

Faith-based peace building and conflict transformation - Religion and Nonviolence

Introduction - 3 preliminary observations:

Violence is a new subject matter

There has been much exploration, discussion and writing over the last 20 years or so about religion and about conflict and peacemaking. Peace building is a more recent subject. Religion itself of course has been a subject of study and discussion over centuries. Conflict and peace have become topics only in the 19th century. However, violence as a phenomenon and reality has really been a subject of research and discussion only since the 1960s. Violence as a subject matter in science is rather new and it's important to pay attention to it, because it threatens the existence of the entire human family.

There is confusion between violence and conflict

There is a general popular assumption, widespread also in the peace movement, that conflict is the problem and should be prevented or done away with quickly. It is violence, not conflict, which often takes the form of injustice. If we accepted the reality and potential of, and indeed the need for conflict as a given and not evil in itself, we'd be much better off. In fact, conflict is necessary to incite change and transformation. That perspective, by the way, is the number one educational aspect in peace building. But our media, and even people in the peace movement, talk of conflict and war as if they were the same. That confusion is very counterproductive and actually a hindrance to constructive peace work.

Those who have watched from close will affirm that while violence and confusion are rampant, women are among the most prominent and most effective peacemakers.

Some reflections on faith and religion:

We know that religion is ambivalent and has an ambivalent reputation and is being used for manipulation. In order to consider the role of religion in conflict transformation, one really needs to consider the place of peace in religion. On that account, in spite of the countless appeals to peace by religious leaders all over the world, religious institutions and churches have demonstrated little actual commitment to nonviolent approaches and to resistance of the military machine that holds the world's economy and budget priorities hostage at the detriment of education, health and the environment. It is women who have often stood up against the madness of militarism and of collective violence. Many if not most of these women nurture their action by faith.

Religion today can have a credible role and power for constructive conflict transformation and violence prevention only insofar as it reflects the insights and experiences made during the most horrendous tragedies of the 20th century and by putting forward the principles that protect human life and dignity over against self-interest, individual or collective. That is, religion that claims an almighty God at the service of violent nationalist government or revolution will contribute to more violence and destruction in conflict. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "God is powerless and weak in the world. And only in that way is God with us and helps us." All three Abrahamic faiths know the commandment "you shall not kill". All three also know the commandment of love.

Faith-based approaches carry a high potential for constructive conflict transformation because faith is a spiritual commitment to love and respect in a self-giving spirit.

While religion is generally looked at with suspicion and ambivalence, faith and spirituality are increasingly finding not only fascination but authentic and deep longing and expectation. It is as

if people have lost faith in religion and are finding new hope in faith and spirituality. For the time being, much of that is fascination by deep faith commitments. At this point in time, the fascination outnumbers the commitment.¹

Unfortunately the term nonviolence has until recently not really been part of the mainline theological vocabulary. It is only slowly finding its way into the church. The church of the past centuries and until today seems to have forgotten that nonviolence was foundational to the early church. But nonviolence is very much a teaching in other religions as well, but, just as in Christianity, too often betrayed and forgotten. That's the beauty of the recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa: much of what's happening is inspired indeed by nonviolent approaches.

Communities of faith have always been ahead of mainline religious institutions. In fact, what's needed is communities of women and men that live faith, not agencies that propagate faith.

If you look closely at intentional communities of faith, they all share a commitment to nonviolence.

Faith engages us together to face conflict and to build peace and justice nonviolently.

Some reflections on conflict transformation and peace building:

Peace building is being conducted in a situation where the collision of the needs, interests and fears of people has become a major blockage or drive of action. It is therefore important to recognize that there cannot be peace building without conflict transformation.

Personally I am convinced that the potential of faith or religion in intractable conflict is for conflict transformation. That's because conflict transformation depends ultimately on the principle of letting go/forgiveness and of hope. Ironically it is precisely religious people and even more so religious institutions who tend most to resist transformation.

One of the first things to be done in situations of conflict is to change people's views and perceptions of conflict. If conflict is seen as wrong and sinful it is no surprise that people despair quickly and become uncooperative or drop into apathy. If conflict is seen as inevitably leading to violence, it is no surprise that people resort to violence as a preventive step (as it happened in the wars in South Eastern Europe)

The first destructive myth is to see conflict as evil or violent, as I said earlier. The second destructive myth is to believe that things must become as they were before.

So the question is not whether there will be transformation or not. Conflict itself often grows out of a pending and often an ignored need for change. The question is what kind transformation, how, and towards what. That's where religion comes in: Religion has a quality of hope. Faith includes the capacity to believe that things can change for the better and imagine alternatives.

Conflict transformation theory emphasizes the importance of using different lenses to understand conflict and its situation. One such lens could be religion and its cultural expressions, institutions, and common practices on both the collective and personal level. Often religious people, especially if they belong to the historically or numerically predominant religious tradition, not only resist change, they also refuse to admit a multiplicity of lenses.

¹ The extraordinary success of the film "Of men and of gods" (Des Hommes et des Dieux) is a testimony to this search for truth and authenticity, which no ideology, no state or national reason or religious doctrine can provide, and much less military might. (The monks of Tibhirine were serving the community, both Christians and Muslims, the people, whereas both the military government demanded exclusive loyalty and the Islamic militants wouldn't tolerate anyone who played into the hands of the government. It's an extraordinary testimony to the power of spiritual community discernment and nonviolence.)

Intractable conflict affects all levels, the personal, relational, structural and cultural. Any one of these merits the question: what change is needed or desirable? Who is best placed to implement change?

One more aspect of conflict transformation is the pyramid of different levels on which conflict is being addressed and fed into. The top leadership, the middle range leadership, the persons with influence on the grassroots level. Religion is a factor on all of these levels, but its entry points are very different. In conflict transformation, linking the lines vertically within the pyramid of influence and public profile is very important. Here especially, the gender perspective is crucial, because often you'll find that the people with sustainable constructive influence on the grassroots level are often women.

As I look at faith-based initiatives for conflict transformation and peace-building, it seems to me that an overriding factor is the identification of the universal human rights with the core values of religion: love and compassion. One such example is the effort of the Association Tchadienne pour la Nonviolence. Its objective is to promote social transformation through nonviolence. One of the major operational goals in this is to practically help in the implementation of human rights and in facilitating conflict transformation between different social and economic groups. This association is mainly Christian and faith-based, but not exclusive in its approach. What's striking is the number of people involved. Western NGO's tend to think what's needed to conduct good projects is a healthy institution, a solid plan, and efficient office and sufficient funding. The Association Tchadienne pour la Nonviolence is a faith based initiative, like others in Africa and elsewhere who do most marvelous work, can't operate by these criteria. Rather, they depend on countless people, some hired, many volunteers, who serve the cause because they believe in it.

Finally, peace-building does not qualify for being faith-based because of its linkage to a religious institution or its reference to a specific religious text or figure. What makes peace-building faith-based is its commitment to the values of love and hope beyond the immediate and calculated results, as well as the commitment of those who carry it out. It's not the institution who carries faith, but the people who drive and run it.