

Mobilizing Religion Against Terrorism

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WITH SICKENING FREQUENCY, WE SEE stories of marketplace bombings and trucks plowing into crowds of pedestrians—acts of violence often accompanied by cries of “*Allahu Akbar*,” or “God is the greatest.” The perpetrators claim that the slaughter of civilians, including women and children, is in the name of God, and they believe that by doing God’s bloody work they will earn their own heavenly reward. Reports of terrorist attacks worldwide and of sectarian fighting in the Middle East show that the religious inspiration for killing is widespread and effective. By contrast, religious insistence on peace is often muted and ineffectual. This must change.

Religious authorities must become a more effective force in countering religiously inspired violence, whether such violence takes the form of terrorist attacks or protracted warfare. They can do this across three fronts: through intrafaith efforts, through interfaith initiatives, and through collaboration with the U.S. State Department in countries where religion tends to be a key catalyst for violent political conflict.

That religious calls for peace and reconciliation seem mute compared to such violence is not for lack of effort. Shaun Casey, founding director of the State Department’s Office of Religion and Global Affairs during the latter half of the Obama administration, has told me that hardly a week goes by without some religious conference or workshop making a pronouncement in support of peace. Famous examples of such gatherings include the Alexandria Declaration of 2002 calling for peace in Israel and Palestine, and the Marrakesh Declaration of 2016 regarding the rights of religious minorities.¹

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Of course, declarations in support of peace, even when made at well-attended conferences, are unable to compete for public attention with gruesome acts of violence. A truck mowing down pedestrians at a Christmas market in Berlin is certain to lead the evening news, while an interfaith conference on peace in the Middle East may not even make the last page of a daily newspaper. The proclamations of religious leaders, when standing alone, can be easily dismissed as the nice sentiments of well-meaning yet ineffectual figures. Kumbaya pronouncements are more sweet than consequential.

Moreover, important points that should command close attention can be lost if they are made as though in passing. For example, the 2002 Alexandria Declaration includes the powerful statement that “killing innocents in the name of God is a desecration of his Holy Name and defames religion in the world,” and it is signed by an impressive list of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders.² However, the condemnation is buried in a statement about the broad subject of peace in Israel and Palestine. No matter how important another subject might be, religiously inspired violence is sufficiently critical to warrant its own focused attention. Finally, as is always true about pronouncements coming out of conferences, the question is: what happens after the ink dries and participants return to their homes? Was the conference a “one-off” event, or will something come of it? If the counter to religiously inspired violence is to be effective, it must be focused, powerful, and persistent, and it must be conducted within faith groups, across faith groups, and in conjunction with political peacemaking efforts.

INTRAFaITH EFFORTS

To observe that pronouncements by religious groups, whether intrafaith or interfaith, tend to vanish into the ether is not to say that they should not be made. Indeed, the counter to the terrorists’ claim that God is on their side is to insist that such violence is the opposite of what religion teaches. Well-informed believers must speak from their faith traditions and articulately connect their theology to their condemnation of violence. They should assert that killing in the name of God is worse than wrong—it is evil. The message must be as direct as that. Bombing a restaurant is evil. Burning down a church is evil. Slaughtering so-called infidels is evil. Religious bodies and their leaders must say so, not just once in a while, but repeatedly. It will be important for faith leaders to practice the way they have been taught to preach: to get to the point that killing in the name of God is evil, and to stay on that point. Certainly, the more publicity such statements receive the better. But the point of making them is not to engage

in a competition for television airtime. It is to dispute the terrorists' claim that their violence is in the service of God.

In an April 2017 speech at Egypt's Al-Azhar University, an intellectual center of Sunni Islam, Pope Francis offered the kind of frankness that is needed from religious leaders.

According to Francis, "Peace alone is holy, and no act of violence can be perpetrated in the

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name of religion or in the name of God."³ It was the sort of direct statement that should be made not sporadically but repeatedly, and by leaders of every faith group.

In this century, the most frequent and lethal acts of religiously inspired terror have been perpetrated by Muslims acting on the belief that they are doing God's will. It may seem reasonable to ask whether our focus should be concentrated solely on violence inspired by Islamist extremism and on the need for Muslim leaders and scholars to speak forcefully against terror. Indeed, combatting Islamic-inspired violence is a pressing need, but for two reasons it is best addressed in company with other faith groups. First, Islamist extremists do not hold a monopoly on religious violence. The systematic murder of six million European Jews by Christian Germans was a twentieth century attempt to destroy a religion and an ethnicity. More recently, Christian militias have killed Muslims in the Central African Republic, and Buddhist terrorists have killed Muslims in Myanmar and Sri Lanka.⁴ Second, demands by outsiders that Muslim leaders alone speak out against religious violence could appear insulting and could produce resentment and defensiveness instead of action. Killing in the name of God is a threat to all faiths, and it would best be combatted by the action of all faiths.

For the religious case against killing in God's name to be powerful, it must be more than an unsupported exhortation. It should be a theological argument led by the most articulate voices of the various faith traditions and grounded in fundamental religious principles. The outlines of the argument are clear. Killing in the name of God violates the Sixth Commandment that we shall not murder.⁵ It violates the Love Commandment that we shall love our neighbors as ourselves.⁶ It violates the just war principle of non-combatant immunity.⁷ It violates mainstream interpretations of Islamic law.⁸ Those who make the argument must admit that instances of violence—sometimes glorified—exist in their own traditions. In the Hebrew Bible, Joshua's army slaughtered every man, woman,

and child in Jericho.⁹ Pope Urban II beseeched crusaders to “destroy that vile race [Muslims] from the lands of our friends.”¹⁰ The righteous insistence that killing in God’s name is evil does not justify self-righteousness.

In confronting religiously inspired violence, religious leaders will be strongly inclined to expand the subject into broader questions about a conflict’s legitimacy and background. Attention to non-combatant immunity can drift into other just war questions, such as whether there can be a just war in an age of nuclear weapons. Discussions about protecting civilians in the Middle East can lead to questions about the root causes of violence. These are subjects deserving of attention, but not at the expense of losing focus on a pressing subject on which faith groups can speak authoritatively: simply put, is killing in the name of God evil, or is it not? If it is evil, faith groups should say so without losing their point by expanding the subject, however tempting that might be.

However focused and powerful statements of religious principle might be, it is almost certain that much will be lost in translation when it comes to practical applications of that principle. We do not always practice what we claim to believe; this can be true even in hierarchical denominations where the linkage between doctrine and practice should be strongest. For example, the Crusades, driven by Urban II’s chilling exhortation to exterminate Muslims, took place roughly six centuries after St. Augustine developed a Christian just war theory.

Most faith groups are either not hierarchical or are only loosely so. In my own Episcopal Church, most members neither know nor care what resolutions are adopted by the denomination’s triennial General Convention, and the few who do know of the resolutions are apt to ignore them. Islam is a nonhierarchical religion, and its believers are much more likely to draw inspiration from the local mosque than from pronouncements made by distant scholars. The challenge, then, is in translation: how to get scholarly pronouncements to be accepted and believed at the congregational and personal levels.

Each faith group will have its own thoughts about how to spread anti-violence messages among its followers. The key will be for each to develop a plan tailored to its own needs. The plan may include the creation of literature, the use of social media, and the mobilization of field workers. Experts on advertising and public relations might be called on for their advice. A substantial fundraising effort, conducted on a global scale, would certainly be necessary to support such an international campaign.

INTERFAITH EFFORTS

Although pronouncements by ecclesiastical authorities usually fall on deaf ears, it is still important to make clear statements that killing innocents is against God's will—that it is evil. Just as individual faith groups should take their own positions against religiously inspired violence, the world's major religions should convene to speak with one voice. While separate positions by particular faith groups would be of little consequence beyond their own members, a clear statement by a broad group of interfaith leaders would reach a larger audience.

This could be accomplished by an interfaith conference on the sole subject of killing in the name of God. The conference should be a well-publicized event, should consist of the most widely known leaders of world religions, and should result in a statement that is clear and strong. As with many denominational statements, it would be important to resist the temptation to express feel-good sentiments, such as “peace is good,” or to expand the scope of the conference to different, but nonetheless important, subjects—such as the horrors of nuclear war. The sole subject should be violence against innocents committed in the name of God.

One can think of several ways to convene such a conference. It could be done by the secretary general of the United Nations or by any number of non-governmental organizations. But because the conference would consist of world religious leaders who speak from the depths of their faith commitments, it would be most convincing if it were initiated from within the community of faith by a religious leader with great convening authority—ideally, for instance, the Pope.

Beyond issuing statements, interfaith leaders could take active roles in trying to resolve the religious components of political conflicts. During the decades-long civil war in Sudan prior to the country's partition in 2011, for example, the causes of fighting between the predominantly Muslim north and the majority-Christian south were not solely religious. The northern-centered government was Islamic, but so were many fighters for the south. The causes of war included ethnicity, oil, and opposition to the government's effort to impose Arab culture on the black Sudanese population. That said, during my time as President George W. Bush's Special Envoy for Peace in Sudan, the conflict included unresolved religious issues that would have to be addressed as part of a peace process. Could Christian churches that had been destroyed or expropriated by the government be restored? How would Sharia law apply to non-Muslims? Even more vexing problems beset the Middle East today: how can Shia and Sunni co-exist? What is the future of Jerusalem?

When I was the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, I proposed that the Security Council create a mediation facility to address the religious components of political disputes. Resolution of international conflicts is the responsibility of the Security Council, but experience in religious matters is sometimes beyond the capacity of the UN. Therefore, I thought that world religious leaders, including the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the

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Sheik of Al-Azhar could designate a panel of expert mediators that would be available to the Security Council and the secretary general to

help disputants work through difficult religious issues. There is an important distinction between mediation and arbitration—an arbitrator can compel the resolution of a dispute, whereas a mediator cannot. Certainly, no outside force could compel religions to change their positions. But a good mediator can bring opposing parties together, work through issues, and hopefully narrow their differences. When differences are based on religion, experts in the field are more likely to be helpful than even skilled diplomats who have no experience in addressing issues of faith.

My idea of creating a mediation service for religious controversies received some support within the UN, notably from the Philippines, and was received politely but coolly by other countries, particularly China. Most interesting was the resistance to the proposal within our own State Department, where the expressed reaction was that we have enough problems on the political front of world affairs without adding the additional and volatile subject of religion.

But suppose that religion is not an unnecessary complication to be avoided when addressing a discretely political issue, and that religion is instead central to and even causal of the problem. Such was the case in the religious wars of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, and more recently in the Catholic/Protestant violence in Northern Ireland. It is the case today in the Middle East and wherever believers kill supposed infidels, claiming that they are doing God's work. In such conflicts, it would be better to address matters head-on with the help of knowledgeable mediators than to pretend that religion is a distracting side issue.

The idea that religious leaders can be helpful in resolving political conflict is not new. Indeed, many religious groups see peacemaking as central to their ministry. Franciscans and others have long been engaged in preventing political

violence in various countries, including Kenya and Burundi. In a message to me, Father Michael Perry, Minister General of the Franciscans, explained the Order's understanding of faith in action: "Religion is not simply about baptism, biblical truths, liturgical rituals, and charitable works. Religious belief and action is also about preventing violence, proposing alternatives to violence, promoting dialogue, collaboration, peace and reconciliation."

The tradition extends beyond the work of the Franciscans; the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy has a long history of working to reduce religious causes of tension in countries including Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and has established an interreligious council in Sudan. The Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic lay organization with a strong ecumenical emphasis, has similarly proved itself to be a respected mediator in places of conflict. It has brought about peace agreements in Mozambique and, recently, in the Central African Republic.¹¹ Such work should be honored and encouraged—its resources should be available to the UN and its efforts actively supported by religious leaders across the globe.

WHERE GOVERNMENT CAN HELP

In general, diplomats are trained to address political rather than religious disputes, and as I learned while at the UN, many foreign policy professionals would prefer to avoid the latter. But while government officials cannot do the work of religion, they can create conditions under which that work can be done.

As President George W. Bush's Special Envoy for Peace in Sudan, I asked Ray Brown, the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires, to organize a meeting of Sudanese religious leaders at the U.S. Embassy in Khartoum. To my mind, the meeting was a disaster: Christians and Muslims agreed on nothing. Christian clergy vehemently detailed how they had been persecuted by the Muslim majority. An Anglican told of his cathedral being tear-gassed during Holy Week. A Catholic said that the government had expropriated church property. The Muslim clergy denied every allegation, claiming that in their country all people were equal and free to practice the religion of their choice. What was most distressing was not the disagreement, but the rage with which the Christians spoke. I had hoped that faithful people of good will might begin finding common ground, but as the meeting progressed, I despaired that this could ever happen.

That evening, Ray Brown hosted a reception at the ambassador's residence that included attendees of the clergy meeting earlier in the day. Separately, each group approached me to express its appreciation for the meeting. Far from

sharing my despair at the contentiousness in the room, they thought that the experience had been excellent. They said that before that day they had never met and exchanged points of view. Of course, a single meeting cannot resolve serious differences, but it can open a dialogue that until that point had been non-existent in Sudan.

The critical part played by the State Department's man in Khartoum, Ray Brown, in facilitating the meeting warrants special attention. Without him, the meeting would not have happened. I wanted to bring together Muslim and Christian leaders, but I had no idea who they were or where to find them. Not only did I not know whom to invite to the meeting, but the invitees also did not know me. An invitation from me would have been out of the blue, and may not have drawn a response. A mysterious outsider cannot parachute into a country and hope to accomplish much, nor can the outsider provide follow-up when his visit ends. The embassy personnel present on the ground may be able to sustain a process and, where appropriate, suggest bringing in a mediator.

For embassy personnel to be a useful resource in addressing the religious components of political disputes, they should be alert to the issues and, most importantly, be supported by the State Department when they engage religious leaders. The top people in our embassies are Foreign Service officers, and their careers depend on the approval of their superiors. The messages and overall level of support that State Department leadership sends to embassies are thus highly influential.

In 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry created the Office of Religion and Global Affairs within the State Department. Among its responsibilities is the kind of engagement with religious leaders that Ray Brown brought about in Sudan. The office director position is currently vacant, and budget cuts proposed by the Trump administration leave the future of the office uncertain.¹² Because religion is the cause of much violence, and because our embassies are outposts for religious engagement, a strong role for the Office of Religion and Global Affairs is essential.

Religious violence continues to plague the Middle East and much of the broader world. Against this background, it is critical for religion to become more effective in combating the violence committed in its name. Within denominations and through interfaith initiatives, religious bodies can take clear positions that killing in the name of God is evil; they can disseminate that message on the local level; and they can mediate religious causes of conflict. The U.S. government cannot do the work of religious leaders, but through the State Department and engagement at the embassy level, it can facilitate that work. 

NOTES

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7. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012).
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12. For a summary of the status of the Office of Religion and Global Affairs, see: Peter Mandaville, "The Future of Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy Under Trump," Brookings Institution, March 7, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-future-of-religion-and-u-s-foreign-policy-under-trump/>.