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Protecting Religious Diversity for Building Peace and Preventing Violence

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Abstract

This article seeks to take a broadly human rights-based perspective to the question of the role that religion can play in building peace, preventing violence and reaching reconciliation in post-conflict situations. It takes as a fundamental position the notion that religions contain within themselves the potential for peaceful co-existence and preventing violence in all its forms. However, it also recognizes that there are numerous cases in which religion has served as the vehicle for expressing violent views and even as the pretext for violent acts. In taking a human rights perspective, it is necessary to ensure protection for religions and religious belief in order to foster this peace-building capacity of religions and to mitigate the possibility for them to be exploited towards violent ends. It is important to concentrate on the values that underpin building a culture of peace, including those taught us by the world's major religions and supported by the secular values of human rights. This notion of peace comprises important elements allow people to enjoy a sense of security in their lives which, in turn, allows them to develop and take an attitude of tolerance towards others.

Keywords: Religion, Culture of peace, Human rights, Preventing violence, Post-conflict reconciliation.

I. Introduction

This article attempts to take a broadly human rights-based perspective to the question of the role potentially played by religion in building peace and preventing violence. As such, it takes as a fundamental position the notion that

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religions contain within themselves the potential to create an environment in which peaceful co-existence is fostered and violence—in its many forms—is prevented. However, it also recognizes that there are numerous cases in which religion has served as the vehicle for expressing violent views and even as the pretext for violence itself. From a human rights perspective, this is understood to mean that we must ensure protection for religions and religious belief in order to foster the peace-building potential of religions and to mitigate the possibility for them to be exploited towards violent ends.

A further contextual position of this paper is that the classic international law understanding of peace as, in its simplest terms, the absence of (armed) conflict between States and within a State is far too limiting. The fact that, on the international level, the very system that upholds peace internationally[1] appears to regard peace as an exceptional condition is clearly a fundamental 'philosophical' problem that we face: This, then, requires us to take a human rights-based approach to the notion of peace within international law in order to arrive at a broader conception of peace – what might be called the "culture of peace". What is important is for us to try as far as possible to concentrate on the values that underpin building such a culture of peace, including those taught us by the world's major religions and supported by the secular values of human rights. This notion of peace comprises important elements which allow people to enjoy a sense of security in their lives and which, in turn, allow them to develop and take an attitude of tolerance towards others.[2] This is largely achievable on the level of the national society through a human rights approach that gives value, in particular, to the fundamental values of equality and non-discrimination, guarantees basic rights and freedoms and protects cultural and religious diversity.

To ensure the peaceful co-existence of peoples and nations that the UN Charter called for in 1945 requires, in addition to this, that the notions of equity (in particular over shared resources and access to the world's wealth) and justice

[1] The primary purpose of the United Nations as expressed in Art.1(1) of the UN Charter is: "To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace;" Full text of the Charter is available online at: https://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter1.shtml [accessed on 31 Jan. 2015].

[2] As Amartya Sen (1981) *Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Clarendon Press, Oxford) famously stated with regard to famine: "In the terrible history of famine in the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press" which underlines the importance of a range of human rights to ensure human security, including freedom of speech. See also: Amartya Sen (1999) *Development as Freedom* (Oxford University Press).

in their distribution be respected. We cannot, and should not, ignore the fact that a great number of the conflicts around the world have as their root causes disputes between States or groups within States over shared natural resources.[3] Of interest to this paper is that, in many cases, such conflicts may have resource-related competition at their base but religious and/or ethnic differences frequently supply the immediate cause for violence breaking out. The corollary of such violence associated with is cultural, religious and ethnic diversity is intolerance[4] which can, and should, be challenged on the basis of human rights and the value of cultural diversity which, in its internal and international dimensions, can play a role in helping to build a culture of peace.

II. Religion and Religious Heritage: Exclusion and Violent Destruction

Sadly, religion and religious heritage may be distorted and exploited symbolically to provide a pretext for disputes and violence. Since power is central to the construction of heritage,[5] communities frequently clash over the way in which this is represented in religious symbols. In addition, different religious communities may lay claim to the same location as 'belonging' to their heritage which can lead to denial of the right of access to certain groups to heritage sites. The effect that such exclusion has on the cultural community excluded is important here since it is not only demoralizing for them but may easily lead to strong resentment and even violence. A prime example of this phenomenon relates to the city of Jerusalem (*Beit ul-moghaddas* in Arabic) which contains some of the holiest sites for Jews, Christians and Muslims. Here, on the same site, are located the Western Wall of the Second Temple (a holy site of great significance for Jews), the Holy Sepulchre (the tomb of Jesus, a central site of pilgrimage for Christians) and the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Dome of the Rock (the site of Muhammad's Night Journey and of the first Ka'beh, a highly important religious site for Muslims). At one time or another, each of

[3] Frances Stewart (2002) "The root causes of violent conflict," *BMJ* 324(7333): 342–345 notes that "Many groups of people who fight together perceive themselves as belonging to a common culture (ethnic or religious), and part of the reason that they are fighting may be to maintain their cultural autonomy. For this reason, there is a tendency to attribute wars to "primordial" ethnic passions, which makes them seem intractable. This view is not correct, however, and diverts attention from important underlying economic and political factors."

[4] Rodolfo Stavenhagen (1990) *The Ethnic Question: Conflicts, Development and Human Rights* (United Nations University, Tokyo).

[5] Laurajane Smith (2008) *The Uses of Heritage*, Oxford: Routledge, 2006 at Chapter 8. See Also: Brian Graham and Peter Howard (eds.) *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing.

these three religious communities has been excluded from their holy site and inter-communal conflicts have periodically erupted over them.[6]

Similar inter-religious tensions in India between Hindus and Muslims over shjared holy sites have not only resulted in exclusion but even in the destruction of the physical fabric of the religious heritage. The Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, built by Shah Babur in 1528, was destroyed in 1992 by militant Hindus from the VHP party, an act that resulted in extremely serious inter-religious clashes between and many deaths.[7] A similarly corrosive mix of religious and political ideology lay at the heart of the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 2001 by the Taleban who wished to eradicate material evidence of the existence of a pre-Islamic culture in Afghanistan, an act politically designed to separate Afghan history from its Buddhist past.[8] Furthermore, the destruction by Serb forces of the Ottoman bridge at Mostar in Bosnia in 1993 was a highly symbolic act since this 16th century bridge had linked Christian and Muslim neighbourhoods for centuries. It is notable that the Serbs also destroyed archives that held information confirming the cultural (and religious) identity of the Muslim population of that area.[9] Through such actions, the Serbs were attempting to eradicate any historical memory of the existence of Muslims in that area and so we can clearly regard them as part of a campaign of ethnocide.[10]

The Case of the Holy Sepulchre[11]

The aforementioned site of the Holy Sepulchre provides an interesting insight into both the potential for competition over access to and control over a holy site even within one religion, but also of the possibility of resolving such disputes peacefully. Six Christian denominations co-exist on the site of the

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6 Menachem Klein (2001) *Jerusalem: The Contested City*, New York: New York University Press.

7 Nandini Rao and C. Rammanohar Reddy (2001) 'Aydohya, the Print Media and Communalism,' In *Destruction and Conservation of Cultural Property* edited by Robert Layton, Peter G. Stone and Julian Thomas (London: Routledge) at pp.139-155.

8 Francesco Francioni and Federico Lenzerini, (2003) 'The Destruction of the Buddhas of Bamyan and International Law', *European Journal of International Law*,14: 619.

9 Council of Europe (1993) *War Damage to the Cultural Heritage in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina*, 4th Information Report presented to the Committee on Culture and Education (Strasbourg: Council of Europe) [Document No. 6999].

10 Patrick J. Boylan (2002) 'The Concept of Cultural Protection in Times of Armed Conflict: From the Crusades to the New Millennium,' In *Illicit Antiquities - the Theft of Culture and the Extinction of Archaeology* edited by Neil Brodie and Kathryn Walker Tubb (London: Routledge) at pp.43-108. See also: Francesco Francioni (2008) 'Culture, Heritage and Human Rights: an Introduction,' in Francesco Francioni and Martin Scheinin(eds.) *Cultural Human Rights* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff at pp.1-16.

11 This case is described in Raymond Cohen (2008) Saving the Holy Sepulchre: How Rival Christians Came Together to Rescue their Holiest Shrine (New York: Oxford University Press).

Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, a place associated in Christian tradition with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and one that now enjoys international recognition as a World Heritage Site. The different Christian denominations that co-habit in the Holy Sepulchre are Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Armenians, Syriani, Copts and Ethiopians. Conflicts among these different Christian confessions tend to break down along the following lines: Greek Orthodox versus Roman Catholics or Armenians; Armenians versus Syriani; Copts versus Ethiopians; Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics versus Armenians; and Roman Catholics and Armenians versus Greek Orthodox.[12] It is a crowded space where hundreds of monks gather daily to pray, feasts are celebrated, pilgrims visit, services are conducted, sacramental objects and furnishings are moved, the physical fabric of the building is cleaned and repaired etc. Hence, despite the fact that it is a holy place of worship for millions of Christians across the world, these different Christian communities have been embroiled for centuries in disputes over the use of the sacred space of the Holy Sepulchre and even, at times, these have resulted in violence.

Since 1852, the relations between the various religious communities have been governed by a set of customary rules known as the 'Status Quo' that is based on the Ottoman diplomatic principle of *ala halihi* designed to maintain the status quo on the ground following military conflict.[13] This, in itself, is telling in that the 'peace' of the Holy Sepulchre is kept by rules developed to govern a post-war situation. Within the Holy Sepulchre, the Status Quo governs which religious community holds what and who can do what, when and where. For example, the right to clean and/or pay for the repair the property denotes the exclusive possession of it while the right to hang a lamp or picture denotes exclusive possession of that particular space (pillar or part of the wall) on which it is hung; possession of the roof denotes possession of the space under it, and so on. However, these customary rules are incapable of responding to every eventuality and disagreements inevitably occur.[14] Although these religious communities have generally been able to resolve disputes over use of this sacred space, they have also needed the support of the secular authorities to keep the peace between them.[15] As a consequence, 1000 police were deployed in 2003 to

[12] Glenn Bowen (2011) '"In Dubious Battle on the Plains of Heav'n": The Politics of Possession in Jerusalem's Holy Sepulchre,' *History and Anthropology* 22(3): 371-399.

[13] Cohen *op.cit.* n.11.

[14] Bowen *op.cit.* n.12.

[15] *Ibid*.

ensure that Holy Saturday passed off safely and without clashes between members of the different Christian denominations.

It is clear, then, that religion plays a critical role in human security, both in provoking and preventing conflict. Hopefully, we can find ways to maximise its second role and to minimise the first. There are some specific points of importance for us to take account of with regard to the relationship between religion and conflicts. First, it is sobering to remember that over half of contemporary conflicts have some religious dimension and that religious leaders often emerge as primary figures of authority in failed States. Moreover, since religious issues are inevitably related to ethnicity, language, territory, politics and economics, even where the root cause of a conflict lies in one of these (as is most often the case), religion may well act as the vehicle or pretext for conflict or, at the least, exacerbate it. In addition, given that the main concerns of religion are life, death and justice, it is of relevance in all conflicts. As a final point concerning how religion can impact on conflict situations, just as much as religiously-based conflicts tend to be more intense and longer lasting than other types of conflict, religion is an essential component of effective conflict management and resolution in many contexts.[16] It is also important for us to ask the question: Why is religion so important in conflicts? This can be answered in terms of the ability of religion to provide an ideological basis for achieving social coherence and unity in situations where these are found to be lacking: In times of conflict, secular ideologies and institutions have often failed and religion can then fill the gap left by these and provide the underpinning for claims to social justice which are frequently important bases for violent disputes.[17]

III. The Importance of Human Rights for Supporting Peace

As mentioned in the Introduction to this paper, although I have been addressing the role of religion primarily in the context of conflict in the previous section, I prefer to take a broad conception of peace—what might be called the 'culture of peace'—and to try as far as possible to concentrate on the values that underpin the building of such a culture of peace. In doing this, the idea of human security is a key one: this conception of peace comprises important elements that relate to people being able to enjoy a sense of security in their lives that, in turn, allows for an attitude of tolerance towards others. This is largely achievable

[16] Paula Otis (2004) 'Religion and War in the Twenty-first Century,' in Robert A. Seiple and Dennis R. Hoover (eds.) *Religion and Security: The New Nexus in International Relations* 11.

[17] *Ibid*.

nationally through taking a human rights approach that gives value, in particular, to notions of equality and non-discrimination and guarantees basic rights and freedoms, including religious freedoms. In addition, given the potential of religion to play a positive role in preventing violence and helping to end conflicts, it would seem that protecting religious rights and diversity is also crucial. However, it has to be recognized that these rights go along with concomitant responsibilities placed in particular on religious leaders to prevent their faith from becoming the flag under which conflicts are waged and atrocities are committed: they must continue to teach and emphasize the essentially peaceful message of all great religions.

As has been seen above, however, in a great number of the conflicts around the world, whatever their root causes, religious differences (often also split along ethnic lines) have provided the symbolic vehicle through which these grievances are played out. Hence, preventing conflict and internal violence involves both addressing those root causes but also seeking to lessen tensions between people(s) of different religions and cultures. This, in turn, requires a strong defence of human rights, the value of cultural and religious diversity and tolerance. One of the most important of these human rights is the right to peace, namely the right of everyone to live a life of peace and security, free from violence, which was formally recognized by the international community in the mid-20th century. The Charter of the United Nations (1945) recognised that to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, it is necessary "to practise tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours".[18]

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 recognised that respect for the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family—the main purpose of human rights— is the foundation for freedom, justice *and peace* in the world.[19] Here, then, we see that a clear relationship is drawn out between the human right to peace and the rights to life, to integrity, to liberty and to security of the person. Moreover, the protection of human dignity—a fundamental value of religion as well as of human rights—is regarded as essential to preserving and enjoying peace. It is

[18] UN Charter in its Preamble makes the linkage between peace and human rights clear in the first two paragraphs, as follows: "*to save* succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and *to reaffirm* faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small". Full text of the Charter is available online at:
https://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter1.shtml [accessed on 31 Jan. 2015].

[19] Universal Declaration on Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 in its Preamble. Text available online at: www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/ [accessed 31 Jan. 2015].

not necessary for us to limit ourselves in this discussion to the overt references to peace in these international instruments, and we can extend this discussion to include the importance of guaranteeing civil, political, economic, social, cultural and linguistic rights.

Respecting religious rights and freedoms should be a part of this and both tolerance and mutual understanding play a central role in achieving this. In fact, the relationship between peace and human rights is one of mutual interdependence since not only is peace a necessary condition for the guarantee of human rights, but human rights also provide an essential framework for securing peace in its broadest sense. In this way, there is a clear inter-connection between the objectives of human rights and most major religions with regard to human dignity and peace as can be seen in the Charter of the Organization of Islamic Conference (2008), a faith-based organisation, that calls on the Organization to, "contribute to international peace and security, understanding and dialogue among civilizations, cultures and religions and promote and encourage friendly relations and good neighbourliness, mutual respect and cooperation".[20]

IV. Cultural (Religious) Diversity, Dialogue and Building a Culture Peace

It seems appropriate for a conference held in Tehran to remind ourselves of the Tehran Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted by the non-Aligned Movement member States here in 2007.[21] In its Preamble, this instrument contains several statements of great relevance to the subject at issue here, in particular with regard to the international dimensions of building a culture of peace. These include the following points:

There is a dignity and value in each culture (and religion) and these deserve recognition, respect and preservation.

All cultures share a common set of universal values.

Tolerance and respect for cultural, ethnic, and religious and linguistic diversities is essential for peace

It is necessary to engage in equitable and mutually respectful dialogue among and within civilizations.

[20] In its Preamble. The present Charter of the Organization was adopted by the Eleventh Islamic Summit held in Dakar on 13-14 March 2008. Text available online at: www.oic-oci.org/is11/.../Charter-en [accessed 31 Jan. 2015].

[21] Tehran Declaration and Programme of Action On Human Rights and Cultural Diversity Adopted by the "Non – Aligned Movement Ministerial Meeting on Human Rights and Cultural Diversity Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran, 3-4 September 2007

When we are considering the place of religious diversity in building a culture of peace, a central idea must, of course, be that of inter-religious dialogue. However, it is not simply the fact of such dialogue taking place that is important, but also the quality of the dialogue—including the degree of mutuality involved—and the atmosphere within which it occurs. Moreover, each religion should be accorded its own value and equal dignity so that the relationship is one of mutuality and not dominance. Inter-religious dialogue that has been built upon these principles should make it possible to build greater cohesion within societies as well as peaceful relations and co-existence among different nations and civilisations.

Such dialogue operates on two levels which reflect the internal and international dimensions of the role of cultural and religious diversity explored here. Internally, dialogue is conducted through intra-societal encounters and exchanges and, given the diverse nature of most the world's countries, it is an important policy objective to encourage mutual recognition and respect amongst the different ethnic, cultural and religious communities. As we have seen, the history of internal conflicts tends to contain a common thread of religious and/or ethnic dimension, of which the unfortunate tendency to seek to destroy an enemy's cultural/religious heritage and identity through 'ethnocide' during internal armed conflicts is testimony. Many ethnically and religiously diverse States fear the potential for secession by cultural minorities or, at least, a challenge to the notion of national unity if too much recognition is given to minority cultures.[22] However, it is actually the failure of central government to recognise minority cultures and guarantee the cultural and related human rights of their individual members that often leads to secessionist sentiments and inter-ethnic/inter-religious violence. On the international level, dialogue is conducted through inter-cultural encounters and exchanges and the impact of globalization and traction of the idea of a 'clash of civilizations' and its corollary, the 'war on terror', have rendered the need for dialogue ever more vital and relevant. This is particularly true in view of the fact that contemporary terrorism has become articulated through a quasi-religious ('Islamic') ideology that bears little relation to the actual religion, but which has a powerful resonance among marginalised young people and groups and carries the potential to spark inter- and intra-religious tensions. Hence, a principal objective of inter-religious dialogue on the international plane must be to bridge the gap in knowledge about other societies, religions and civilizations and, through this, to foster mutual respect

[22] Patrick Thornberry (1991) *International Law and the Rights of Minorities* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

and overcome the mutual distrust that comes from ignorance. Importantly, this should remove the pretext for aggression and violence that is provided by misconceptions and even negative propaganda.

In the context of the current crisis and conflict dominating the Fertile Crescent and the Levant, it is valuable to remember that inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue is by no means a new phenomenon in this region. Throughout history, peoples have exchanged cultural experiences, ideas, values and goods through their art, trade and migrations. With its history of intellectual cross-fertilisation (with India and Ancient Greece, for example), Iran is an excellent example of a country and civilization that has always been open to outside experiences and that has absorbed outside cultural and religious influences.[23] Iran has also made significant intellectual and cultural contributions to the world, including in the fields of science (natural philosophy) and philosophy. The ideas and influences absorbed from elsewhere have generally proved to be a positive contribution to Iranian culture and it is this capacity to absorb that is itself a cultural strength. Indeed, although the essential strength of any culture (and religion) comes from its own roots, it must also be able to flourish when encountering other cultures (and religions). This, in turn, presupposes a capacity to accept and sustain cultural change.

V. The Role of Religion in Peace-building and Reconciliation

When the international community considers the situation of post-conflict societies, 'reconciliation' is a favoured and much-employed term, but one that bears some examination as demonstrated in the case of the conflict in Kashmir which is an interesting case to take here since it is both an inter-religious (Hindu-Muslim) and political (India-Pakistan) conflict. This case shows us that reconciliation is not always welcomed by the people on the ground. In 2003, an Institute for Reconciliation was opened in Srinagar in Indian Kashmir and a prominent Kashmiri journalist asked the challenging question which illustrates the depth of resentment and hostility that such disputes engender: 'Does reconciliation mean submitting to a rapist when you are being raped, as we are here in Kashmir?'[24] However, it is also a question that goes to the heart of the notion of non-violence that is shared by so many of the world's main religious

[23] See, for example: Johan Elverskog (2011) *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (University of Pennsylvania Press).

[24] Brian Cox and Daniel Philpott (2003) 'Faith-based diplomacy: an ancient idea newly emergent', *Brandywine Review of Faith and International Affairs* 31 at p.34 reprinted in James A. R. Nafziger, Robert Kirkwood Paterson, Alison Dundes Renteln (eds.) (2010) *Cultural Law: International, Comparative, and Indigenous*, Cambridge University Press, at pp. 910-11.

traditions. Thus, we see again, how religious faith and teaching has a capacity to provide for people who have suffered from extreme violence and the degradation and affront to their sense of dignity that this entails a framework within which they can find the ability for reconciliation.

The notion of reconciliation is one that is expressed in a profound sense in all the world's ancient religions, containing within it the sense of restoring a relationship that has been damaged or broken. There are, of course, differences in the ways in which different faith traditions understand the idea of reconciliation and the relative roles of punishment, forgiveness, apology and atonement. In Islam, for example, the Qur'an refers in a number of places to God's mercy and it contains injunctions for forgiveness that imply a restorative logic: this is seen, for example, in the rituals designed to bring reconciliation between offenders and victims. The logic of atonement is extended in the Christian faith to the mercy shown by God to the sinners on the cross and forgiveness is an essential part of the Christian teaching of 'turning the other cheek' when one is struck. Atonement is also a central idea in the Jewish Torah and also in the Jewish law (*halakhah*) where punishment, repentance and restitution are all aimed towards restoration and reconciliation. In Buddhism, we find the notion of the restoration of the offender's soul and of relationships between the estranged and the ethical code (*Vinaya*) and traditional Tibetan judicial customs stress reconciliation as a response to evil.[25]

VI. A Coda: The Role of Women in Building Peace

It is important here to remind ourselves that women can play a central role in post-conflict resolution and in the building and maintenance of peace.[26] Experiences from as far afield as Northern Ireland[27] and Rwanda,[28] for example,

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[25] Ibid.

[26] See, for example: Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women of 1995 and Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000), 1880 and 1888 (2009) calling for the promotion of women's participation at all levels of decision-making on peace, disarmament and security issues.

[27] Valerie Morgan (1995) 'Peacemakers? Peacekeepers? Women in Northern Ireland 1969 – 1995,' Professorial Lecture, University of Ulster, 25 October 1995; Valerie Morgan and G. Fraser (1995) 'Women and the Northern Ireland Conflict - Experiences and Responses' in S. Dunn (ed.) Facets of the Conflict in Northern Ireland (London: Macmillan/St Martin's Press).

[28] Cecilia Ntombizodwa Mzvondiwa (2007) 'The role of women in the reconstruction and building of peace in Rwanda: Peace prospects for the Great Lakes Region,' *African Security Review* 16(1) available online at http://www.issafrica.org/topics/peacekeeping-and-conflict-management/01-mar-2007-the-role-of-women-in-the-reconstruction-and-building-of-peace-in-rwanda-peace-prospects-for-the-great-lakes-region-cecilia-ntombizodwa [*accessed 31 Jan. 2015]. See also*: Jeanne Izabiliza (n.d.) 'The role of women in reconstruction: experience of Rwanda,' report prepared for UNESCO, available online at: www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin /.../Role-Women-Rwanda.pdf *[accessed 31 Jan. 2015]. At p.2, the linkage between women playing their role in*

have demonstrated this reality. Since women (and children) are frequently the members of a society most severely damaged and traumatised by armed conflict, as well as by other forms of social and political violence, they generally have the most to gain from securing and ensuring peace and security.

Also in Africa, in Central African societies it has traditionally been a sacred duty to show respect to older women and, as a result, they have often played a key role in crisis management and conflict resolution. Hence, when a conflict degenerates into armed violence, an appeal would usually be made to a respected woman of mature years to calm the tension and reconcile the combatants.[29] An example of this is the mediation role of older women among the Tubur (Tupuri) of Cameroon, known as 'old mamas', who have traditionally been responsible for mediation and consulted on all problems which disturbed the peace. Once consulted, an old mama will listen to those directly involved in the conflict and any witnesses; she then addresses the protagonists, naming the person or persons at fault and asking the offended party to forgive the offender or offenders. Among the Mungo people of the Cameroon, any misfortune occurring in the community would lead them to seek the mediation of *Kalbia* who were married women recognized by their fellow clanswomen as having supernatural powers, such as the gift of clairvoyance. They could determine the causes of the evil undermining society and hindering peace and could restore peace, because they intervened between disruptive forces and society.[30]

In view of their role in preventing and/or mitigating violence, it is especially important that women's and children's rights be fully supported and that they are empowered both to play a positive role in building peace and be protected from the damaging impacts of lack of peace. It is therefore vital also for women's rights to be respected within established religions, which provides us with a further dimension to this discussion: in order to maximise the capacity of women for fostering peace and reconciliation, the role of women in religion also needs to be examined. It is not unusual for women to be placed in a secondary role or, at least, in the background and outside the hierarchy of established religions. Since we have seen that not only can religion play an important role

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building peace post-conflict is made clear: "The contribution of women in peace building and reconciliation efforts can become most effective by increasing their participation in decision-making organs and in the implementation of policies at institutional and community levels".

[29] M.J. Mathey, T. Dejan, M. Deballe, R. Sopio, A. Koulaninga and J. Moga (2003). The Role Played by Women of the Central African Republic in the Prevention and Resolutions of Conflicts. In UNESCO, *Women and Peace in Africa* (pp. 35-46). Paris: UNESCO Workshop at p. 41.

[30] V. Ngongo-Mbede (2003). The Traditional Mediation of Conflicts by Women in Cameroon. In UNESCO, *Women and Peace in Africa* (pp.27-34). Paris: UNESCO Workshops.

in preventing and mitigating violence and conflict—with appropriate leadership—but that women often also play a key role in preventing conflict and in post-conflict reconciliation, it is not inappropriate to suggest that religion could give a more prominent place to women in order to maximise this capacity.

Finally, there is an important message to be found here: the act of building a culture of peace and eschewing violence is as much a personal crusade or jihad as it is a job we should leave to others such as the State, the religious authorities, human rights etc. Just as much as 'charity begins at home', so does building peace and confronting violence.