



On the relationship between religious identity, religious peacebuilding, civil conflict, and civil peace

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Abstract

This paper draws on the extensive literature on religion, conflict and peace to challenge three observed common assumptions about the relationship between religious identity and religious peacebuilders or peacebuilding on the one hand, and civil conflict and peace on the other. Highlighting the broadness within the dynamics of civil peace and conflict as demonstrated by previous studies, it argues that both religious identity as a cause or exacerbator of conflict and violence, and faith-based actors and actions as causes of peace, are only parts of the independent variables which could produce conflict and peace, depending on the situation concerned. Consequently, it advises local religious peacebuilders against the tendency to not recognise the compound-ness that typically characterised interreligious relationships in multicultural societies, and the tendency to frame the encounters between peoples in those societies in religious terms hurriedly.

Keywords: religious identity, civil conflict and peace, religious peacebuilding, interreligious relations, Nigeria and Africa

1. Introduction

Part of what has motivated this paper is the observed tendency to quickly adopt the terms “religious conflict”, “religious violence”, “interreligious violence”, or even “Christian-Muslim conflict”, for conflicts which, even though they have (a) religious component(s), may be much broader than what they have been reduced to. They may be broader in the motivation, in the factors defining their occurrence, or even in the sense that the religious components are not the principal determinants of the conflicts even though they may seem to be easy to identify amidst the constellation. The second motivating observation is what appears to be the over-valuing of the role of religious peacebuilding (and related religious peace-works such as interreligious dialogue) in the causation of peace in religiously diverse societies.

Actually, studies have argued that due to the irrationality of faith, its ability to unite and differentiate people, its divisiveness, its exclusive claims to eternal truth, its absoluteness, the pro-violence ethical components of its sacred texts, its eschatological views, its missionary nature and so on, religion could cause or influence conflicts, as an identity and a community, the object of a dispute, a political tool and a tool for mobilisation, a worldview and ideology, an ethical system, an element of grievances, and as a component of nationalism. These have been discussed by scholars who have explored the conflict-causing components of religions, including Appleby (2000) ^[1], Juergensmeyer (2000 & 2008) ^[29, 30], Marty (2000) ^[36], Kimball (2002) ^[32], Selengut (2003) ^[40], Gopin (2000) ^[19], Lefebure (2000) ^[34], Huntington (2002) ^[28] and Cavanaugh (2009) ^[8]. What this paper tries to do, therefore, is not to argue that all civil conflicts are entirely secular, or that religious identity cannot heavily influence intrastate conflicts, as studies have showed that it could. Rather, it advises against the tendency to not recognise the compound-ness that typically characterises interreligious relationships in multicultural societies, and the tendency to frame the

encounters between peoples in religious terms hurriedly, whether conflictual or peaceful. In what follows, with specific interest in Christian-Muslim relations, I identify two propositions about the relations between religious identity and civil conflict, and one about religious peacebuilders and civil peace, three of which serve as hypotheses to be tested or verified, and then show why they are simplistic and not exactly true, in order to encourage a broader viewpoint that appreciates the multiple variables which could shape the relationship between the phenomena in any given setting.

2. Themes and Discussions

2.1 Being Christian, or Muslim, or having such a religious identity, necessarily means that the concerned person's thoughts and decisions, particularly with regards to peace and violence toward other humans, are influenced or even determined by that religious identity

This is not exactly true for a number of reasons. For example, increasingly, the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging, and the distinctions between spirituality and religiousness, have received academic attention. In the midst of globalisation, intrastate and international migration, people are encountering each other and their differences, and national and religious boundaries are being broken. Economic intra-country migration, religious conversions (whether partial or full), and secularisation have continued to redefine the meaning of religious belonging in such a way that Person A's identification as a Christian may not mean at all that the elements of Christian beliefs are hugely important in their everyday life, thoughts and decisions, or that they may not have strong support and affiliation to non-Christian movements, or that they are actually Christians. The same applies to contemporary Islam and other religions which Christians may be encountering. A team which studied the categories of Muslims in North Central Nigeria identified a group of “independents,” which includes those Muslims who are just Sunni Muslims, not Sufi or anti-Sufi, and are happy to associate with any other Muslim who

wants to be associated with, including Shiites, Ahmadis or any other peaceful category (Ostien, 2012:21) ^[37]. But this is not the only reason why a person's particular religious identity does not always determine their actions.

For any typical believer, like most or all human beings, the belief system combines with other elements to constitute and define their identity (and choices and actions). As constructors of individuals' identities, the family, financial status, psychological feature, sex, and experiences (good and harmful) are among the factors that also shape human decisions regarding others, and regarding peace and violence. A detailed study of these relationships will of course amount to volumes, as there are actually real connections between them and people's attitudes towards others and their environment generally, and also with variations according to the individuals concerned.

So, the question is, why should the religious component of a person's identity be placed above all of the other components? The nonreligious aspects could be as relevant or even more important in the construction of thoughts and in decision-making. How do we know how important Islam is to an attacker's decision to attack their Christian neighbours, and how can the relevance of this cause be measured in comparison to other possible causes? Are the causes even separable in such a way that there would be more religious than secular reasons for the choice or action? What about factors external to the individual? These are important questions to be asked when there may be a reason for religious peace actors to think that a person's or groups' decision to carry arms against a religiously different other was primarily determined by religious identity differences.

2.2 In religiously heterogeneous societies, for example where Christians have a Muslim majority as their neighbour (as in [parts of] Nigeria), religion always matters in the violent conflicts that involve people with different religious identities, like Christians and Muslims

This is also not the case. When actually do conflicts and violence emerge from differences in religious identity? A comprehensive response to this, of course, would require more space, as there are multiple external factors which condition the potency of identity differences as a source of group conflict, but the major point to be affirmed is that difference in religious identity does not always lead to conflicts and violence. If there is any idea that peace and conflict experts may all agree with, it is that transculturally and transhistorically, violent conflicts result from multiple factors, and even where there is a primary independent variable, a number of forces combine to shape the events. The extensive literature on this subject shows that important factors in the causation and nature of violent civil conflicts since the second half of the 20th century include: ethnic attachments and ancient hatreds (Blimes:2006; Fujii, 2009:5) ^[5, 15]; ethnic differences and power struggles (Horowitz:2014 & 1985) ^[26, 27]; natural resources, greed, and poverty- which reduces opportunity costs for rebellion and causes poor government capability (Collier & Hoeffler:2004) ^[9]; social identity (Tajfel & Turner:1986; Seoul:1999) ^[44, 41]; elites' manipulation of identities for political and personal interests; grievances, perceptions, preferences and opportunities (Hirshleifer:1995 & 2001) ^[24, 25]; globalisation and demands for economic liberalisation which have weakened some states' capacities to sustain proper resource distribution (Crawford & Lipschutz:1998)

^[11]; identity-based discrimination and socio-economic and/or political deprivation (Gurr:1970, 1993 & 2000; Crawford: 1998) ^[21, 22, 23, 10]; emotions such as hatred and anger (against a given person or group), pride (in one's culture, nation or race), fear and/or resentment (of a person or group) (Suny, 2004; Kaufman, 2001) ^[44, 31]; the presence of conditions which favour insurgency, including political instability, rough terrain, the availability of foreign support and cross-border base camps, large populations, and poverty, which produces a weak central government (Fearon & Laitin, 2003) ^[14]; nationalism, regime type and repression, access to contrabands, historical legacies, and conflict contagion.

It has been understood as well that, indeed, "each conflict [or act of violence] contains an element of uniqueness – features that are impossible to operationalize and measure across space and time" (Buhaug & Rød, 2006:317) ^[7]. The relevance, influence or intensity of these factors and others not mentioned vary across socio-geographical contexts and is partly determined by the type of intra-country conflict concerned, which is why contextualisation matters hugely for the effectiveness of peace actions. Intracountry violence or conflicts occur in different forms, which in modern categorisation, include military coups, civil wars (which could be separatist, nationalistic, territorial or resource-based), genocide or ethnic/group cleansing, insurgency/rural guerrilla warfare, communal clashes, and terrorism. The issues that often matter in each of these types and the actors involved also vary. Consequently, understanding their causes would involve different levels of analysis: individuals, groups, organisations, the state and even the international system. For example, as it is individuals who make up groups, similarities may be drawn in the motivational processes shaping group violence (where a group of persons carry out an attack), and lone violence (where an individual does, for example, Suicide Terrorism [Piven:2008]) ^[38]; and still, there is a distinction between them and the operational forces in them vary. Besides, a proper understanding of group action requires an understanding of the in-group individual actors' conditions, as they may differ in motivations despite the presence of shared group interests and values. "Group conflict," as Gopin (2002:5-6) ^[20] rightly observes, "is constituted by a series of unique human beings who evolve, for one reason or another, into a complex interaction of adversarial relationships."

To manage and understand these complex explanations, a distinction between the necessary conditions and sufficient conditions for war, violence or conflict has been suggested by some. Whereas the former include those conditions which must be present or things which must exist before there can be war or conflict, the latter category includes "phenomena which, if present, enable us to know [that] war will break out" (Williams, 2016:7) ^[45]. But even establishing what falls into these categories is itself not simple. Similarly, distinctions could be made between proximate and underlying causes, or according to Paul D. Williams, "underlying or permissive factors, and catalytic or trigger factors" (Williams, 2016:7) ^[45]. Whereas this may seem more useful, it is not without difficulties either, as the boundaries between proximate and underlying causes may not always be clear, as well as the relevance of the causes so classified in the violence or conflict motivation process. This is the broadness within the conflict motivation process

which peace theory has revealed and which should be acknowledged by religious peacebuilders. In summary, religious identity hardly acts alone as an independent variable in conflict motivation.

2.3 Faith-based peace actions are almost always necessary for the safeguarding of peace in multi-religious societies, that is societies where religious identity, for example, Christian and Muslim belonging, is a major socio-political factor

Part of the background of this paper is the recognition that faith-based peacebuilders and peacebuilding, particularly Christian and Islamic peace actors and agency, are able to promote civil peace in multireligious societies. This is hardly doubtable, as it is easy to find evidence across African communities and cities. Cultures and religions have assets which seem to enable or promote intrastate and intra-communal peace. The tangible religious assets include places of worship where adherents converge, those individuals who are regarded as religious leaders and who command the respect of adherents, the sacred texts which include pro-peace ethical guides for believers, and the organisations operating under the management of the religious groups, including peacebuilding bodies. The intangible ones, on the other hand, include all the values and norms which they offer for “God’s creation” and which in one way or the other could promote a peaceful and secure society if adopted, such as love, compassion, mutual respect, empathy, forgiveness, the sacrosanctity of human life, et cetera. These are clear.

However, the value of religious or faith-based peacebuilding in the process of safeguarding interreligious peace is often exaggerated, and seemingly places undue attention on the religious while removing it from the other important secular factors, especially where the area concerned is religiously diverse. As the previous sections have discussed the factors causing and shaping civil conflicts and violence, I shall turn to the multiple non-religious factors which produce or influence intrastate peace, and draw on the revelations of multidisciplinary scholarship to highlight the broadness that surrounds the presence or absence of peace in societies, and therefore show in the process that faith-based peace actors and actions are only one out of many important factors in the network of peace production, although partly depending on the type of area concerned.

Even as these causal variables may vary across different societies, the process of peace causation and sustenance involves, among other things: (1) the creation and sustenance of an environment that makes (direct) violence and armed conflicts unlikely, (2) the prevention of violent attacks and conflicts when they are about to occur (including also the management and de-escalation of conflicts to prevent the outbreak of violence), and (3) the resolution of these violent conflicts when they occur. All or most of these could be classified as “curative and preventive” therapies for peace (Galtung, 1996:2) ^[16]. It is evident that even in relatively peaceful societies, individuals and groups have conflicts, but they often do not erupt into armed clashes and direct violence. This could result, for example, from a resolution of these conflicts through non-violent means by the parties in the conflicts or intervening actors, for one reason or another, an example being because the cost of involving in destructive violence will be high for the parties, thereby making peace more attractive. It could

also happen if the environment is just not “favourable” to violence, perhaps because of an existing violence-inhibiting policing system, or because the tools required for the attacks are not accessible.

In the process of intrastate peace-generation or sustenance, intra-country and perhaps international politics seem to occupy a central position. As for domestic politics in non-homogeneous societies, typical determining factors may include power and resource-sharing systems, regime type, the quality of governance, nationalism, state policies and actions, and state-society relations, which affects citizens’ loyalty to the state. How do these work? One, for example, some fiscal and power-sharing formulas have been described as helpful for the promotion of peace and stability in ethnoculturally or religiously diverse societies. Federalism, which involves the decentralisation of governance and division of powers from the top and centre to regional and subnational governments and institutions, has been regarded as “peace-preserving” by some scholars (Bakke & Wibbels, 2006:2) ^[2]. For one of the fathers of Peace Studies, Johan Galtung, a democratic system of government produces intrastate peace if it works well, because it will, “in principle, produce a relatively content population that, on the average and over time, gets much of its wishes satisfied, within the limits of the feasible” (Galtung, 1996:4) ^[16]. Ironically, however, whereas “it is widely accepted that democracies are less conflict-prone,” (Gartzke, 2007:166) ^[17] a dictatorship may be able to sustain some level of “peace”, at least for a while, due to the authoritarian control it may wield on the society. Besides, democracies have different levels of internal peace, and democracy seems not to be a complete intrastate peace-formula. Two, the consequences of poor governance typically include gross youth unemployment, lack of social services, corrupt judiciary and police, poor infrastructure, et cetera, all or some of which could make armed conflict, whether between religious groups or not, more likely. Inseparable from the quality of governance is the type of policies a government pursues. On them does the citizens’ loyalty to the state partly depend. Three, some aspects of nationalism may trigger rebellion against the legitimate state authority, especially when there is an enabling environment for it. A deeper examination of the relationship between different and interconnected components of politics and peace would reveal more.

Using Timor-Leste as a case study, Kingsbury (2010) ^[33] has attempted to demonstrate that there is a relationship between (1) the level of peace in a society and (2) the level of the society’s development and state capacity. Where there is a low state capacity, involving, for example, a weak judicial system and poor policing, the state will likely have a low legitimacy, which manifests in the society as lack of respect for or a failure of the rule of law. This situation could generate or promote lawlessness and anti-state activity, civil violence and conflicts. For example, with over 40 mainly youth deaths occurring within London as a result of violent attacks between January and April 2018 in different parts of the region, police cuts under the Conservative government was alleged by some analysts as possibly having some effects on the rise in serious violent crime in 2018 (BBC News, 6 & 9 April 2018) ^[3-4]. Obviously, part of how policing deters violence is through intelligence gathering and the cooperation of the police with locals, in order to identify and prevent or foil impending

attacks, or monitor and deescalate ongoing conflicts before they metamorphose into public violence. Additionally, their ability to discover and arrest offenders, coupled with the ability of the judiciary to subsequently carry out prompt and proper prosecution, may deter offences. It seems to be harder and less attractive to break the law in societies where it is widely known that doing so have consequences which offenders can hardly evade, than in settings where there are inefficient and weak policing and judicial systems. It must be added, however, that this is also conditioned by other factors which enable or inhibit intrastate law and order.

If poverty or a low level of development is one of the conditions which favour violence (cf Fearon & Laitin:2003; Collier & Hoeffler:2004; Kingsbury:2010; Mack:2005) ^[14, 9, 33, 35], then its relative absence might be a source of peace as well. Poverty is identified as a cause of conflict for more than one reason. One, governmental poverty produces weak states- states with low capacity- which consequently are unable to sustain key state institutions and adequately carry out functions that require the capital that is unavailable, an example being the provision and sustenance of standard security-providing institutions. It has been suggested that as they manifest the rule of law, “police forces, prisons, the court system and instruments to protect human rights are critical to the establishment, maintenance and development of any peaceful and stable society” (Kingsbury, 2010:372) ^[33]. Two, poverty among the citizens could create a population which is vulnerable to means to money or benefits-acquisition that are anti-state or peace-inhibiting. For example, armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, and fraud. Additionally, it seems that among other factors, such as state repression, poverty helps rebels to expand their membership, for example when the financial benefits of the membership are attractive to the poor potential joiner. Three, it could make the competition for scarce resources more intense.

For multicultural societies and modern cities where people from different cultures and parts of the globe are encountering each other, an approach to ethnic, cultural and religious diversity that is pluralistic is often suggested as a means to peace. This orientation is believed to be more peace-promoting than those of the exclusivist and inclusivist, the latter being a middle-position. As opposed to an exclusivist who insists that their belief system represents or offers the only true revelation from God and right understanding and interpretation of reality, the pluralist recognises the validity of the different cultures and belief systems and is therefore not a bigot and an intolerant person. They believe that “God is our way of speaking of a Reality that cannot be encompassed by any one religious tradition including our own” (Eck, 1993:169) ^[13]. It is therefore assumed that in culturally heterogeneous societies where relative intercultural and interreligious peace exists, the religious attitude of some or most of the residents towards the outsider would most likely be a pluralistic one that is open to interfaith dialogue and relationships. The “outsider” could be regarded as “a category encompassing the ‘insufficiently orthodox’ coreligionist, the apostate, the adherent of a ‘false religion,’ the indifferent, the agnostic, and the nonbeliever” (Appleby, 2000:14) ^[1]. These are examples of major causes of peace in religiously diverse settings.

For present-day peaceful societies, all these still require verification and testing. Besides, it seems that none of these

is a one-size-fits-all peace-producing factor or an exclusively adequate formula for peace in culturally heterogeneous societies, and the specific features of different societies influence their relevance across various contexts. With a Large-N analysis of political protests and violence occurring in twenty-two federal states between 1978 and 2000, Bakke and Wibbels (2006) ^[2], have attempted to show that rather than being unconditionally peace-preserving in every federal system, it is how much fiscal and political federal institutions respond to the characteristics of the societies in and for which they operate, for example, their ethnic composition and level of wealth, that determines the level of peace they produce. Moreover, federal designs, including the levels of government, may differ across federal systems, each having different degrees of success and concomitant peace. The regional autonomy and high political and fiscal decentralisation that some federal designs involve, for example, could boost or contribute to the emergence of rebel or separatist nationalist movements at regional or state levels within the federal system. It might be, for instance, that the confederal constitutional and governmental structure of pre-Biafra Civil War Nigeria might have had an aggravating effect on the conflict between the Eastern and the central governments in 1966 and 1967, but this has yet to be investigated. A similar argument has been made about rebels in Colombia and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia (Roeder:1991; Brunce:1999; Suny:1993; Eaton:2005) ^[39, 6, 42, 12].

What this section does is to describe the broadness within the process of peace generation in religiously and culturally heterogeneous societies, to support the paper’s claim that it is simplism to think, and act on the basis of the thought, that faith-based peace actors and actions are almost always important for the safeguarding of peace in African societies where religious identity is a major factor in the public sphere. Such thinking removes attention from the other critical determinants of peace level even in religiously diverse areas. With the appreciation of the above-described factors and those not mentioned due to limited space, local Christian and Islamic peace actors in Nigeria and Africa would be more open to collaboration with non-religious actors and to the diversification of their own peace actions.

3. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to challenge three observed assumptions about the relationship between religious identity and religious peacebuilders, on the one hand, and intrastate conflict and peace, on the other, for the purpose of improving the practice of religious peacebuilding in areas where religion-related group conflicts have occurred or are present. For example, with the growth in the number of local religious peace builders in societies where Christians and Muslims constitute the two major religious groups, and the observation that simplistic views about the relationship between religion, civil conflict, and civil peace could hinder the effectiveness of their peace actions, it is important to draw on the large amount of study on those phenomena to provide a small-sized response to the observation, which could be easily accessed by these peace actors. It is expected that this paper will serve as an eye-opener or reminder to the readers on the broadness which surrounds peace and conflict within religiously diverse settings, and that both religious identity as a cause or exacerbator of conflict, and faith-

based actors and actions as promoters of peace, are only parts of the contributing variables, some of which may be more important than the religion-related ones in certain situations. This paper suggests that rather than hurriedly looking to classify conflicts and violence as religious or not and regarding religious identity as a necessary component of the situation concerned, religious peacebuilders should thoughtfully consider the different factors that shape interreligious encounters, and then define their responses based on this critical approach.

4. References

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