure a robust response to Urban II's call to arms to liberate the holy places a decade later.

Few in late 11th century Europe would have had any first-hand knowledge of Muslims or an awareness of the circumstances in which Eastern Christians lived to warrant such a response. The Muslim world, in fact, was tolerant of other faiths—provided they accepted a lesser role in society and paid their taxes. Therefore, there were undoubtedly other factors that contributed to the popular response to Urban II's appeal. European society at that time was experiencing demographic changes, with all the internal social tensions that inevitably follow. Population growth, the development of the knight class in search of social mobility, and the increased enforcement of law and order meant that warriors and those wanting to climb the social ladder had to look elsewhere in their need for land or new outlets for their innate sense of aggression and the practice of their martial skills. These factors, however, would have been insufficient in themselves to persuade men to endure the sacrifices they would have to make by embarking on a Crusade had it not been for the religious mood, which Urban II identified and tapped into successfully. In his article 'The Genesis of the Crusades: The Springs of Western Ideas of Holy War', Herbert Edward John Cowdrey identifies that mood as 11th century Europe's preoccupation with sin and penance. At a time when the Church's penitential system was in a state of disorder and confusion, people were never sure whether or not their penance could gain them full remission for their sins.⁸⁹ The only two assured ways of receiving forgiveness until then had been to enter a monastery or go on an unarmed pilgrimage. The Church was now offering a third way: warriors could gain remission for their sins by doing what they were good at—and killing or being killed in God's name would assure them of a place in paradise.

Whatever high motives that deluded them, by legitimising the use of the sword in God's name, Gregory VII and Urban II unleashed a destructive force that over the following three and a half centuries inflicted unspeakable human suffering on anyone who had the misfortune of being identified as an alien or infidel within or beyond the boundaries of Western Christianity. Within a year of Urban VII's sermon at Clarendon, Jews living in the Rhineland became victims of this new wave of religious fanaticism. In later years, Byzantine-rite Christians were subjected to the same barbarities as their Muslim and Jewish neighbours. Sir Steven Runciman's description of the Crusaders' siege of Alexandria compares to what happened in the two other great centres of belief, culture and trade that were also plundered, Jerusalem and Constantinople:

89 *Idem*, p. 21.

They spared no one. The native Christians and Jews suffered as much as the Moslems; and even the European merchants settled in the city saw their factories and storehouses ruthlessly looted. Mosques and tombs were raided and their ornaments stolen or destroyed; churches too were sacked... Houses were entered, and householders who did not immediately hand over all their possessions were slaughtered with their families.⁹⁰

The Crusaders' record of barbarity could easily lead one to question whether these holy warriors were motivated more by a lust for violence and loot than any sense of religious idealism. Opportunistic behaviour and greed may well have overshadowed the religious intent of their mission at times, yet an analysis of the Crusaders' songs and writings demonstrates that, at least initially, a religious mindset motivated them and legitimised their cruel behaviour. An anonymous knight put on record his own motives for embarking on the First Crusade, attributing his decision to fight to 'a great stirring of the heart throughout the Frankish lands, so that if any man really wanted to follow God and faithfully to bear the cross after him, he could make no delay in taking the road to the Holy Sepulchre as quickly as possible'.⁹¹ The Crusader clearly saw himself as a pilgrim, albeit armed, who had undergone an inner conversion that led him 'to join the sacred army of God's saints'.

THE REMNANT OF THE PACIFISM OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Not all Western Christians endorsed the belief in divinely sanctioned violence. One notable exception was Francis of Assisi, who in 1219 succeeded in engaging al-Kamil, the sultan of Egypt, in dialogue. Francis had hoped to bring an end to the senseless killing between Christians and Muslims by persuading the sultan to convert to Christianity. Although he failed in his immediate goal, Francis's presence and manner had such an influence on al-Kamil that the sultan later sent a messenger proposing a truce, during which time he was prepared to explore with the Christian Crusaders the possibility of peace.⁹² The Crusaders agreed to the truce but declined the sultan's offer to discuss peace, presumably because they believed themselves to be engaged on a sacred mission that did not allow for such compromises. Later, in the same century that Francis embarked on his peace mission, the English Franciscan and scientist Roger Bacon expressed similar beliefs that the Crusades were 'cruel and useless' and the infidel would be more open to

90 Quoted by Malcolm Billings (2000). *The Crusades*. Stroud: Tempus in association with the British Library, p. 153.

91 *Gesta Francorum* quoted by Herbert Edward John Cowdrey (1976). *The Genesis of the Crusades: The Springs of Western Ideas of Holy War*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.

92 Adrian House (2000). *Francis of Assisi*. London: Chatto and Windus, pp. 208–213.

conversion if Christians were less aggressive and predatory. A couple of centuries later, Erasmus—while not rejecting the principle of a just war—based his arguments in favour of pacifism on his understanding of the New Testament.

ISLAM AND VIOLENCE

The religious justification for fighting given in the Koran is rooted in the historical injustice that was done to Muhammad and his followers when they were driven out of their homes in Mecca and deprived of their livelihood because of their belief in God. In principle, a Muslim was only permitted to fight to right an injustice, defend themselves and protect their religion from destructive forces: 'Permission to fight is granted to those against whom war is made, because they have been wronged, and Allah indeed has the power to help them. They are those who have been driven out of their homes unjustly only because they affirmed: Our Lord is Allah. If Allah did not repel the aggression of some people by means of others, cloisters and churches and synagogues and mosques, wherein the name of Allah is oft commemorated, would surely be destroyed'.⁹³ The reward for fighting unrelentingly against disbelieving neighbours was the assurance of paradise: 'Whoso fights in the cause of Allah, be he slain or be he victorious, we shall soon give him a great reward'.⁹⁴ In the real world of Arabia's inter-clan warfare, however, it would appear that attack was considered the best form of defence, leading Muhammad and his followers to take the military initiative in order to ensure the survival of the *umma* or community of believers.

The concept of jihad was always considered to be broader than military action. This is well illustrated in Muslim tradition. Muhammad himself emphasised the priority that should be given to the jihad of the heart, the struggle to purify oneself and submit wholly to God alone, when on returning from battle he told his companions: 'This day we have returned from the minor jihad (war) to the major jihad (self-control and betterment)'.⁹⁵ In the course of time, Muslim jurists acknowledged the different nuances in the struggle to submit to God's will and that jihad could be performed with the heart, tongue, hands and sword. The jihad of the heart represented the individual's personal struggle with evil. The jihad of the tongue and the hands represented the struggle to promote what is right and correct what is wrong. The jihad of the sword represented the struggle against the enemies of the faith: those unbelievers who rejected the message and rule of Islam.⁹⁶ It was every Muslim's duty to offer their wealth and, if necessary, their lives in this struggle. All Muslim men who were physically able to fight were expected to take part. The jihad of the sword,

93 Koran 22:40–41.

94 Koran 4:75.

95 Hassan Hathout (1996). *Reading the Muslim Mind*. Plainfield, Ind.: American Trust Publications, pp. 108–109.

96 *Ibidem*.

though, was regarded as a collective responsibility, and not one that should be undertaken by an individual believer acting alone. Depending upon the particular circumstances or the nature of the threat that needed to be thwarted, jihad could be employed as an offensive or defensive action. It was justified within the *dar al-Islam* (the territory of peace) when embarked upon to punish wrongdoing or eradicate the forces of disbelief—to defend the faith and protect the unity and peace of the *umma* from the threat of apostasy, dissent, schism and rebellion:

Fight those from among the people of the Book who believe not in Allah, nor in the Last Day, nor hold as unlawful that which Allah and His Messenger have declared as unlawful nor follow the true religion, and who have not yet made peace with you, until they pay the tax willingly and make their submission (Koran 9:29).

It was also justified as a defensive measure against the endemic threat posed by the *dar al-harb* (the territory of war), those regions that were beyond the rule of Islam.

Although it began as a non-violent means of achieving social and religious reform, the concept of jihad developed to sanction the use of the sword, as the Muslim community grew to be a political power on the Arabian Peninsula. In the early days of the community at Mecca, Muslims accepted insult and rejection in their efforts to convert their fellow citizens to a new spiritual vision through their preaching and charity. It was after the *hajj*, the emigration to Medina, that Muslims were given permission to fight, essentially to right the injustice that had been done to them.⁹⁷ The order to fight in the ‘cause of Allah’ was given when it was felt that the survival of the community was under threat from hostile neighbours. The sanctioning of a more pro-active use of the sword was justified when non-believers had dishonoured their pledges with Muslims. It was at this stage that jihad became instrumental in the spreading of Islam, and the time-honoured aggressiveness of the Arabian tribes that now formed the Muslim community became focused on the world of the non-believer. The relationship between the *dar-al-Islam* and the *dar-al-harb*, the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, was defined in terms of jihad, or a state of war, which applied even when hostilities were suspended.

As the practice of war developed, becoming (for some at least) a way of life, so too did the rules governing the conduct of war. Jurists and scholars differed on the circumstances and to whom these rules applied but agreed that their prime aim was to limit violence and avoid the risk of acting out of anger or revenge. As war was a collective responsibility, it was to be declared only by the caliph or imam. No war was to be started, however, before

⁹⁷ James Turner Johnson (1997). *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 60.

the enemy was invited to convert to Islam or enter into a peace agreement. Summary executions, the torturing of prisoners, mutilating the bodies of the dead, the use of poisoned weapons, the killing or molesting of non-combatants, rape and sexual molestation, ethnic cleansing, the devastation of crops and the destruction of religious, medical and cultural institutions were outlawed.⁹⁸

From its earliest history, the unity of Islam was threatened by a series of internal revolts and by those who believed they were justified in using violence to promote their self-proclaimed mission to purify their religion from the malpractices of leaders who had usurped power. Driven by the convictions that ‘the subject’s duty of obedience lapses where the command is sinful’ and ‘there must be no obedience to a creature against his Creator’,⁹⁹ these rebellious groups, led frequently by charismatic leaders, perceived themselves to be acting virtuously by killing the unrighteous. Tyrannicide was looked upon as a religious duty. In the long run, however, these extremist groups lacked the organisation and popular support to withstand the military power and authority of the established leadership. A notable exception were the Assassins, whose terrorist activities spanned the best part of two centuries (1090–1275) and who only ceased to be a threat to the Sunni establishment when the Mongol invasion provided Baybars, the Mamluk sultan of Egypt, with an opportunity to seize their network of mountain strongholds in Syria.

THE WESTPHALIA AND ENLIGHTENMENT EFFECT

The social and political milieu can, and often does, provide the trigger for sectarian violence. However this, I would argue, is not necessarily the fundamental cause for religious intolerance and violence in the world today. The 17th century Treaty of Westphalia may have succeeded in putting an end to pitched battles over beliefs that had marred interstate relationships in Europe for most of that century. The claim that it removed once and for all the influence of religion from international politics is more questionable. It could be argued that by domesticating or nationalising belief, the motto being that the faith of the ruler was the faith of the realm or state, Westphalia in fact turned religion into a powerful social agent, which was used to enforce the cultural identity of the colonisers, as European princes and governments expanded their rule to embrace the countries of Africa and Asia. Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka and the BJP Hindu nationalist party in India argue British colonial policies that favoured one group over another, a practice aimed at restricting the religious hegemony that they enjoyed prior to colonisation, ultimately sowed the seeds of their countries’ present conflicts.

98 Hilmi M. Zawati (2001). *Is Jihad a Just War?: War, Peace, and Human Rights under Islamic and Public International Law*. Lewiston, New York: E. Mellen Press, pp. 40–45.

99 Bernard Lewis (1995). *Cultures in Conflict: Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the Age of Discovery*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 126–127.

The impact of the Enlightenment may also have been over exaggerated in terms of conformation to the cultural norms and expectations of society. The phenomenon of believing without feeling a need to belong to a community or practice a particular faith makes it more difficult for social scientists to evaluate the real impact of religion on community or tribal life. To quote Alan Aldridge, the author of *Religion in the Contemporary World, a Sociological Introduction*, ‘Latent religiosity survives as a resource to be mobilised at times of crisis in the lives of individuals or the history of the society’.¹⁰⁰

RELIGION AND MEDIATION

Given that religion can be a causal factor in conflict, the question we need to explore is: can religion play the reverse role and help to mediate, manage and resolve conflict? The starting point, for me, is to acknowledge that theological differences rooted in firmly held dogmas are irreconcilable. On one level, inter-faith dialogue that fails to openly acknowledge these fundamental differences can be as much part of the problem as the solution. We have to learn to coexist with the cracks and not be tempted to paper over them. My Lisbon experience of living with a crack, caused by the 1755 earthquake, thought me this lesson. There is a risk of looking back and idolising past relationships—but there never has been a golden period. People of different faiths were tolerated so long as they knew their place within the established order. An unwritten social contract existed between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East, where Christians were allowed to practice their faith and carry out works of charity provided they did not proselytise.

To learn to live with our differences and not see the other as a threat or competitor calls for a real shift in mindset, a profound change in the understanding of ourselves and those who are different. We need to learn to think differently about the other and to actively promote a climate that allows for real interaction and the development of a genuine respect, despite our differences in belief and practice.

We need to move beyond the sectarianism that can be engrained within religious communities. I recall meeting with Dr. Peter Shirlow of the University of Ulster to discuss research he had carried out in 2003 in neighbourhoods divided by so-called ‘peace lines’, physical barriers erected to keep neighbouring communities apart, which have increased in number since then. His research indicates that, since the peace process began, the gap between the two communities has widened, especially among the younger generation. He found that prejudice was so engrained on both sides that 68% of the 18–25 age group claim they never had a meaningful conversation with anyone from the other community. His findings also revealed that 72% of all age groups refuse to use health centres located in areas dominated by the other religion, and 62% of unemployed people refuse to sign on

100 Alan Aldridge (2000). *Religion in the Contemporary World: A Sociological Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 3.

at their local social-security office if it is located in what is seen to be the other's territory. He told me that one of the main problems facing Northern Ireland is that everyone sees themselves as a victim of the other side and is unable to recognise that self as a perpetrator of violence and intimidation. The challenge, he believes, is to help people on each side see that they are both victims and perpetrators in the current divisions.

The Irish School of Ecumenics report 'Moving Beyond Sectarianism', published in 2001, describes the pervasiveness of sectarianism at every level of Northern Irish society. It underlines the need to think about sectarianism as a systemic as well as a personal problem. 'Sectarianism', it concludes, 'has become a system so efficient that it can take our sane and rational responses to a situation which it has generated and use them to further deepen sectarianism'.¹⁰¹ The example given is how people have responded to the violence over the years: the tendency has been to move from mixed residential areas to live 'exclusively among our own'. The authors recognise that this is a perfectly understandable and blameless response but the unfortunate effect, they claim, is to reinforce sectarianism still further. What applied in Northern Ireland then is still applicable today in many parts of the world facing strife.

People, the report found, approach sectarianism by drawing lines between themselves and others, and because they can always find people whose actions are worse than their own they can point to them as the real problem. The consequences of the dynamics of systemic sectarianism, the report claims, is that no one is ever responsible — 'the buck never stops passing'.¹⁰² Sectarianism can also feed on what the authors call 'religiously motivated boundary maintenance': people worship, are educated and marry almost exclusively within their own communities, with the intention not to be sectarian but to build strong communities. The result, nonetheless, according to the report, is 'strengthening the sectarian divide'.¹⁰³

THE SECTARIAN MINDSET

A sectarian mindset is not a monopoly of the street or disadvantaged neighbourhoods, it is pervasive even at the highest level of religious leadership. Writing about the meeting of more than 2,000 religious leaders that was held in the United Nations building in New York, the former chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks says he found it easy to understand 'why religion is as often a cause of conflict as it is of conciliation'. He criticises his fellow participants for their failure to rise above 'the narrow loyalties of faith', and says the peace spoken of was too often 'peace on our terms'. The general message, he concludes, was: 'Our faith speaks of peace; our holy texts praise peace; therefore, if only the world

101 Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg (2001). *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*. Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Columba Press, p. 12.

102 *Ibidem*, p. 13.

103 *Idem*, p. 14.

shared our faith and our texts there would be peace'.¹⁰⁴ John Stuart Mill's argument that diversity should be nurtured and not merely endured, on the grounds of it leading to truth and human progress,¹⁰⁵ appears to have been overshadowed by the climate of theological particularism (the belief that one group has exclusive possession of truth, knowledge and goodness that is universally applicable), which still shapes the outlook of many of today's religious leaders.

MOVING BEYOND TOLERANCE

Some would claim that religion can promote peace and coexistence in so far as it promotes tolerance of the other. The word 'tolerance' for many people today defines a positive attitude towards diversity, calling for respect and acceptance of those who think and act differently from oneself.

The Latin roots of the word, meaning to endure or put up with the objectionable, indicate that tolerance, as it was originally defined, had more negative overtones. Far from embracing diversity and pluralism, Aquinas and others saw the willingness to permit or concede the practice of a religion they judged to be false as the lesser of two evils—since to act otherwise could possibly involve a greater evil. Even Locke endorsed 'toleration' only because he considered the 'consequences of intolerance are a greater evil than the evil that is tolerated'. The original concept of tolerance prevails today, especially in religious circles. The 2003 edition of the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* distinguishes between 'personal' tolerance ('permitting others to hold and to put into practice views that diverge from one's own'), which it endorses, and 'doctrinal' tolerance ('permitting error to spread unopposed'), which it judges to be 'reprehensible'.

Even with its negative connotations, the traditional concept of tolerance, which allows for would-be warring communities to coexist side by side without violence, should not be undervalued. The achievement of 'mere coexistence', as it is sometimes disparagingly referred to, is no mean feat, especially in communities that have been marred by inter-ethnic or inter-religious strife. The real threat to human existence presented by the face of intolerance today underscores the urgent need for religious communities in particular to re-evaluate their own attitudes towards diversity and pluralism. The French Catholic existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel believed that far from embattling people with negative attitudes towards others, a genuine religious experience or conviction mandates a person to be pro-active in defending the right of others to believe differently. He maintained that the 'intense conviction' a religious person experiences, which is so much part of who he or she is, should enable that person to empathise with another's convictions, which are different but equally intense. This ability to identify or empathise

104 Jonathan Sacks (2002). *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. London, New York: Continuum, p. 9.

105 John Stuart Mill and Elizabeth Rapaport (1978). *On Liberty*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., pp. 9 and 50.

should lead believers to move beyond that state of passive acceptance usually referred to as tolerance.¹⁰⁶

THE RIGHT TO BE DIFFERENT

To uphold and actively defend the right of others to make truth claims different from our own and act upon them, provided they are not detrimental to the rights and well-being of others, would be an important first step in taking people beyond 'the sectarian milieu' in which their own convictions have been formed. Robert Putnam judged education to be the key to counterbalancing the drift towards intolerance, which he found in American communities that were more religious in their make-up. I would agree that education could help to dispel the myths that allow others to be looked upon as outcasts or 'demons', but it is equally true that indoctrination, in the form of religious dogmatism based on absolute claims, can reinforce separatism and an intolerance of what is judged to be false. Respect for others and their conscientious beliefs and opinions is the framework for dialogue that allows for an honest exchange of conflicting ideas. High on the agenda of such exchanges should be a willingness to test truth claims that authorise a sense of exclusiveness or superiority over others. Equally high on that agenda should be a willingness to consider the reordering of the hierarchy or canon of beliefs that determine the faith and practice of each religious tradition. The affirmation of human life as a sacred experience or gift should take priority over what name we give to God or how we define our understanding of the divine.

For the first time in our history, human beings have it within their power to extinguish the whole of life, and, in the process, cause grotesque disfiguration to the face of the globe. This awesome fact places a particular responsibility on those religious traditions that regard the whole of creation as a sacred gift to be cherished, and who believe that humans will be held accountable for their stewardship of the earth. Now is undoubtedly a defining moment in human history, which calls for an exceptional and imaginative response from the world's religions. Whether they will be capable of responding to that challenge depends on the quality of religious leadership within the diverse traditions. The top-down approach is not sufficient: religious leaders need to have a depth of knowledge and spiritual maturity to engage their own faith communities at every level, in order to challenge the sectarian mindset that sees the other as less worthy of respect and therefore dispensable.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Oliver McTernan is the director and co-founder of Forward Thinking, a UK-based organisation that promotes better understanding between cultures and focuses on mediation in the MENA region. His book *Violence in God's Name: the Role of Religion in*

106 Gabriel Marcel (1964). *Creative Fidelity*. New York: The Noonday Press, pp. 210–221.

an Age of Conflict addresses the need to take the religious factor seriously in international efforts to address faith-fuelled identity conflicts.

ABSTRACT

Religion can be a cause of conflict but, equally, it can be an important tool for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict. It can be a powerful force for integration or the cause of segregation and marginalisation. This is true regardless of the theological or ethnic differences that exist at global, regional or local levels. Faith imbues the whole life of a believer and, either consciously or unconsciously, helps shape their human response to the moral, social and political challenges they encounter every day. The challenge facing religious leadership today is to overcome the past and present ambivalence towards the use of violence that is prevalent in all the major religious traditions, and to help their adherents to recognise the need to live alongside and engage with the other, regardless of their theological differences.

KEYWORDS

Religion, conflict, prevention, ambivalence, leadership

الملخص

يمكن للدين أن يتحول إلى سبب للنزاع، لكن في الوقت نفسه يمكنه أن يكون وسيلة في غاية الأهمية لتجنب النزاعات و تديبرها و حلها ؛ و يمكنه أن يكون بمثابة قوة هائلة للإدماج أو للتفرقة و تهميش الآخر، و ذلك بغض النظر عن الإختلافات اللاهوتية و الإثنية القائمة على المستوى العالمي و الجهوي و المحلي. و يؤثر الدين في كل حياة المؤمن، و يساعده، بوعي و بدونه، في صياغته لجواب إنساني على التحديات الأخلاقية و الإجتماعية و السياسية التي تواجهه كل يوم. هذا و يواجه رجال الدين اليوم تحدي تجاوز التعارض بين الماضي و الحاضر حول إستخدام العنف، الذي يسود في كل التقاليد الكبرى للأديان، و مساعدة أتباعها للإعتراف بضرورة العيش المشترك و الإنتظام مع الآخرين من دون أخذ في الإعتبار لإختلافاتهم الدينية.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الدين، النزاع، الوقاية، التعارض، الزعامة.