

Religion in Peace Building **Aloysius John**

Humanity has known many violent conflicts which were undertaken for the cause of religions. The crusades during the 11th century, the thirty year Religious war in France (XVI century), the Irish conflict, the Indo-Pakistan conflict, the Sri Lankan war and the historical Israelo-Palestinian conflict are but some relevant examples. The dynamics of these wars have a religious cause, leading to hatred between the belligerent communities.

In this modern rational world, which is globalised, religion as motivation to maintain the dynamics of conflict, is an area for continued reflexion and analysis. For example, the 30 year Sri Lankan Ethnic Crisis was put to an end through military victory, but, yet till today religious sentiments do not favour the political resolution to this conflict. On the contrary religion plays an important role to maintain the crisis. What are the reasons that motivate one faction of the Buddhist religious group to advocate against going for peace with the Tamil minority? Can we argue as in the case of Sri Lanka, that Culture, religion and ethnicity are imbricated and when religion is used for political ends, it may be an obstacle for building peace.

There is a connection between conflict, religion and peace building, requiring an understanding as to how they are linked and how this influences conflict situations. The aftermath of September 11, 2001 has been a period of accelerated religious extremism and conflict wherein "Islamism" has become a major threat with blind killing of innocent people. But this is also, implicitly, a response to the "international democratic forces" who in wanting to restore democracy are also involved in blind killing (gently called as "collateral damage") and the international indifference towards the injustice and sufferings meted out to the Palestinians by the Jewish state.

The purpose of this document is to argue that religions can play a role in conflict resolutions, because they play an important role in society and influence social attitudes and behaviours especially in societies where religious traditions are highly maintained. This discussion will first focus on identifying the role of religions in the society at large as well as during the conflict situations, it will then take through a discussion on how religions can contribute to conflict resolutions, which will be illustrated in the last part through a concrete

example in Sri Lanka. This concrete illustration of the role of the Faith Based Organisation as builders of peace will help give relevant meaning to the role of religion. As a conclusion this paper will also propose a certain number of suggestions for the religious leaders to promote peace. Reference will be made to the Sri Lankan conflict in different parts of this document. This document does not claim to be a paper on sociology of religion, but rather a means to understand peace and conflict resolution from the perspective of religion from a very practical angle.

Religion - its role in the society and in conflicts

Religion is a complex and diversified universe. Durkheim presents religions as "a set of beliefs and practices related to sacred things". It contains specific practices, beliefs, rules which are united under one structure (for example the Church) and all those who adhere to them compose the basic form of religious life. This gives cohesion, coherence and brings the believers of the same religion together.

When we refer to religion we are referring to action, that is realisation of the basic form of religious life in the day to day lives. In order to fulfil this, the force to act comes from the faith. The actions are prescribed traditionally and handed from generation to generation, as a way of "being" and "doing" which are closely related to the modal culture which legitimated by religion becomes the condition for social "functioning". For example, the caste system in Hinduism is a classification of socio-professional class based on opportunities leading to an unjust system. The access to the opportunities is limited for those who are from the poorer section of the population. This is also a mean to safeguard the hegemony and domination of the elite group over the greater section of the population. Such a system cannot be maintained without an external force that facilitates the sustainability of the system and this is done by integrating norms that are legitimated by the religion. For example, an untouchable's destiny is to do menial job. Since he does menial jobs, he is profane and consequently does not have access to certain opportunities in the society. Thus he learns to live and adapt to sub human conditions and this becomes his functioning in the society because it is told to him that he is an untouchable because of his Karma and he has to accept it to be born in a better

Karma in his next birth. In this, these social functioning indicate that religion has a role, a social utilitarian role which is devoid of any rational reasoning. This is important for the social functioning and maintaining the structure as seen in the caste system described above.

A brief overview of different religions indicate a double dimension in the religious practices : the individual dimension nurtured and practised in the private sphere {personnel, family } and the collective doing which transforms the principles and beliefs into collective being leading to a culture. These individual and collective beings and doings confer the religious identity. For example in Islam, the collective identity is generated by the respect of the five pillars of Islam leading to cohesion and coherence which confers the Islamic culture and belongingness to the "Umma" (the community).

During the different contacts with the Muslim communities, beneficiaries of development aid in Asia, I have observed that religion is perceived as a divine obligation and basis for living together. During one of meeting with a "basti" (living quarters of low cast people in Pakistan) in Pakistan, the members overtly claimed while discussing on the Kashmir issue, "India is our enemy and we must fight against Hinduism and we must protect Islam. It is our duty". In other words, India is a Hindu nation and they are our enemy and we Muslims must protect ourselves from this enemy. Such positions are maintained in many communities and it reveals that religious communities, whatever status they may have in the society, are in a logic of global social intercourse which is characterized by their social and religious identity. This is also verified in the present, post war Sri Lankan ethnic issue, where radical Buddhism is advocating for a national identity based on religious belongingness and thus refusing the minority identity which is equated to Hinduism.

In some cases, Religion is also the state ideological motor and it plays a determinant role in building of democracies or acting as an obstacle. As Alexis de Toqueville observes, "Religion in the US appears as contributing to the building of democracy rather than an obstacle, Christianity brings about cohesion and the togetherness". He also adds *"Moreover, almost all the sects of the United States are comprised within the great unity of Christianity, and Christian morality is everywhere the same. In the United States the sovereign authority is religious, and consequently hypocrisy must be common; but there*

is no country in the whole world in which the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America, and there can be no greater proof of its utility, and of its conformity to human nature, than that its influence is most powerfully felt over the most enlightened and free nation of the earth". Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1851), pp. 331-337

Religion is also a binding factor, especially, when the cohesion is under threat. There is a tendency to search for coherence in the religious common background which develops within individuals a "public consciousness" and gives them common moral and social norms resulting in social responsibilities conferred to each individual. This is evident in the case of Sri Lanka, where the government is trying to create Sinhala cohesion through Buddhism, religion of the majority community. The hardcore Buddhist monks, in particular those partisan of JHU and Sinhala Urumai are promoting "Sinhala communalism (which has Buddhism as the corner stone) with no restraints on populism and extreme chauvinist positions, they bring about attitudinal blockages on the Sinhala community" (Sinhala-ness and Sinhala nationalism, Michael Roberts.). The same phenomenon is also observed in Pakistan, where the talibans try to maintain cohesion through radicalism and Islamism which in a way tries to eliminate any individual that does not have the public consciousness and application of the moral and social norms resulting in the social responsibilities that is conferred to each "individual believer" . The assassination of Salman Taseer, the Punjab Governor in Pakistan on January 4, 2011, itself is a clear indication of what is discussed above.

The examples above illustrate that religion can also become a political instrument, as Max Weber observes , "religion is instrumentalized for political gains and the religious symbolism is used in the social rapport in order to dominate and legitimate power over another group". This is true in the case of Sri Lanka and the minority Tamils, where Buddhism is being used to win over the popular Sinhala mass, in order to institute Buddhism as a national religion and thus dominate over Hinduism which is perceived as religion of the minority and also imported from south India, thus alien.

Religion as basis for peace and reconciliation

In many of the international violence or crisis situations, Religion has played a contributing role, sometimes with high involvement. For example in Pakistan the present tense situation is fuelled by religion or religious sentiments. The Taliban and the fundamental Islamic groups are highly active and are a danger for democracy; in Sri Lanka, Buddhism is also a contributing factor to maintain a situation of communal differences. For example the JHU and the Sinhala Urumai highly supported by radical Buddhist monks is promoting the idea of Sinhala domination over the minority Tamils in the North ; and the day to day violence in Irak where religious communities are attacked by radical groups.

While religion often divides people and leads to conflict or politicizes identities in deeply divided societies, it can also be used as an ethico-moral reason to bring disparate people together. For example regular gatherings like Sunday mass or the Friday prayers in the mosques, bring large number of people together and the influence of the religious leaders is significant enough to motivate them and give them a common basis for collective position.

Making use of the level of influence that religion has on individuals and groups, which also varies from context to context there is a need to make a thorough analysis, of the way religions can contribute to promote peace and reconciliation in their respective societies. The contribution that religion can make to peacemaking needs to be explored and explicated.

All three of the Abrahamic faiths contain strong warrants for peacemaking. Christianity, Islam and Judaism have precepts of peace-making inbuilt in their scriptures. In the past there have been cases of mediation and peacemaking by religious leaders and institutions. In 1972 the world Council of Churches and the All Africa Conference of churches mediated the peace agreement in Sudan. The different churches played a vital role in the struggle against apartheid and promoted an environment for a peaceful transition. One significant example is the end of the civil war in Mozambique in 1992, obtained through the mediation of Saint Egidio community.

There are many examples and good practices of peace making initiatives through religion or faith based organisations. However the outcomes are far

from being totally satisfactory. This is due to present trends in the religion based conflicts where the radical and fundamentalist elements are mixed, making things more difficult for negotiation due to their intolerant position towards other religious leaders.

In Sri Lanka, the Church played an important role in bringing peace and harmony into the society. Two catholic Bishops were active in motivating and mobilising the peace initiatives and this was one of the relevant experiences taken even at the global level in 1996. But these initiatives did not have the international backing and the support necessary to take them forward, even though there was an explicit request by the two bishops. The international community did not seize the opportunity nor give due attention to these initiatives and making them become a movement for promoting peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. The Norwegian peace brokers did not seize these opportunities and get the religious leaders involved in the process. Within the island there were radical religious groups opposed to these undertakings.

The role of religion can be understood from a three track perspective of peace building and reconciliation process : the grass root, the national and international levels wherein we can observe cross cutting role of religion. Its role is necessary and indispensable at the grassroots level as connector among the community members of different religions; at the national level, the religious leaders have a predominant role to play to motivate and mobilise the policy makers and the deciders to take the appropriate actions. And at the international level there is a need to take up activities that would favour peace and harmony wherein the religious leaders could also play a role.

The field of religious peacemaking is also developing, with religions having acquired good experience in this field. With more sophisticated reflections of its growing experience, a corpus of knowledge is developing, in particular, interfaith dialogue as a mechanism for resolving violent conflicts. It lifts up the unique elements of religious peace building, with a particular focus on apology and forgiveness. Importance and emphasis is also given to the issues of social Justice and Human Rights. For example, recently, the Church leaders in Sri Lanka developed a critical position on some of the Government's post war moves : the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Committee, the present situation in Sri Lanka and the way the government was dealing with the post war situation. They

underlined that the military solution was not the right one and the need for a political solution which implicitly meant Social justice to the minority Tamils. Religious leaders are particularly effective in working together for peace especially when they are from different faith communities as in Sri Lanka. When the faiths explore and practice common values, such as justice and compassion, in public life, religious leaders can be an inspiration to others starting from the grass root to the international level. In the case of Sri Lanka, the Peace program initiated by Caritas Sri Lanka was aiming at doing awareness building with the people at the grass root and at the same time at the national level, the Church leaders along with the Buddhist clergy and the other religious leaders were involved in lobbying and dialogue with the government and the LTTE.

Bringing in the “religion dimension” means having access to the sphere of belief (the faith dimension) , religiosity (rituals and behaviours), the community (the religious groups) and the common religious experience. These dimensions are important and will serve as common denominators for building peace. These dimensions will contribute to peace making and create harmony among the people.

Accommodating the spiritual dimension into the peacemaking process will create access to reflexion and critical thinking and also question the affective base of the parties' behaviour, enabling people to look into critically on their own attitudes and actions. When the conflicts have become deep-seated then People's conflict behaviour is often based on more emotional considerations and thus may not be changed simply by rational negotiation processes and subsequent agreements. Relevant decisions and commitments must be motivated from value-based perspectives which will help to engage in transformative action. In the case of Sri Lanka, it is evident that the ethnic resentment has settled in the minds of the people and translated into attitude of indifference or resentments. It is here, that the role of religion and the faith based approach will help them to work for a sustainable peace. Religion can consequently become a source of peacemaking and the peacemaking potential of religious leaders and institutions becomes a matter of importance.

In many of the multi-religious communities, the religious leaders can play a predominant role. First of all religion is a significant factor of identity among the groups that are in conflict. In this context the religious leaders from the different sides of the conflict can be mobilised to facilitate peace with the

grass root. They can also influence and negotiate with the second and third track stakeholders, ie the local, national stakeholders and at the international level with the international stakeholders. Moreover religious institutions are trusted and are credible for their respect of sets of values.

Religion sometimes is also a moral force to oppose injustice on the part of the government and at times it is the unique leverage for promoting reconciliation among the conflicting parties, rehumanizing situations that have lost their humanity due to protracted wars or conflicts. The capacity of religions to mobilise different stakes holders at different levels has always been recognized. The religious leaders perceive the mediating role as a free gift to be put at the disposal of the entire society.

Religion based interventions need to be two pronged approach. First of all they are the direct intervention of the religious leaders themselves who are directly involved with mediations with the political leaders and other stakeholders. Secondly, this involvement is often accompanied by an involvement in social activities either during the conflict or after the conflicts. They are undertaken in the field of social intervention, development or relief Aid activities and are assets for the peace making role of the religious leaders. Very often the social interventions are carried out by the Faith Based Organisation (FBO) which have long standing experience in the field and work alongside the religious leaders.

Role of FBO in Peace Building

Faith-based organisations have generally remained with the people in situation of conflicts and helped them by their presence and relief activities. At times, they have also been specifically targeted when considered to be in opposition to the repressive forces. They often collaborate creatively with the civil society in identifying those who are victims in order to help them from the social, physical and giving them psychological support. Significant examples are the infrastructure and the established grass root networks of the Churches which are active in the field of development, relief and advocacy activities and have contributed to produce valuable resource people who can act as professionals in the field of social action.

Faith-based Organisations are an integral part of life and society in areas where they work. Caritas

network, Christian Aid are but some of the examples. They work with the communities and hold much Credibility with the people because of their presence at grassroots, their active involvement with the people at every aspect of their lives and for the many services they offer to these communities. FBO have a responsibility to be the voice of the voiceless and to hold governments accountable to their constitutions and recall their responsibility towards the poorest.

One of the Peace building activities undertaken in Asia is the National Peace Program initiated by Caritas Sri Lanka with the help of Caritas Network. It is worth exploring this example in order to understand and explicit the role of the FBO in peace building and the role of religion.

The National Peace Program – A case Study

Caritas Sri Lanka was involved in the relief activities since 1989, when the ethnic conflict turned into a military war between the LTTE and the Government. Caritas Sri Lanka was among one of the rare Church Based organisation implementing relief program in the Vanni region, Mannar, and in the Jaffna peninsula. Because of its belongingness to the church and due to its ability to efficiently and effectively carry out the programs both the government and the LTTE agreed to its presence in the north, giving credibility to their services and interventions.

In 1994, the bishops both catholic and other Christian denominations, the Muslim leaders and Buddhist monks from the open minded Buddhist clergy, took initiatives as an interreligious group to dialogue with the government and the LTTE to bring them to the peace table. These initiatives of the religious leaders were well received by the Bandaranaike government who was ready to use their office to initiate the grounds for a peace deal, which would have the favour of the Tamil and Sinhalese communities, because Christians are present in both these communities. Goodwill missions were undertaken and mediation through dialogue were initiated. There were lots of hardships and in spite of the different obstacles and hostilities, the interreligious group kept on the pressure of dialogue and negotiations.

At this juncture the Peace Program was initiated by Caritas Sri Lanka, and it got involved in peace initiatives through its network partners both nationally and internationally. The activities at the

international level were undertaken through the different church based networks. In 1995 a working group was formed and this group was composed of international partners, actively supporting the peace initiatives of Caritas Sri Lanka. Different lobby activities were taken up in different countries that had an interest or a stake on the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka. At the national level, Caritas Sri Lanka was working closely with some likeminded Faith based organisations, in particular the National council for Peace.

In order to concretely translate these efforts into action, a people oriented approach based on community based activities was introduced. Caritas Sri Lanka with the help of its partners entered into a new phase of project programming, guided by the conviction that there cannot be sustainable development without peace initiatives. The National Peace Program, now aimed at promoting peace and dialogue at the grass root level, undertaken in parallel with the peace initiative taken up by the religious authorities.

The National Peace Programme consisted of three dimensions: Education and mobilisation of the program beneficiaries to understand the conflict and look for means for working towards peace ; create a space for both the communities to get to know each other mutually and understand the sufferings of the communities in order to contribute to stop the violence ; Education and awareness building of children and youth through street play and theatres etc. These different activities were progressively complimented by exchange visits between the Tamil and Sinhala community.

Tamils from the north were brought to the south to stay with the Sinhala families and share with them their living conditions, the tribute they have to pay due to this war and their sufferings, while the Sinhala members were taken to the north to live in the Tamil families to get to know about their living conditions through a concrete life experience. This had not happened for more than two decades and was an unique experience. The impact was very important, because Caritas regularly organised reflection sessions to discuss their experiences and these sharing of experiences were to be later shared with the other members of the community. For example a retired army official in the region of Kurenegala received a Tamil widow in his house, and this lady's husband was killed by his troop and this was a very intense moment of sharing in truth and sincerity; in another case, a young Sinhala

mother lived a few days with a Tamil family in the north in order to understand the ordeal and tribulations of this family, especially the mother who had lost her husband and her eldest son in the war. Such sharing of these moving experiences among the members of the communities was a meaningful way to motivate the members to become agents for peace by refusing violence.

These experiences were later shared during prayer sessions, group meetings and in some cases to dialogue with the local leaders asking them to advocate for Peace. The major challenge for Caritas as a Faith based organisation, was to link social reality, political violence and the value of life, with the faith dimension as the background in a multi-religious context and promote life dialogue.

Other activities under taken were awareness building through art and culture; street play and role play which gathered people both Christians and Buddhists to raise their consciousness on the sufferings of their brothers in the north and motivating them to mobilise. These awareness building sessions, resulted in peace rally and peace gatherings which contributed to challenge the government asking them to take necessary action to promote peace. Memorandum were also given to the local political authorities asking them to work for peace and promote human dignity

In Jaffna, The Centre for Performing Art was created by Fr.Savery, a Tamil priest from Jaffna, with the aim to use art, culture and faith as vectors to promote peace and harmony in the society. This became a mean for sharing the life conditions of the victims with the larger public, motivating them to take up lobby activities with the political leaders. The messages were formulated in such a way that they were accessible to all religious groups. The important point here is that it was undertaken at the national level with a real will to motivate participation at all levels in different parts of Sri Lanka.

Analysis of this program

A quick analysis of this program shows how a Faith Based Organization grappled with the most critical issues facing a religiously fragmented society, through a variety of methodologies. Like minded religious leaders worked together to establish a religious peace track through which the people were motivated to adhere and contribute to peace and

harmony in order to uphold the value of the human person and his dignity common to all religions.

The cases presented here is a real experience of religious communities and leaders joining together to contribute to resolve this conflict that is at least partially rooted in religious sentiments. This is a clear illustration as to how Religions are opportunities to promote peace and harmony through dialogue based on the value of the human person and the offices of the religious leaders and service of the religious institutions are all means for building peace in societies divided on the basis of religion.

In Sri Lanka the traditional diplomacy, specifically the Norwegian intervention, has been particularly limited due to the limited importance given to the religious approach to peacemaking. Religious approaches to peacemaking, do not provide a miraculous solution, yet they can complement secular peacemaking productively. They can play a subtle complimentary role alongside political initiatives for peace. The above case study was meant both to demonstrate the value of religious contributions to peacemaking, and to extract lessons about what is and what is not effective.

Highlights of Religion and FBO as contributors for peace from the above example

- Encourage the respective religious communities to change their behaviour, reduce violence and rehumanize the other.
- Provide emotional, psychological and spiritual support to the people.
- Disseminate idea for peace and mobilize the communities to act.
- Mediation role.
- The religious leaders promote a strong faith-based motivation for peace building.
- Long term involvement and committed action.
- Moral and spiritual authority and leverage

Conclusion

Religious leaders are peace builders and in this sense they can contribute to social change with a deep respect for social justice. Religious identity can be a source for cooperation and a force for peace when individuals and religiously active groups manage to reframe the core issues of the conflict from an existential conflict over land, opportunities and equalities into a dialogue over sharing of resources and ability to live together as different yet diverse traditions. As in the case of Sri Lanka, the issues need to be reframed in such a way that dialogue is seen as a partnership where religious morality can be the basis of a common ethic of peace and reconciliation.

In many of the religions, "peace and harmony" are commonalities along with the issues of justice, peace, reconciliation and forgiveness which are interwoven into the fabric of faith. This will help in creating understanding between people of different faith. In this way religion imparts moral vision, building bridges between warring groups, establishing a lasting peace, social justice, promoting political forgiveness and healing the wounds of history

At a moment when the international community loses its hold on the conflict situation in a country, as in the case of Sri Lanka, then the religious dimension can become one way of taking forward the dialogue. This will avoid the deviance towards unilateral and unjust decisions by the government, which will only contribute to maintain unjust situations and injustice in the society cause of the conflict. Very often this is not taken into account. Integrating the religious dimension will help to achieve a just peace.

The role of the religious organisations is often appreciated in their capacity to motivate their religious communities to work for peace and to promote a situation of sharing for which religion becomes a common denominator. FBO have an important role to play in order to promote a creative collaborative role in the society. This means that they must be in a position to identify what they can offer to promote peace and harmony not only in conflict resolution but also when peace has been achieved or when the hostilities have stopped. This advocates for a symbiosis and synergy between the religious leaders initiatives and the concrete welfare or development work undertaken by the FBO.

The religious dimension to conflict resolution needs three elements which are in interaction: Good leadership which creates commitment for the cause; Technical know-how and up to date technical information; finance and human resources to take the initiatives concretely forward. This will certainly enable the FBO to be the voice of the voiceless, because faith-based reconciliation is based on certain important principles and values of pluralism, inclusion, peacemaking, justice, forgiveness, healing deep wounds, sovereignty and atonement.

Religion contributes to have a keen knowledge of justice, evil and kindness. Through the faith dimension, we can come to an understanding of the "other" as less other, to feeling empathy and sympathy and to walking a path to peace that is surrounded by notions of love, reconciliation and healing. Indeed peace workshops create empathy and understanding between members of fighting groups. Significantly, even if for limited periods of time, intergroup contact can often help reduce prejudice so long as the contact takes place in an environment that encourages mutual respect. This was very evident in the case of the national peace program initiated by Caritas Sri Lanka.

In an international context where religious factors are being politicised and wrongly interpreted to promote violence and conflict situations, the role of religion and the religious leaders must be more and more mobilised by the secular and political forces. This will act as a leverage to mitigate religious tensions and religion based conflicts. The governments must also be open to listen to the religious leaders and integrate their contributions into the democratic process for conflict resolutions.

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