

# **Violence and Peace: Beyond Preaching and Chanting**

A Summary of the Fifth Memorial Wilhem A Visser't Hooft Consultation  
The Ecumenical Institute, Chateau de Bossey  
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## **Framework**

It is a fact that in many instances religions are involved in conflict and violence. Constructing a world of peace is a challenge to all religions. While they uphold the cause of peace, religions are also involved in situations of violent confrontation. A logical starting point for the consultation was to reflect on the paradoxical function of religion in relation to matters of peace and violence.

Opening presentations by Dr Konrad Raiser and Imam A Rashied Omar on the topic of religion and violence were followed by intensive discussions. Regional case studies were examined. The focus then turned to a discussion on the logic of violence; the use, misuse and abuse of power; the search for justice; and religious identity in pluralistic societies. The consultation required participants to personally and collectively think through key issues in relation to religions and violence.

The dynamics of the consultation were impressive. Forty consultants gathered at the Ecumenical Institute outside Geneva, Switzerland. There were Christians (Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic), Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists; from Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, North and South America. The interpersonal exchange and respect created and sustained for that week was a stunning model of what could be achieved.

At the outset, Dr Konrad Raiser, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, raised several issues. Not only do we need to reflect about religion and violence, the events of 11 September suddenly thrust religions into the centre of global politics. There are increasing appeals to religious communities and their leaders for public initiatives of moderation, moral orientation and reconciliation. We need to confront the ambiguous relationship of religion and violence. There can be no authentic affirmation of peace within any religious tradition without facing up to the challenge of violence in human community life. Within the Christian perspective, Jesus refused to meet violence with violence. Rather, he sought to transform confrontation and enmity into a relationship of communication and mutuality. When Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, war and violence were used to maintain the unity of the church and the empire. The traces of this unholy alliance of religion and violence are still with us in the crusading language of the "war on terrorism" and the justification for the use of war and violence to maintain order and justice. The task is to unmask the logic and dynamic of violence and its dehumanizing and destructive

consequences. Reiser went so far as to suggest that religious communities and their leaders have no grounds to provide any moral or ethical legitimation for the use of violence in response to conflict, even in the pursuit of political, economic, cultural or religious ends. Religions could take the lead by making a critical assessment of their own involvement in the emergence of a culture of violence.

Imam Rashied Omar identified a number of themes in his opening presentation. Contemporary world events invite a reassessment of conventional understandings of the relationship between religion and violence, in particular the manner in which religion is implicated in violence. Conventional academic perspectives regard religion as having a predilection for violence. However, apologists for religion deny that religion has anything to do with violence. There are elements of truth in both assertions. It is important to acknowledge that all our sacred texts provide opportunities for justifying violence. The challenge is to find authentic ways of dealing constructively with these texts, and with any symbols and rituals that appear to legitimate violence. The analysis is complex, for religion does not spawn violence independent of predisposing social, economic and political conditions, including the aggressive agendas of many political leaders.

He also identified key theoretical concerns in the post-Cold War literature on religion and violence. The relationship between religion and ethnicity in a large number of recent conflicts has led to them being labeled ethno-religious, with a deadly alliance between religious extremism, ethnicity and ultra-nationalism. Violence is usually seen as illegitimate force, or force gone wrong. That is why we hear more of religious terrorism than state terror. In defining terrorism, it is the powerful who determine who is a terrorist and who is not, and then ensure that it works in their favour.

Overcoming religious violence requires the development of theologies of religious pluralism whereby truth is not seen to be the exclusive possession of any one religion, and that there may be many different but equally valid ways of understanding the divine. Inter-religious dialogue and solidarity will facilitate transformation and contribute to the development of theologies of religious pluralism and tolerance. The special contribution religion can bring to existing conflict strategies is through models of conflict transformation which emphasize human rights, justice and building relationships of trust. Inter-religious global action campaigns could be initiated, along the lines of support for the formation of an International Criminal Court and the Jubilee 2000 campaign for the cancellation of the debt of severely impoverished nations. Others commented that we need to recall our history, both good and bad. Religion has proved to be oppressive at specific times. However, it is not the essence of religion that has been oppressive, but its use and misuse in order to gain power or remain powerful. Religion and power have constituted an unholy alliance. Has religion been misused in different traditions in order to legitimize violence?

If religion is to be a moral conscience, then it must speak with one voice on the subject of violence. Religions must not only speak together, they must also act together in responsibility, love and justice. Religions have a good deal in common. Talking about these things can contribute to peace. In inter-religious conversation we can address the linkage between

religion, human psychology and politics. Focussing on theological issues alone is insufficient.

## **Case Studies**

Pursuing the case study model, the consultants heard analyses from participants who are experiencing the violent conflicts of the Middle East, Rwanda and the India sub-continent. The consultation learned that in the Middle East religions were vulnerable in their efforts to address the situation as their members were both victims and perpetrators of the violence. An emerging concern is the politicization of inter-religious dialogue. Another concern is that churches often defend their own particular interests rather than acting together. It was pointed out by the speaker that the conflict is one where religion and politics are bound together to the detriment of both. When political leaders seek courageous solutions they take great risks. He went on to say that Jewish rule over territory has been more important than the Golden Rule. Jews and Palestinians need a separate State, so they can co-exist, with Jerusalem shared as a joint capital and home to the three Abrahamic religions. It is not enough to be prophetic. Yehezkel Landau called for a more holistic approach to peacemaking... and on the spiritual level a different understanding of holiness has to be taught by religious leaders and educators. People of all faiths are seeking an experience of true holiness based on an awareness of an all-loving and inclusively just God. Landau's paper was regarded as a contribution to the wider global scene. It has relevance beyond the Middle East.

**Rwanda** - Unprecedented violence in Rwanda resulted in the terrible genocide of 1994 when in a period of just three months more than one million innocent people lost their lives. This in a country which is 70% Christian, 28% traditional religion, and 2% Muslim. Prior to this violence the Rwandan people had been living together in harmony for centuries united by a common language and culture. The non-intervention of those from the international community who could have prevented this atrocity is still a major scar.

On the Indian sub-continent there has been a history of communal violence but it has become more intense in recent times. Some minority communities feel that they have become refugees in their own country as a result of the violence. India is a country of great diversity and has been so for most of its history. The conflicts are much more recent, beginning less than a century ago. The Hindu/Muslim and Hindu/Christian conflicts are not religious but communal in nature. The analysis was penetrating and honest.

As one would expect, the response from the consultants was thorough and lively. One of the haunting questions raised in discussion is: "In the face of evil, why does the majority within society stay silent? How can religion motivate people to resist evil?"

## **Holy and Sacred**

It was agreed that there were differences, with "holy" being regarded as "spiritual", in the sense of the numinous as understood by Rudolf Otto. The "sacred" was regarded as being

more closely tied to designated symbols which represented power to those inside and outside the group with which the sacred is identified. Sacred symbols (places) may have been replaced in the West by the economic/military cathedrals. If the events of September 11 were a violation of the sacred in this sense, it might explain the strong Western reaction. Sacred sites can be viewed as the repository of power, and therefore of identity. The sacred becomes the focus for socio/ ethnic/ economic/ cultural identities. The "identity mix" allows one or the group to assert and recognize its identity, but how can identity be asserted without succumbing to violence (threatening the other's space or identity). We had a discussion on relative identity in which a structure appears as a vehicle of the religion. This leads in turn to a situation that in order to protect identity one might resort to violence of some type. Is it true that Buddhist cultures tend to be less violent because there is not an emphasis on "identity"?

## **Identity**

Our identities are by nature plural, with multiple belongings. Identity is related to language, land, sacred places and memory. Various examples of identity with the "land" were discussed, from that of the indigenous peoples of the Americas to the macro question of Hindu thoughts of India as their land now being challenged. The desecration of land sacredness and identity, through colonialization processes and the current attempts at redress, were discussed. In the broader field of identity, the consultants analyzed the problems inherent when a majority subsumes a minority, when the rule of law is cast aside at the time of a choice for self-determination. An invited speaker suggested that ethnic, religious, cultural and other forms of pluralism are a positive phenomenon to be welcomed and celebrated, but differences can be used to promote division and oppression. It can also be the excuse for marginalization, exclusion and oppression... giving rise to violence. He suggested that religion is often seen as the cause of conflict, when frequently it is the intensifier of conflict.

Group discussion also focussed on globalization and identity, noting that the effects and impositions of globalization are manifest in different ways in the life of different countries and peoples. As a threat to the richness of pluralism and pluralist societies, global homogenization pressures affect modes of life, leading to resentments which have a variety of impacts, even to acts of terrorism arising from a clash of cultures, attitudes of exclusion and frustration. Indigenous peoples become more and more vulnerable, especially when having a minority status. Religions do have a responsibility/role in mitigating feelings of hostility, cognizant of the need for economic justice in the global economy.

In an age when the politics of identity are so powerful, we analyzed the tension in the need for inclusion, which by its nature creates a larger element of exclusion. In the midst of this tension is the use of religion to be an identity marker. Positively, religion may be a way of interpreting reality, but as religious symbols take on importance, an ambivalence occurs. When the positive becomes an absolute in the mind of the perceiver, can the respect for the other be extended? At this juncture the potential for violence occurs. The consultation was of one voice in affirming that religion is but one of several identity markers. Religious communities have the obligation to participate in the cessation of violence caused through the need for exclusive

identity.

The role of religion in violence against women and to a lesser degree violence against children, was a thread through many of the conversations. Unfortunately, even though it was obvious, this conversation was not the subject of intense formal investigation. The gender identity issue is certainly an area where religions are required to listen to the theological critiques which would prevent the male power structures from continuing to encourage structural violence based on gender or age. Once again, the intersect of identity and (gender) power will need to be scrutinized in relation to potential and actual violence.

## **Power**

The question of the use and misuse of power underscored much of the consultation. A WCC consultant led us through her analysis of power. As religious people we should first question ourselves as to the power we have, and how we contribute to the dominant power structures. Power can be seen as a social relationship between those who are in power and those who are (more or less) powerless. But where does the origin and purpose of power lie? Theologically, power has its source in God, with the power exercised in society being derivative, a gift entrusted to humans. Accordingly, this power should be exercised for the freedom and benefit of all. The participants articulated that religion can be understood as an encounter with the holy which leads to responding acts by human beings who have experienced the encounter. The image we have of the Divine will shape our understanding of power. There is an image of God as the almighty ruler who uses power to punish or destroy those who do not obey the divine will. But there is also the God who is creator and redeemer, whose creativity is liberating and encouraging. The image we use will be all determining.

A thematic presenter used the phrase in the Lord's Prayer - 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us' - to suggest that trespassing refers to a transgression of the limits which protect the other. It suggests acts of violence - the exercise of power with damaging effects on others.

Secular power is generally seen as the possession of a few, as domination over the less powerful. But there are different experiences of power - as a strength which we are to use for the benefit of life for all or as a means of control. Here domination and repression become misuses of power. It is now important to develop and live a different concept of power whereby we pursue an alternative to the existing system. We need to contribute to a new understanding of the praxis of power.

## **Justice**

Every society has rules to regulate human behaviour. But a paradox arises because violence can be used as a way to access justice. Most of the world's revolutions used violence to achieve a more just society. On the one hand, justice has been closely linked to law, with

punishment meted out both as retribution and as a deterrent. The restorative justice perspective embraces a more victim centred approach as well as a focus on "restoring" the offender. It is an attempt at a holistic approach to crime that brings together the offender, the victim, and the community. All become responsible for overcoming the violence perpetrated and for restoring relationships. The experience of truth commissions suggests this approach to justice may well have something to contribute at national and international levels.

Within religions' approach to violence, there is plenty of scope for a prophetic role. The spiritual and reconciliation dimensions of the search for justice at the political level should not be set aside, but grasped by religions. The consultation asked whether religious bodies use enough public information, especially the reports from the UN and from their own agencies/bodies (from which the UN draws its information). Or, is there a lack of interest from the religious bodies to rescind violence? We were reminded that silence is taken as a legitimization of violence.

## **Media**

Our groups also raised the issue of the media and the reporting of violence. We noted that there exists for many countries the State control of the media where the media is manipulated. Also, the media are being co-opted by extremists, while moderate voices are "boring" to the media. Religions know too little about the media, and the media are usually attracted by the sensational and the simplistic.

Fundamentalists are more sophisticated in their use of the media, while mainstream religious people are more comfortable criticizing the media. We need to engage the media positively and constructively, and our own faith traditions need to do a lot better with their own (in-house) media. Is there enough effort in countering the negative effects of religious stereotyping by the media?

## **... and.... Action?**

Respecting the fact that religions and their geographical areas will be developing their own particular approaches in addressing the horrendous impact of violence, the consultation absented itself from recommending specific courses of action. However, there is one workable (and religious) international activity which could be effectively and plausibly entertained by religions in the short range (3-5 years). It would reflect an awareness-building in justice and compassion. The idea of fasting was discussed, as it has such a universal appeal and sound spiritual backing. It is recommended that religious leaders, in concert with the United Nations, pursue the challenge of holding an international day of fasting. It was even suggested that the major religions' leaders would come together for a few days fasting to emphasize the "day". This day would be "A Day Against Violence", with its major active component being a day of fasting, according to local custom, health and need. This would serve to emphasize compassion and justice, interest the youth, attract the environmentalists, and would be within

the political interests of all religions and religious groups on many counts. This would bring into closer focus the picture of "Justice and compassion: let's be against violence."

As chief rapporteur John Roberts concluded in the official executive summary approved at the final plenary: "Participants recognized that in religious traditions there is a surprising co-existence of love and violence, of the affirmation of inclusiveness and the practice of exclusion. They worked through this paradox in the nature of religion in relation to matters of peace and violence and came out affirming the importance of inter-religious dialogue, non-violent initiatives, and joint peace building activities in overcoming violence."

Consultation follow-up activities included the appointment of a core group to plan the next Visser't Hooft consultation on Religion and Peace, the recommendation for various forms of net-working and the publication of a booklet about the consultation and related matters. The consultation's final plenary approved a press release and a short official summary outlining the main points raised during the course of the consultation. These had been prepared by the main rapporteur, John Roberts, who in consultation with other rapporteurs, also compiled the daily official log from which this unofficial summary-report is derived.

The round-table evaluation by the participants was extremely positive, with special mention being made of the meditation which began each day at the conference table - here was the visible sign of unity, expressed through a rich variety of religious backgrounds.

David Morrison

### **Discussion highlights -**

There can be no authentic affirmation of peace within any religious tradition without facing up to the challenge of violence in human community life

Religious communities and their leaders should not provide any moral or ethical legitimation for the use of war and violence in response to conflict... they need to take the lead by making a critical assessment of their own involvement in the emergence of a culture of violence

The special contribution religion can bring to existing conflict strategies is through models of conflict transformation which emphasize human rights, justice and building relationships of trust

Religion and power have constituted an unholy alliance

If religion is to be a moral conscience, then it must speak with one voice on the subject of violence

Necessity for a more holistic approach to peacemaking... and on the spiritual level a different

understanding of holiness has to be taught by religious leaders and educators

In the face of evil, why does the majority within society stay silent? How can religion motivate people to resist evil?

How can religious identity be asserted without succumbing to violence?

Religious communities have the obligation to participate in the cessation of violence caused through the need for identity

The gender identity issue is certainly an area where religions are required to listen

Religion is often seen as the cause of conflict, when frequently it is the intensifier of conflict

Religions need to contribute to a new understanding of the praxis of power

Within religions' approach to violence, there is plenty of scope for a prophetic role

We need to engage the media positively and constructively... is there enough effort in countering the negative effects of religious stereotyping by the media?

An international day of fasting as a day against violence