Religion, Conflict and Structural Violence

A memorandum, 2018

Executive summary

1. This memorandum for policy-makers is about the role of religion, either apparent or real, in conflicts, disputes and disagreements within and between countries throughout the world, and in the management of peace-building, reconciliation and mutual support. It argues that there is at present amongst political leaders insufficient awareness of academic research, analysis and theorising about these matters, and that they need higher levels of what it calls 'religion and conflict literacy' than is currently the case.

2. The paper outlines the principal facets of such literacy and points out that there are implications for governments and public administration, non-governmental organisations, universities and schools, and print, social and broadcasting media. It has its origins in one particular country, but is concerned not only with domestic matters but also with foreign policy and international relations, and is mindful of the trends – socio-economic, financial, cultural, technological, ecological – collectively known as globalisation. Much or most of it is therefore likely to be widely relevant, not in one country only.

3. The paper draws throughout on concepts, insights and approaches developed at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen, as published in a professional development course entitled *Religion and Conflict*, March/April 2017, and on the theoretical work of Johan Galtung and Jean-Paul Lederach.

4. Also, the paper draws on some of the discussions and reflections in the report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, published in 2015.

Background

5. Examples of current conflicts and disagreements in which religion appears to play a significant part include the following:

    - acts of terrorism perpetrated by individuals or groups claiming a religious justification (including Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh) for their actions

- the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and its influence on individuals, groups and movements in a large number of other countries

- rights and freedoms which appear to compete with each other, as for example when one person's right to manifest their religion competes with the right of another not to be discriminated against or not be intimidated

- the prevalence of what may be termed religio-racism — for example antisemitism, Islamophobia and sectarianism — where markers of perceived difference include not only physical appearance but also religious allegiance, and lead to discrimination, prejudice and violence against 'the Other'

- mutual mistrust between religious values on the one hand and what may be termed Enlightenment values on the other, namely the cluster of values, ideas and practices that gathered strength in the intellectual, cultural, moral and political climate of Europe and North America through the eighteenth century and whose legacy is seen in, amongst other places, equalities legislation and international human rights standards in the modern age.

6. In addition to conflicts and disagreements such as those mentioned above there are situations where personal and collective memories of violence and mutual enmity in the past are still fresh and raw, and where processes of peace, confidence-building, reconciliation and mutual assistance continue to be required. Examples include situations in the Balkans, the Caucasus, central Africa, Indonesia, Northern Ireland, South America and South Asia.

7. Why should policy-makers in secular society seek to acquaint themselves with academic theories and research about the relationship between religion and conflict? There are two principal reasons. Together, they comprise a fundamental and inescapable paradox:

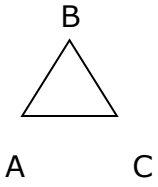
    - Whether chosen or inherited, religion can be an important component in someone's sense of identity and self-worth, and in their personality, relationships and way of life. It can be a way of feeling connected to others, can give a sense of personal and collective meaning and significance, can provide narratives, stories, symbols and teachings which impart moral guidance and inspiration, can build courage and resilience in times of trouble, can be a place of ceremony and ritual at times of celebration or grief, can articulate feelings of awe and reverence for the natural world, can inspire art, literature, music and architecture, and can motivate acts of kindness, compassion, generosity and justice. For these reasons governments and public services have a legitimate and indeed necessary interest in religion,

even though they may insist, in a famous phrase, that they 'don't do God'. Religion can be a public good.

- Religion can also, however, be used as a justification for, and as a source of motivation and inspiration towards, acts and behaviours which do substantial harm. It can support violence as a way of dealing with conflict between and within groups and nations, can legitimise structures and processes which limit the freedom and fulfilment of large numbers of people, particularly minorities, and can be associated with lasting damage to the natural environment. It can be, in short, a public bad. For this reason too governments have a legitimate and indeed necessary interest in it.

8. In short, it follows that a fundamental distinction may be drawn between, as the terms might be, **healthy religion** (a public good) on the one hand and **toxic religion** (a public bad) on the other. Also, a fundamental distinction needs to be drawn between **violent and non-violent** responses to conflict, and it is essential in this connection to bear in mind that violence can be not only **direct and physical** but also **structural and cultural**. Examples of the latter include institutional racism and Islamophobia, and forms of oppression around class, gender, age, disability and sexuality, and **social determinants of inequality** in relation to health, education, housing, transport and wellbeing.

9. The approach to conflict pioneered by the Norwegian theorist Johan Galtung[1] is built on the customary distinctions between (a) attitudes and assumptions (b) behaviours and (c) conflicts of interest and clashes of goals. The focus in peace-building needs therefore to be on (a) the views of themselves and each other that people hold (b) specific events and incidents, and (c) underlying conflicts of interest, themselves rooted in industrial, colonial and economic history. Galtung points out that the notion that A (attitudes and assumptions) leads to B (violent behaviour) which leads to C (conflict) is over-simplifying, although appealing to common sense. Instead of a visual model that could be summarised as A→B→C, he proposes a triangle:



10. The triangle model visualises that the relationships between A, B and C are two-way, with each of them being both cause and consequence of the other two. It follows that the resolution of conflict and the making and maintaining of peace require a three-pronged approach: (a) action to change attitudes and assumptions (b) action to reduce and end both

direct and structural violence and (c) action to resolve, or at least to manage, conflict. All too often the distinction between violence and conflict is not made, however, and on the contrary the terms 'violence' and 'conflict' are used interchangeably. But it is the failure to transform conflict that leads to violence, not the other way round.

11. Healthy religion tends to be associated with non-violent resolution of conflict, and toxic religion with physical, structural and cultural violence. Two challenging questions are then these. Which comes first - violence or toxic religion? And non-violence or healthy religion? In different words, which leads to which, which is consequence, which is cause? Or is the relationship entirely dialectical, entirely chicken-and-egg, each item in the pair leading to and leading from the other? If so, how and when in practice do human beings transform vicious and toxic circles and spirals into virtuous and healing circles and spirals?

12. In order to respond with wisdom and effectiveness to these questions, leaders, governments and organisations need what may be termed **religion and conflict literacy**. The principal facets of such literacy are outlined in the next section of this paper.

Religion and conflict literacy

13. The term *religion and conflict literacy* is chosen in preference to the shorter and more common term *religious literacy* on the grounds that it is more focused, and more directed towards understanding the function of religion in specific situations, particularly situations of intercommunal and international conflict such as those summarised in paragraph 5 above. Four of the principal features of such literacy are to do with (a) ethno-religious identity (b) diversity within diversity (c) the relationship between belief and behaviour and (d) the interpretation of symbols. Each of these is considered in slightly more detail in the following paragraphs.

(i) Ethno-religious identity

14. Most dictionary definitions of religion refer to discourse about God, the gods, the supernatural, the transcendent, and imply that individuals consciously choose whether or not to believe that such discourse refers to realities that actually exist. But for many people throughout the world religion is not chosen but given, and is more to do with heritage, belonging and sense of identity than with holding certain beliefs about the supernatural, or engaging in practices that embody the assumption that supernatural or transcendental realities exist. It can therefore be **a system of belonging rather than a system of belief and can be bound up with ethnic or national identity, and with how a person is perceived, approached and treated by others.** The term *ethno-religious* is used to capture the ways that ethnicity and religious allegiance

can overlap and intertwine, and the ways in which us/them differences are imagined and talked about.

15. Over the centuries, ethno-religious identities have been particularly evident in Europe in relation to Catholics and Protestants, and in the ways membership of certain Protestant denominations was linked in the past to social class. It is still true in parts of Europe (for example, Northern Ireland and western Scotland) that a person's religious affiliation may reflect their birth, family and community more than their personal and deliberate choice, and that markers and badges of religious identity can include — for example — a person's first name and surname, and the name of the school they went to. Terms such as *cradle Catholic*, *ethnic Protestant* and *nominal Christian* refer to the ways in which a person's religious identity is not always a conscious choice on their part. So does the term *secular Jew*. More recently being a Hindu, a Muslim or a Sikh in Europe or North America may similarly reflect a person's heritage and background as well as, and more than, their conscious choice.

16. Incidentally, the concept of ethno-religious identity is as relevant for understanding Christianity in western countries as it is for understanding Christianity elsewhere. The terrorist Anders Behring Breivik saw himself as a defender of Christendom, and a leader of the Brexit campaign in the UK recently maintained that chocolate rabbits and eggs at Easter time are a hallmark of what he called 'Europe's Judeo-Christian heritage'.

(ii) Diversity within diversity

17. There are significant differences *within* each religious tradition, for no tradition is monolithic, none is unchanging and none exists independently of specific cultural, historical and political contexts and circumstances. There are tensions between tradition and reform, between the perspectives and experiences of women and men, and between different approaches to the interpretation of sacred texts. Specifically, and bluntly, there is a need in every tradition to discern the difference between toxic religion and healthy religion.

(iii) The relationship between belief and behaviour

18. The relationship between what someone believes and what they do is often difficult to unpick. Two people may have similar beliefs but perform different actions. Or they may perform similar actions but have different beliefs. Also it happens that human beings do not always know accurately why they did something and may be prone to self-deception in the reasons they give for their actions and the explanations they offer regarding their motives and purposes. An important implication, incidentally, is that 'religious ideology' is a dubious and unreliable concept for adequately understanding the factors associated with terrorism. Proponents and defenders of the Prevent programme urgently need to understand this, and to act on it accordingly.

(iv) The interpretation of symbols.

19. It is possible to appreciate religious art, architecture, stories, poetry, music and theatre without necessarily sharing the beliefs which they express or assume.[2] Similarly, all or most religious and philosophical traditions contain concepts, wisdom and teachings that can valuably challenge the strategies, policies and priorities of secular governments, both national and local, and which therefore merit a presence and a hearing in the public square.

20. Frequently Enlightenment values have been and are in opposition to religion, and religion in its turn has been and is suspicious of, or downright hostile towards, the values associated with the Enlightenment. The two sets of values have also, however, sometimes intertwined and converged, and have deeply influenced each other.[3] At best, they can and do critique each other, and there can be synergy and mutual reinforcement between them. They can therefore be, in short, critical friends. As such they may then combine to challenge and oppose, and propose alternatives to, the values known loosely as neoliberalism and neoconservatism, and the populist and nativist discourse that was so evident during 2016 around the EU referendum in Britain and the presidential election processes in the United States.

Implications and recommendations

21. The concept of religion and belief literacy has many policy implications, including the following:

Law: anti-discrimination legislation and practices need to take on board the concept of ethno-religious identity, as for example in jurisprudence in Australia.

Education: programmes of religious education need to pay focused attention to the key concepts in this paper.

Media: similarly training for journalists needs to pay focused attention to the key concepts in this paper.

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[1] For extensive information about Galtung's work over the decades, https://www.transcend.org/tms/

[2] As argued by, for example, Alain de Botton in *Religion for Atheists: a non-believer's guide to the uses of religion*, Penguin 2013 and Simon Loveday in *The Bible for Grown-Ups*, Icon Books 2016.

[3] Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: the origins of Western liberalism*, Allen Lane, 2014.