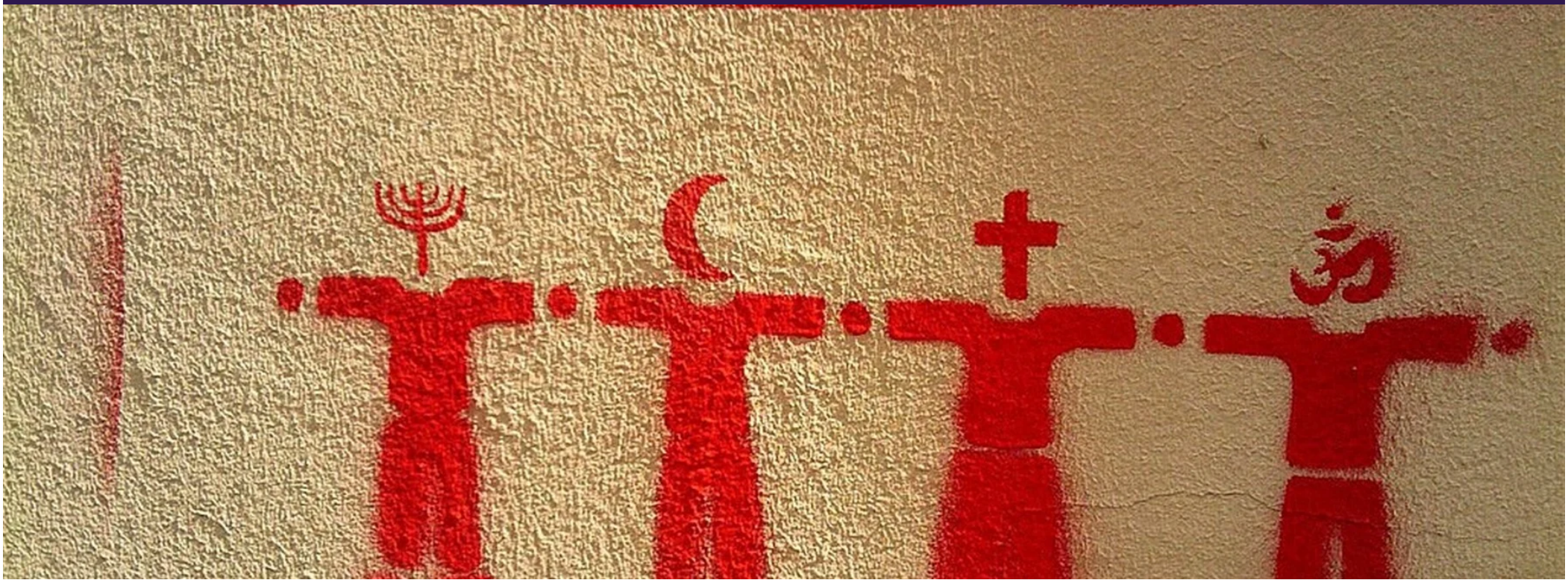

Religion, Civil War and Peace

Mehmet Gurses

23 January 2017

Under what conditions can religion play a constructive role in peacebuilding and what are the obstacles to this process?

Author's note: *In this article, I use the terms "war" and "civil war" interchangeably. They refer to a contested armed incompatibility involving a government and a non-state actor that generates at least 25 battle-related fatalities annually. Whereas ethnic civil wars refer to those armed conflicts that include ethnic challengers that are at odds with the identity of a state, seek to redefine or divide the state itself, or strive for major changes in their relationship with the state (see Sambanis 2001).*

Religion, war, and peace are among the "thickest" and multifaceted concepts. Thus, tackling the relationship between them is a daunting task and calls for a greater scrutiny.

A great deal of existing scholarship on civil war, particularly those statistically examining the effects of various social, economic, and political factors on war dynamics, almost exclusively refer to the term "peace" in the negative sense, i.e., the absence of violence. This "narrow" approach to peace is in part driven by its simplicity that allows for large-n cross-national comparison. While useful in reaching generalizable findings, such an approach could potentially mask the underlying causes of war, preventing us from addressing the root causes of conflict eruption.

Here I refer to peace in the positive sense, or the absence of "structural violence" that calls for going beyond the mere absence of physical violence and points toward "social justice" (see Galtung 1969). This positive or "quality

Latest

An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme

Chances for Peace in the Third Decade

A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham

A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind

Most read

The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities

Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug

peace," in the words of Peter Wallensteen, requires the creation of postwar conditions that not only prevent countries from relapsing back into another episode of violence but also allows for security and dignity for the members of the war-torn society.

How does religion help or hinder the creation of such circumstances? Under what conditions can religion as a powerful, potent force help reinforce and strengthen peace? What are the obstacles to religion playing such a constructive role in peacebuilding?

A complicated relationship

A number of scholars have identified religion to be the cause of deadlier, longer, and more intractable civil wars (see Svensson 2007; Fox, James, and Li 2009; Basedau et al. 2011). Yet others have drawn attention to "the seeds of tolerance, justice, compassion, and peace" in religious traditions and argued that religion can help bring about peace and democracy (Johansen 1997, 53; see also Appleby 2000; Driessen 2010). Religion, as Philpott states, "devastates not only New York skyscrapers but also authoritarian regimes; it constructs not only bellicose communal identities but also democratic civil society." Thus, this group of scholars concludes that religion can also be used in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes (see Abu-Nimer 2001; Alger 2002).

These contradictory findings stem from a number of sources. First and foremost, the literature on the relationship between war, peace, and religion often conceptualizes and measures these concepts from different points of view. In addition to the narrow conceptualization of peace noted above, the question of what entails a civil war and how it should be operationalized has

Cartels

ORG's Vision

Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

caused much controversy. While scholars often agree on what a civil war *is*, the casualty threshold used to mark the onset of a civil war, ranging from 25 to 1,000 annual battle-related deaths, has resulted in a number of civil war datasets on which most of empirical findings are based, and that are not always comparable.

Second, the peacebuilding capacity of religion is applied to cases that are not necessarily analogous. For example, as Nichols argues, religious actors played a positive role in bringing about peace in the conflict between the Sandinistas and East Coast Indians of Nicaragua in the late 1980s through helping to develop a common language of conciliation and infusing Christian values into the negotiating process. Appleby, drawing on the case of Northern Ireland, maintains that religious leaders can gradually "saturate" the society by transforming the conflict environment and issues, condemn violence, and thus foster cross-communal cooperation. However, Appleby warns that such an outcome requires special situations characterized by a strong civil society and democratic tradition as well as assistance from the international community. Partly because of the lack of agreement on the casualty threshold noted above, current literature on civil war often treats the case of the Sandinistas vs. East Coast Indians within the broader conflict between Nicaragua under the Sandinistas and Contras, making it a somewhat "marginal" case. Whereas, the Northern Ireland conflict, as Appleby aptly warns, is characterized by some unique characteristics that are that are rarely present in many war-torn countries.

Third, existing literature is still in the process of identifying the complex and complicated causal mechanisms between religion and peacebuilding. This is in part due to the ambivalent, contextual nature of religion. Religion and politics

are connected in complicated ways that make it nearly impossible to disentangle one from another. A religious tradition as Armstrong summarizes is "never a single, unchanging essence that impels people to act in a uniform way." Instead, religions and religious interpretations "are susceptible to different readings in different contexts and become entangled in or influenced by newer sociopolitical context". In the context of civil war, religion often becomes a part of the political arsenal to sustain the fight. As religion turns into another instrument of legitimation and mobilization in the hands of political actors it loses its power as a peacemaker.

Finally, and relatedly, the politicization of religion is most prevalent in ethnic civil wars in which fighters are lined up along identity lines and rebels are by and large secessionist in goals or desires. Therefore, the effect of religion on conflict processes in a case like Chechnya where Muslim Chechens fought destructive civil wars against Russia dominated by Orthodox Christians needs to be distinguished from the role religion plays in ethnic conflicts that involve groups hailing from the same faith, as in the case of Kurds vs. Turkey. While civil war between groups hailing from different faiths can contribute to identity formation in such a way that fuels the violence, war between co-religionists does not necessarily help foster peace. Instead, religion as the common denominator is often subsumed to ethnic, national identities and interests. The war realities often constrain, if not shape, religion, rendering religion an ineffective peacemaker (Gurses 2015).

Religion and ethnic civil war

Nicolas Rost and I have shown that due mainly to this "politicization of religion," the hypothesized peacemaker role of religion does not hold against a global sample of ethnic civil wars. War and country characteristics, rather than shared

religion, are better predictors of peace duration after ethnic civil wars. While the peace duration in our study refers to the absence of violence, in further support of studies that have pointed to discriminatory state policies as the culprit behind ethnic civil war onset and recurrence (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010; Gurses and Rost 2013), we found that the level of discrimination faced by members of ethnic groups that rebelled against their government after the end of the war is the most robust predictor of peace duration. Thus, state policies that address the demands of aggrieved minorities and re-adjust their relationship with the state that could make them a part of the system are more likely to help build sustainable peace. Resorting to a shared religion to help reconcile warring groups without addressing the root causes of conflict is more rhetoric than reality.

Observations

- There is a need to clarify the terms in order to delineate the religion-peacebuilding nexus. The terms war, religion, and peace are multidimensional and hence defy reaching a consensus on the exact nature of religion's relationship with peacebuilding. Avoiding law-like, general explanations is more likely to be fruitful. Just as religion's role in identity formation varies, so does the role it plays in conflict onset, duration, outcome, as well as building peace in postwar environments.
- The role religion plays in peacebuilding should be qualified. Religion in conflicts fought over government, also known as ideological civil wars, could take on a dramatically different role than in conflicts involving competing identities which are often secessionist in nature. While it is much easier for religious actors to mediate between warring groups that share the same ethnicity, speak the same language, and believe in the same "God," their

role is likely to be diminished, tarnished by political considerations in situations where protagonists use religion to either distinguish themselves as a group from one another (e.g., Palestinians vs. Israel) or religion as a common denominator ceases to be a marker that separates members of warring groups (e.g., Acehnese vs. Indonesia, 1976-2005; Kurds vs. Turkey, 1984-Ongoing). Thus sharing the same faith in the context of such ethnic civil wars often results in relegating religion to a secondary role as the war dynamics help bring ethnic identities front and center.

- Sustainable peace requires addressing structural causes of violence. Merely stressing shared faith as a solution to conflict without undertaking reforms that can re-adjust the warring groups' relationship with the state is not likely to be effective.

Conclusion

Religion is a potent force and can serve as a peacemaker. Its role, however, is contingent upon characteristics of the civil war and the nation in question. It is worthwhile to note that "ethnic conflict remains one of the prevailing challenges to international security in our time" and "conflicts that in some way involve an ethnic dimension can be found across each of the world's continents". Furthermore, as Fox notes, of 268 politically active ethnic minorities worldwide for the 1990-1995 period, 163 (61%) are not religiously distinct from the dominant group. Gurses and Rost, building on datasets drawn from two different sources, find that in about half of the ethnic civil wars that started and ended between 1950 and 2006 ethnic rebels shared the same religion as the governing ethnic group. Thus, it is essential to differentiate such cases in which religion is likely to be politicized and used as an instrument of

legitimation and mobilization than those cases involving groups hailing from the same ethnicity, culture, and faith.

Still, religion can serve as a peacemaker by injecting “meaning” and repair social ties that were destroyed during the war. Ideally a change of mind should coincide with a change of heart in order to reach positive or “quality” peace. However, given the discriminatory state policies toward ethno-national minorities that account for armed conflict, concrete measures, a change of mind, should precede a change of heart to build and sustain the peace in the aftermath of seemingly intractable ethnic civil wars. Sustainable peace is a dignified peace. Religion can help bring about sustainable peace only after ethnic minorities’ relations with the state are re-adjusted to a degree that minority groups feel secure and certain of their future.

Photo credit (edited): murdelta/Flickr.

Mehmet Gurses is an associate professor of Political Science at Florida Atlantic University. He received his B.A. degree in political science and international relations from Marmara University in Istanbul, Turkey, and his doctorate from University of North Texas. His research interests include democracy and democratization, ethnic and religious conflict, post-civil war peace building, post-civil war democratization, Kurdish politics, and the emergence and evolution of the Islamist parties in the Middle East. His publications have appeared in International Interactions, Social Science Quarterly, Civil Wars, Defense and Peace Economics, Democratization, Party Politics, International Journal of Human Rights, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, Conflict Management and Peace Science, and Political Research Quarterly.

Share this page

Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

Follow us

Registered with FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

Useful links

Login
Contact us
Sitemap
Accessibility
Terms & Conditions
Privacy policy