



EVANGELISCHE AKADEMIE
TUTZING

Bitte Sperrfrist beachten: Donnerstag, 16. Januar 2020, 19.00 Uhr!
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort!

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The Peace-Building Power of Religion: Successes and Challenges¹

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Director of the Evangelical Academy, Rev. Udo Hahn, Minister of State, Dr. Joachim Hermann,
Chairman of the German Protestant Churches, Bishop Dr. Heinrich Bedford-Strom,

Distinguished Guests, Esteemed Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Peace be upon you/Al-Salamu Alaykum/Shalom.

Please accept my sincere gratitude for the invitation to be with you here today, and the even greater honour you do me by asking me to address this august gathering. I have heard a great deal of the beauty of this setting, and of its important history and significance, so I am very impressed - and humbled.

I have been asked to share some thoughts with you about “the peace-building power of religion”. I confess I originally wrote a 15 page, 10,000 words paper. I was then very kindly asked if I could just keep to a maximum of 45 minutes – which 10,000 words never would render possible.

I thought perhaps I should try to redraft into the proverbial 3 points – apparently the average most people are capable of retaining.

But then from 10,000 words to 3 points was more than my Mediterranean mind - holding a historical consciousness from whence 3 Abrahamic religious traditions emerged – and still struggle to coexist – could engineer.

So, I will share a few reflections with you about the peace-building power of religion. In five points. And a half.

1. Context

My first point is to explain what I see as the context of our times. I believe that we are living in times not unlike the 1930s Europe, except today they are not only a feature of then colonial Europe, but a global phenomenon. We now witnesses nations with significant military might systematically undermining many human rights (from privacy to the right to health) and subverting the rule of law in their own countries, and globally.

In fact, the news often feels to me to border on the science fiction/comic strip variety. Here are some nations annexing territories – and oceans - they claim as their own. There some nations are literally rounding up certain religious minorities into ‘re-education’ camps where even their religious leaders are defending using the language of sovereignty to deal with terrorism like other nations do. Others are in the throes of redefining citizenship rights - of select religious groups- while yet others are busy dishonouring and/or reneging on the fundamental and hard won rights of their Indigenous Peoples.

In short, we live today, real life stories of “might makes right” and the “survival of the fittest”. These are today’s normal.

In such contexts, the rule of law, indeed the very legitimacy and viability of all types of modern day *institutions* –political, financial, economic and cultural – may have never been more vulnerable. Consequently, multilateral institutions (made up of some of the same nation-states- some of which we even speak of as ‘failed states’, or to be more politically correct, ‘fragile contexts’), are themselves facing a serious challenge of credibility. Unfortunately among those, is the United Nations, whose main pillars are peace and security, human rights and sustainable human development.

Therefore, with the challenge to this multilateral institution, there is a actually a challenge to the very values it stands for, and seeks to defend. In other words, we are living in times where the main narratives of “might make right” challenge the very pillars of our human civilisation – as we knew and erected and defended since the second World War. And this is further exacerbated by an unprecedented access to information -- thanks to all types of media and technology – which is rampant enough to confuse and question any ‘truth’, **and** the very oxygen our planet breathes and needs, is being eroded.

Yes, I hear you thinking – indeed I believe I can feel you – getting somewhat bemused by the bleakness of this context. Because I am not describing a pretty picture or painting a pleasant reality. So this brings me to my second point.

2. Power vs. Force

In his seminal work on Power vs. Force - *An Anatomy of Human Consciousness: The Hidden Determinants of Human Behavior*, Professor David Hawkins amalgamates several scientific approaches (including adaptive kinesiology - the study of muscle movement - and non-linear dynamics) to investigate the nature of consciousness itself². Hawkins’s argument is complex, but the main tenets of relevance here are an appreciation that mind, consciousness, body, muscle, values, and beliefs, social and environmental dynamics, are all part of one whole cosmos – and indeed one being.

The implications of this one-ness, Hawkins (and many others) maintain, also requires us to appreciate not only our interconnectedness as a human species part of a common universe, but also enables our consciousness to distinguish, and react differently, to force, and to power.

Force, Hawkins maintains (and please remember this for a little later), “polarizes”, “repels”, “weakens”, “...sells out freedom for expediency”, is self-serving, involves the sacrifice of others rather than self, is “limited”, and “appeals to our lower nature”. In fact, Hawkins’ explanation of ‘force’ is the understanding of what much research and discourse over the years, particularly in the field of social and political development, international relations and the like, have attributed to ‘power’ itself.

But Hawkins proves, through numerous experiments, that our very muscles, and thus our entire consciousness, reacts differently to force, than it does to power. Power here is the polar opposite to 'force'. It can be "inclusive, attractive, strengthening, principled in its standing for freedom and integrity, is about service to others. In short, power "appeals to our higher nature"³.

While there is much that can be argued about these assertions and indeed much has been said in support and direct contradiction of Hawkins and this entire field of research, I would nevertheless wish to utilize this distinction between force and power, and juxtapose it to the dynamics dealt with here.

We can say that even established democratic regimes are increasingly struggling to disentangle themselves from a series of crippling financial and political debacles – many of which based their credibility and modus operandi on 'force' – market force, military force, defensive force, preemptive force, or the force of racial or ethnic or religious superiority.

At the same time 'new' centers of financial and military (and militant) force are emerging, some with priorities which appear to harken back to colonial times – where an overt interest in raw materials, control over land and seas, as well as other resources, all dictate the terms of engagement. Other decentralized loci of violence - i.e. of force - are spread out over urban centers in the form of gangs, in some parts of the world, and in silent cells waiting to strike to kill or maim in other parts.

All this is taking place, it would seem, and receiving an inordinate amount of air time, far more than an interest in nurturing, in protecting, in securing conformity with human rights aspirations, democratic ideals, and/or even with the rule of law. Yet it is precisely these aspirations of human rights, dignity, adherence to international human rights and humanitarian laws, that I would posit as 'power'.

We are living in an era of force. Not of power.

This brings me to my third point: Religions – as institutions, as leaders of various background, ages and theologies, and as non-governmental and supposedly civic actors - are very much implicated in this force. Religions are part of the myriad vortex of force.

3. Religions – as Power and as Force

The unique abilities of social mobilization which religious actors have historically been capable of, can and does significantly shift attitudes and behaviors. These shifts can ultimately be conducive to peaceful coexistence between diverse communities - or the lack thereof, and sustainable human and planetary development – or the unsustainability thereof.

Religions pronounce on all aspects of life: dealing with money, material wealth, sexuality, political influence, social justice, and more. As such, religions have the potential to provide guidance to daily life, to social coherence, for solidarity, for justice, peace, and non-violent resistance and tolerance. At the same time, some religious organisations (whether religious institutions or even community groups) have their own internal power dynamics; may engage in questionable external outreach; claim absolute truth; and go so far as to instrumentalise (or allow the use of) religion to justify acts of war and outright atrocities.

It is important to recognize both the potential and the risks inherent in the relationship of religions to social, political and financial dynamics.

These very same possibilities and dangers are part and parcel – or should be – of engaging religious actors in social and political processes – indeed, in development and peace making as a whole.

Here we come to important dilemmas inherent to the governmental engagement with religions in peace building dynamics. There are – or should be – questions as to the identity and representativity of faith-based actors. This is particularly relevant given the difference between religious institutions – which are largely male dominated and rife with internal power dynamics – and between in-formal religious actors serving at the heart of their communities.

- With and to whom are we actually talking to when we are speaking with representatives of religious communities?
- Who is excluded from the dialogue and consultation tables?
- To what extent is the governmental outreach taking into consideration, or indeed contributing to, issues of asymmetries of power between diverse groups and communities? Is the governmental engagement with religious actors contributing towards social inclusion of all – i.e. to power – or is there the possibility of collateral damage – i.e. the silencing and marginalization of some voices?
- Whether – and to what extent – are religious actors directly or indirectly, also contributing to supporting dictatorial regimes, which are sabotaging democratic values?
- Does it follow logically, that we make a case for the unique value of religious actors', quote the facts and figures about the extent of their social services and their capacities to effect social norm change. While at the same time, absolving them of any responsibility for the rise in xenophobia, religiously motivated violence, the continuing stigmatization of 'others' (whether women, LGBTQI communities, migrants, HIV positive people – to name but a few) and collude thus in the cherry picking of human rights, which some religious institutions remain notorious for.

This ambiguity must not become the cause of ignoring religion altogether – as the European continent successfully did for decades. Nor must this ambiguity be ignored in the largely governmentally inspired rush to engage with religions as the peace makers par excellence – often without learning from the glaring lessons of history. After all, apartheid was religiously sanctioned by some creditable religious institutions. As was Fascism. As is the ugly hydra of non-state violence and severe state repression, in other parts of the world.

Religions are the quintessential double-edged sword – of force and of power.

The Central African Republic is an example of the 'double-edged sword' of religious involvement in conflict resolution. Many religious entities – whether religious institutions or faith-inspired NGOs – are often the first recourse for victims of the conflict. And yet when the conflict escalates, the very identity of a religious entity becomes its liability. Appreciating the double-edged sword of religions in this case, in fact, requires a deeper understanding of political-military nuances.

On the other hand, as experience in the same country illustrates, FBOs are critical deliverers of services to the poor, with some religious organizations claiming they provide an average of 40% of healthcare.

In fact, in other countries across sub Saharan Africa, because they are deeply rooted and well managed, some FBOs work in tandem with government, and successfully engage in public-private partnerships. Their experience also translates into an unparalleled database and knowledge

capacities, identifying what people need, how best to serve some of the most marginalized, and how to support governments to serve the most vulnerable.

So where does this leave us? Clearly with a need to re-evaluate the way religions themselves are understood, and the means with which secular domains seek to engage with the ostensibly sacred ones. This is especially relevant within the context of current geopolitical dynamics of power, including sustainable development and its indivisible component – peace-building⁴.

This brings me to the fourth point.

4. Working with religions is – or should be -- the ultimate humbling experience for any policy maker or decision-taker in any institution or office.

Working with religions for the sake of peace requires, nay demands, **the humility of Power, and the power of humility.**

“[There is] too much focus on the impact of religion on man, and not enough on the impact of man on religion.” Amin Maalouf

Engaging with religious beliefs, and/or religious engagements of any kind, should be the ultimate lesson in humility. And yet what we are increasingly seeing is an imperceptible move towards arrogance. “I studied theology”, or “I studied religion and conflict” is a common refrain among diverse programme managers, technocrats, even some diplomats and CEOs. As if by saying this, they are affirming that they have a grasp on religions and religious engagement. But, seriously,

- Which theology does anyone study that prepares us for the hydra faces and warped jurisprudence of force which some religiously inspired supremacists are enacting today – in different parts of the world employing different religions?
- Which political science do we study to fully and deeply grasp how and why some politicians play the religion card, while some religious leaders play the political ones – in every corner of the world, at specific moments in history?
- And which of the religious exegesis and forms of praxis studied covers each and every religion??

Moreover, it may be wise to acknowledge that while some religious peace-makers can and do contribute to achieving the SDGs and facilitating the changes required, not all religious leaders and actors are well placed, nor indeed able to do so.

In fact, I would contend that there is no evidence to justify asserting that religious actors are better placed, on their own, to understand local contexts, or even to occupy the moral high ground, and enjoy the trust of civil servants - in spite of this being oft said.

To successfully collaborate with religious actors, a careful analysis of their respective profiles and track records are mandatory – including their own selfcritical reflections – if any. Because religions can be the tool of the righteous, but not necessarily always the right – as unfolding political events even in supposedly ‘peaceful’ contexts continue to demonstrate.

This brings me to the fifth point.

5. Beyond Religious Literacy, Competency in Civic Engagement for Human Rights is necessary

Beyond religious literacy, I contend that what is required is **a competency to deal with civil society dynamics, including inter- and intra-religious sensibilities, and simultaneously with relational secular sensitivities, with a clear objective of human rights.**

Precisely because all religions – institutions and actors - have multiple dimensions, it is imperative that we ensure religious beliefs and praxis are in alignment with human rights principles and laws.

Disputes pertaining to human rights, especially women and girls' rights, are often seen as somehow unrelated to the real business at hand, that of peace making.

Yet there is – or should be - no question that we need to dare to challenge harmful practices – including gender-based ones- and to uphold all principles of human rights for all peoples at all times. Indeed, it is precisely because of these contested domains, the contested sensitive issues, that religions (covering faith, culture and values), have to be a critical part of our engagements on peace making. Religions matter because they are part of a civic political social economic fabric. Not because they stand alone and outside.

Therefore, selecting religious leaders only to work on select issues, without enabling an integration of the religious into broader civic efforts, aimed at realizing the human rights of all, (i.e. a 'whole of society approach'), is, per definition, a flawed approach.

Assuming that you can engage largely male religious leaders as peacemakers or peacebuilders, while turning a blind eye to the fact that some of them may be bigots, paedophiles, homophobes, or plain hypocrites (in Hannah Arendt's term)s, is an act of force – because it will ultimately, polarize, repel, and weaken the efforts at hand.

It is also important to bear in mind that part of the value of secular engagement with religious actors in/for peacebuilding, is that it should enable an introspection within the very same entity embarking on the process of partnership. In other words, by reaching out to point to work with religious actors, there has to be a finger pointing within at the same time - at the internal ways of thinking and working methods, including the attitudes and behaviors of the practitioners – whether secular or faithbased or a mix of the two. Working with religions out there, is mere instrumentalisation, if it does not lead to critical introspection within.

A Note of Warning: The Road to Barbarism

Reflecting on Edward Said's seminal thesis on Orientalism⁵, should remind us that one of the Orientalist myths is that religion is a uniquely determining force in the Arab-Islamic world. In a similar vein, I maintain that it is an Orientalist myth to believe that religion is a uniquely determining force of peacemaking.

Said noted that “...*Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see [a particular reality] as human experience.*” Referencing this, Professor Adam Shatz notes that if the “global war on terror” has taught us anything... it is that the road to barbarism begins with this failure” {emphasis mine}.

I maintain that where and when religious partnerships are seen as a transactional feature in business as usual policy and praxis, or an element in the toolbox of peacemaking, or part of our foreign policy priority or developmental approach - we are failing to see religion as a human experience. Actually, 'religions' should not be subject to what we do with all the other tools at our disposal (monetary/financial, ideological, institutional), i.e. religions are not for use.

I put before you here, that religions are, ultimately, a universe of human experiences **of faith** - therefore they are inherently intangible, unquantifiable and userunfriendly. If we fail to see that human experience, we are on the road to barbarism - and we are risking a consolidation of the vortex of force.

Allow me to be intentionally provocative here: could it be possible, that to be agents of power, we might actually have to come to terms with the irony that in order to realize the peace-building power of religions, we might have to consider leaving religious considerations and partnerships out of the policymaking spheres altogether? Is it conceivable therefore, that to be agents of the peace-building power of religions, we may need to “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's”...? Not because we the two domains of Caesar and God never shall meet, but rather because seeking to regulate all faiths into politics – or vice versa - will result in force.

Ladies and Gentlemen, after more than thirty years of working in the intersections of religion, politics and human rights, I have learned that **the power of humility is in recognizing the limitations of both politics and religions.**

My firm belief is that far from Habermas’s distinctions, **faith is reason. And reason is faith.**

Thus, it goes to reason – and it is consonant with the intangible complexities of people’s lived experience of faith - **that self-reflexivity is a sine qua non of the secular-religious relationships.**

To realize this self-reflexivity, why not try being radical in our considerations? As in, radically inclusive (of all living and breathing beings and things), radically compassionate, and radically merciful.

And if you think about it, being thus radical, how can we fail but to be powerful?

I thank you, and I bid you peace once again, and always.

1. By Azza Karam. All opinions expressed belong to the author alone and are not representing any
2. Arizona: Veritas Publishing, 1998.
3. Again, important to pause and note that these assertions are based on tests of muscle movement corresponding to different stimuli.
4. The Sustainable Development Goals, otherwise known as Agenda 2030, which was formulated and adopted to by 193 governments – UN Member States – in September 2015, covers all aspects of human rights as well as peace and security concerns. I deliberately uphold the perspective that within the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, all human and planetary interests pertinent to all peoples all over the world, are covered in terms of aspirations, objectives and indicators. Peace making, therefore, is very much part and parcel of each of the SDGs.
5. Adam Shatz, “‘Orientalism,’ Then and Now”, The New York Review of Books, May 20, 2019 – <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/05/20/orientalism-then-and-now/> -- accessed May 30, 2019.