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Religion – The ‘Secret Weapon’ in Resolving Religious-based Conflicts

By Stephen D. Hayes

Religion is central to much of the strife in the world today. Yet traditional diplomacy's neglect of religious factors has left the West ill-equipped to deal with the religious dimensions of conflict (as we are experiencing firsthand in Iraq). Nor have we the ability to counter demagogues like bin Laden or Milosevic who manipulate religion for their own purposes. In short, as religious a country as the United States is, it is all-but-totally clueless when it comes to dealing with religion overseas. It is time to wake up and confront this reality before it's too late!

In Chechnya, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Kosovo, Nigeria, Indonesia, and, most visibly of course, the Middle East, religion is fueling armed conflict. At the same time, it is religion itself that holds the best hope for enhanced understanding and reconciliation. Enter the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD), whose practice of faith-based diplomacy is catching the attention of leaders from the Muslim and Western worlds, including Secretary of State Colin Powell who recently declared the Center to be “doing important and worthwhile work.”

Five years ago, Douglas Johnston founded the ICRD to harness the joint strengths of religion and politics in the pursuit of peace. Johnston, a Naval Academy graduate, Harvard PhD and former nuclear submariner, has spent much of his civilian career in government service and Washington think tanks. From 1987 to 1999, for example, he served as Executive Vice President and COO at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “I felt a bit constrained in the world of ‘think tanks’,” he says, “and left to create a ‘do tank.’” Today the Center, with a staff that includes an Episcopal priest, a Muslim vice president and other multi-faith professionals and trainers, is having a real impact on the ground.

In Sudan, the Center and its indigenous partners worked for five years to resolve the 21-year civil war between the Muslim North and the largely Christian/African Traditionalist South. By establishing relationships of trust with religious and political leaders on all sides, the Center was able to inspire steps toward peace that would not have otherwise taken place. This trust shows in the praise from both sides of the conflict. As Quitbe Al-Mahdi, Political Advisor to the President of Sudan, says, “People in the South, people in the North, Muslims, Christians, they all trust the Center. That is why it will be successful in its diplomatic initiatives to promote peace in the Sudan.” On the other side, Rev. Adi Ambrose, a Pentecostal Christian leader, says, “I think this is the organization that can help us build a united Sudan.”

While the Center worked behind the scenes to secure the recently concluded peace agreement between the North and the South, its more significant contribution may be the

steps it has taken to ensure that the peace will be a lasting peace. Two years ago, ICRD was instrumental in creating an independent Sudanese Inter-Religious Council where key Christian and Muslim leaders now meet on a monthly basis to surface and resolve difficult issues. More recently, ICRD also took the lead in establishing a Committee to Protect Religious Freedom that is now bringing accountability to this highly sensitive area.

In Kashmir, ICRD has been quietly bringing together next-generation leaders from both the Pakistani and Indian sides of that dispute in working toward common ground and reconciliation. This project has already produced measurable success in connecting Muslims and Hindus at the grass roots level, in promoting the return of Hindu Pandits to the Kashmir Valley and in building new relational bridges between India and Pakistan. “In Kashmir, none of the ‘old hands’ would have imagined that you could have achieved the measure of reconciliation you have already established,” said Robert McFarlane, former US National Security Advisor.

In South Asia, ICRD is partnered with an Islamic policy studies institute in reforming the religious schools of selected countries in the region, including the Wahabbi-oriented madrasas that gave rise to the Taliban. And in Iran, it is working to build cooperative relationships with religious and political leaders as a first step toward improving the U.S.-Iranian relationship.

Johnston summarizes the global strategy: “In Kashmir, we’re working to defuse the world’s leading nuclear flash-point. In Pakistan, we’re trying to get at the seedbed of global terrorism. And in Iran, we’re seeking to expand U.S. policy options for bringing peace to the region.”

All of the great religions in their own way teach tolerance, forgiveness and peace. “The key,” says Johnston, “is not conversion, but conversation. We want to facilitate the search for deeper understanding...and then turn that deeper understanding into constructive action. Our strategy is based on the premise that everyone of influence on any given side in a conflict is not necessarily bad; and those who may properly be labeled bad, aren’t bad all of the time. So we play to the angels of their higher nature by bringing the transcendent aspects of their religious convictions to bear in overcoming the secular obstacles to peace. As our work to date demonstrates, reaching out in faith is one of the more promising approaches to addressing problems of alienation and ultimately disarming the threat of terrorism.”

In today’s super-charged international atmosphere and concern over terrorism, faith-based diplomacy and religious reconciliation may be the “secret weapon” against the violence-oriented religious extremists. As Marc Gopin, professor of world religions at George Mason University and an Orthodox Jew, contends, “The work of the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy demonstrates that conservative religious people—who otherwise might be vulnerable to religious extremism—can be brought together in a conciliatory way and develop a new non-violent, religious relationship with others.”