Forum on Public Policy

Religion, conflict and peace: Questions, hypotheses and recommendations

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Abstract

History and ongoing events show that with regard to conflict and peace a religious perspective can, with good intentions, play one role or another. It can cause or further a conflict, it can try to resolve conflict in a merely pacifist way, or it can address the root causes of a conflict and promote the structural and attitudinal changes needed to transform a conflict situation into one of peaceful coexistence. The main purpose of this paper is to explore why religions tend to cause conflict and how they can contribute to effective (not superficial) conflict resolution. Findings of research into the origins and development of religion(s) are noted. The importance is emphasised of thinking ourselves into the way original religious experiences could have been communicated, interpreted and understood. Special attention is given to the way in which receivers of accounts of genuine experiences could have focused on the inner meaning or on the contents of the communication, or on both. A few hypotheses are presented about levels of understanding and scarcity of internalising. These hypotheses are tested by using examples of conflict and peace – especially the old South African anti-apartheid conflict and the emerging coexistence in the new South Africa. The probabilities are discussed that outward observance religion can cause or contribute to conflict, and that inner change religion can promote understanding, tolerance and cooperation. Among the recommendations coming forward from this line of thinking and arguing are the following: Religions should become more honest and modest about their perceived certainties and superiorities. Religions should focus more on inner commitment (including believing as a relationship [fides qua creditur], and being oriented to inter-human coexistence) than on external features (including creed [fides quae creditur], code and cult).

1. Religion, conflict and peace

What has motivated you and me to bring our contributions to this conference,¹ is probably our interest in, commitment to and/or concern about religion. Without boring you with details, I feel obliged to share a few bits of my experience that have made me as concerned as I am about religion and religions. I grew up in the then South Africa that was ruled by the white minority with its apartheid ideology, which was naïvely accepted as divinely ordained. The whites regarded themselves as God’s ‘chosen people’ called to evangelise the people of Africa, but to avoid any socialising or intermarrying with them. In my last year in school (1948), the National (!) Party became the ruling party – and I began to question the socio-religio-ideological assumptions of my own ethnic group. During the 1950s I started asking provocative questions and in 1960 I ventured a first letter in the Afrikaans press. In the 1970s, as staff member (in the department of Biblical Studies) at the University of the Western Cape (an apartheid university for the so-called ‘coloureds’), I took part in the ‘struggle’ against

¹ Cf the Latin background of con- (together) and ferre (bring).
apartheid and in a parallel struggle against literal, own-groupish Bible interpretation. I had to dissociate myself from crucial elements in the culture of my own group. I made use of opportunities to ask challenging questions about the (apartheid) ‘system’. And with regard to religion, I emphasised that the core of the Christian message was inner change, and not dutiful efforts to accept doctrine and obey moral prescriptions.\(^2\) At ACCORD, over the past twenty years,\(^3\) I have experienced the value of listening open-mindedly and talking things out, but I also had to realise, and reckon with, the apparent scarcity among fellow-humans of the willingness to change.

It is with this experience as background and motivation that I wish to share with you some questions, hypotheses and recommendations with regard to religion, conflict and peace. It is a great privilege to do it at this very significant conference. I am bearing in mind that all of us inevitably have had different experiences and thus may have differing perspectives on religion, as well as on conflict and peace. I am also bearing in mind, however, that the symbolic table around which we are gathered has no sides, and is intended to be a place where we may share ideas frankly, listen receptively, be liberated from outdated mindsets, and internalise inspiration for the future.

Regardless of our levels of commitment or non-commitment to religion in general or to a particular religion, we may agree about two kinds of roles religion can play with regard to conflict. First, as it has (too) often happened in human history, religious leaders or groups (usually with good intentions!) can play a conflict-causing or conflict-supporting role. Second, however, religious people may fulfil meaningful roles in effectively resolving conflict. Sometimes (also with good intentions), they try to impose quick-fix, pacifist ‘solutions’, but there are enough encouraging examples of interventions from the religious side in which the underlying causes of the conflict were duly addressed. In fact, almost a decade ago (after seven years of research) a landmark publication\(^4\) was launched to counteract the notoriety of religion(s) for instigating and/or propagating conflict. On its dust cover is written: ‘We have witnessed so much violence, war, and death in the name of “religion” in recent years that we may overlook many instances around the world when the unifying power of true religious faith has helped heal differences and facilitated peace’. What is usually needed to transform a conflict situation into one of peaceful coexistence are two kinds of change – structural and attitudinal. And in both of these, religious convictions and approaches can indeed play influential roles.

The main purpose of this paper is therefore to explore the roles that religion – for instance, a religious system and people devoted to it – can play with regard to conflict, and to derive recommendations from our findings.

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\(^2\) While busy with my D.Phil. study on the topic of Understanding Scripture, I was privileged to spend a term as a recognised student at Oxford University (1976). I made good use of the notes I took in libraries and lectures, and I still treasure them (700 pages).

\(^3\) My experience at ACCORD has included conferences and research in South Africa, 11 other countries in Africa, and 4 countries abroad (in the UK, Europe and Middle East).

\(^4\) Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, 1994. Among its 15 chapters there are 7 on case studies from so many countries, including South Africa.
2. Why does religion tend to cause and/or support conflict?

In order to approach an appropriate answer to this urgent question, we have to go back to the ancient origins of religion and the more recent beginnings of current religions. About the latter, varying amounts of documentation exist, and in some cases also scriptures dating from the founding situations. About the former, however, we have to make use of clues uncovered by archaeological searches and of the inferences drawn by researchers. Based on such remnants of the past, immense bodies of literature have come into being and are at our disposal. However, as we consult the written material or view the displays of objects and symbols – as, for instance, in Oxford’s world-renowned Pitt Rivers Museum – we have to interpret the interpretations of others: founders and followers, primary and secondary researchers, insiders and outsiders.

In all these chains of interpretations, the most important ones are probably the very first ones. In so many (or even most?) cases, however, precisely those founding interpretations are apparently just taken as they were handed down in what became firmly established traditions. Questions about what could have happened in the minds of the people concerned are therefore evaded or even forbidden. In The varieties of religious experience, William James has given us descriptions of personal religious experiences – ‘more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism’. He also shared his insight into a crucially important distinction: ‘Churches, when once established, live at second-hand upon tradition; but the founders of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine’. What therefore deserves our serious and honest attention is the link between first-hand experiences and second-hand traditions.

2.1 Hypotheses about internalising or externalising religious experiences

Let us recall our own first-hand experiences, use our empathetic imagining, and think ourselves into the situation where a religious leader (founder or innovator) is communicating an experience to potential or existing followers. Such an experiment can obviously not lead to provable certainties, but it may guide us towards meaningful suppositions. For instance:

First-hand experiences and feelings may include a deep wonderment and gratefulness about the being there of oneself, of others, and of our micro and macro environment; a yearning to radiate one’s thankfulness to an impersonal nature or to express it towards a personified, supernatural being; and a genuine commitment to a lifestyle in the best possible relations to fellow human beings and to nature or a divinity.


6 William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, 1902.

7 James 1902, 30.

8 Here ‘alleged’ could have been inserted.

9 James 1902, 31.

10 From one of the books I read in the Bodleian Library in 1976, I wrote down the suggestion to use ‘sympathetic imagination rather than synthetic cogitation’ (Paul S. Minear, Eyes of Faith: A Study in the Biblical Point of View, 1948, 4.)

11 There is of course also the possibility that someone with socio-political aspirations for his/her own (self and) group may claim to have received divine instructions.
An inner experience cannot be transferred to anyone else as an experience, but an attempt may be made to describe it. Since the experience can be ‘an ineffable sensation of eternity and infinitude, of communion with something that transcends us,’ the one who has had it has to interpret its meaning and then has to select the most appropriate words to communicate the (interpreted) meaning.

An account of a religious experience, and the accompanying body language, will therefore inevitably be comprised of internally oriented elements and externalised codes of communication. And the receivers of such an account may then focus on the inner meaning, or on the external account, or on both.

Suppositions such as these have suggested the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1: About ways in which followers understand the core meanings of messages from leaders, or/and focus on the outer content of such messages**

When religious experiences are communicated to others,

(a) some understand the core meaning and experience inner change,
(b) some accept the contents of the message and try to live accordingly,
(c) some understand the meaning and experience inner change, but also accept the contents, and
(d) some reject the message and its meaning.

Two important considerations are posited by this hypothesis. The first is that an account of a religious experience can be understood penetratingly or superficially, or can be rejected. And the second is that there is a crucial difference between really understanding the inner meaning of such a message, and only accepting the observable words and signals used to convey the meaning.

What we are supposing, is that religion and religions came into being through inner experiences, but that out of such experiences there developed external features and structures. Therefore, at the beginnings and right through the histories of religions, the distinction between internality and externality was of pivotal importance.

On our way to an answer about why religion causes conflict, we may also take a second hypothesis into account. While our first hypothesis is about qualitative distinctions between ways of understanding and implementing, the second one is about possible quantitative proportions of the categories. For our present purpose, we may especially focus on the first three categories, where (a) and (c) may be labelled ‘Understanding and inner change’ and (b) ‘Contents and effort’.

In Christianity, the Gospels in the New Testament already contain a few clear examples of lack of understanding and lack of inner change. Such a response could of course be expected from the legalistically minded ‘Teachers of the Law’ and ‘Pharisees’. They were disturbed by Jesus’ distinction between outward piety and inward integrity and by his provocative anti-

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legalism – to such an extent that they conspired with their political opponents to kill him!  
But it is indeed shocking that glaring misunderstanding surfaced in the inner circle of insiders! Near the end of Jesus’ ministry, his close followers showed that they did not understand, or did not want to understand, his message of hierarchy-defying serviceability. They were ‘arguing among themselves about who was the greatest,’ and, at another occasion, two of them wanted prime seats in Jesus’ ‘glorious kingdom’.

In other New Testament books we get further examples of deficient understanding. Early Christians of Jewish background had the religious culture of literal law observance so deeply embedded in them that they could not (or were scared to) understand and accept Jesus’ message that would liberate them from human effort legalism. In a letter to such a group we therefore find questions and exclamations as the following: ‘You began by God’s Spirit; do you now want to finish by your own power? ... Now that the time for faith is here, the Law is no longer in charge of us.... Freedom is what we have – Christ has set us free!’

In a book on Christian church history, Hieronymus (‘sacred name’), in English usually referred to as Saint Jerome – who was renowned for his great learning (and received the ecclesiastical title of ‘doctor’), who was given the task of translating the Old and the New Testaments from the original Hebrew and Greek into Latin, and who spent half of his life (347-420 BCE) as a monk in a monastery – is described as ‘irritable and honour-greedy’. It seems therefore as if this highly respected church ‘father’ had not understood Jesus’ basic message about undergoing a change of mind!

And then, more recently and very importantly, there was the fundamental (!) misunderstanding of the core message of Jesus – in the ‘Christian’ South African context where apartheid was preached and practised as ‘God’s will’.

Taking such examples from the past, as well as observations in the present, as seriously as we should, one feels prompted to put forward the next hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2: About the proportion of followers who properly understand their leaders’ messages**

When original or subsequent religious experiences were communicated to others, a minority of the receivers understood what inner change means, while a majority focused on the contents of the message as a divine directive to be observed.

It should immediately be emphasised that these hypotheses are not intended to undermine the foundations of any genuine religious establishment. (They may of course threaten to destabilise a system of superficial religiosity.) On the contrary, they focus our attention on the core meaning of true religious experiencing. They do not imply that the contents of the communication are unimportant. What they do imply, is that a communication about an inner experience can be received and applied in, basically, one of two ways. It may be taken as the

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15 Mark 9:33-35.
16 Mark 10:35-44. Moreover, they used an objectified, literal understanding of the metaphor Jesus used for an inner reality. Jesus is reported to have emphasised: “[T]he Kingdom of God is within you’ (Luke 17:21).
19 My translation of Van Itterzon’s Dutch wording, ‘prikkelbaar en eerzuchtig’.
narrative and/or symbolic communication about divinely inspired inner transformation. Or it may be accepted as a divinely revealed instruction that has to be believed and obeyed.

In hypothesis 1 it is assumed that there are two partings of ways. The first is the general one between those who accept a religious message ((a), (b) and (c)) and those who reject it ((d)). The second is the particular parting of ways, within the religious field concerned, between those who experience inner change ((a) and (c)) and those who try to observe divine directives ((b)). In hypothesis 2 it is assumed that a modest minority is found on the route of inner change, and a dominant majority on the route of observance.

In South Africa, precisely that, the observance religion of a dominant religious majority, became a driving force that turned socio-cultural differences and tensions into orchestrated polarisation. The pro-apartheid whites were a minority in the population, but in the religious field they formed an influential majority. They also managed to become a political majority in the whites-only ‘democracy’ of the time. As I was writing this paper, an article on the background of apartheid appeared in the Cape Town-based Afrikaans newspaper and elicited responses in the readers’ column. A historian, renowned for his research on the Afrikaners and apartheid, wrote:

The initial idea of apartheid did not come from academics in the social sciences or humanities, but from people in the churches, the missionary field and the theological faculties.  

He added that a theological professor [in Missionary Science!] was a key figure, and the only academic, in a political commission who drafted the ‘apartheid platform for the 1948 election’ – the election that brought the National Party into power and enabled it to entrench its apartheid ideology by means of one law after the other.

Much more can of course be said about the South African history since the arrival of European settlers 300 years earlier, and about mindsets and value systems since antiquity, but for our present purpose a brief outline of what can be derived from the South African inter-ethnic conflict will have to suffice.

- It seems to be clear that a particular version of a particular religion did play a key role in causing and waging this conflict.
- The conflict-causing element in the preaching of the Afrikaans-speaking (Dutch) Reformed Church(es) was clearly located in the observance-mindedness of the majority in the religious establishment.
- The preoccupation with dutiful observance of quotations from the Bible was a direct result of a literalistic acceptance of its contents.

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21 Dutch (1652), French (1688) and British (1820).
22 In a nearly finished occasional paper (probably to be entitled ‘External religion and conflict, or internal religion and coexistence?’), I am referring to remarkably insightful and relevant material from Don Edward Beck and Christopher C. Cowan, The Psychological Map: Emerging Deep Structures in Global People, 1990, and Aubyn Howard, Spiral Dynamics and Value Systems, 2006.
23 Cf Vaughn Crowe-Tipton’s emphasis on the importance of interpreting and translating according to semantic fields and not just lexical fields (Righteousness and justice in Matthew, 2013, 2-3).
The literalistic loyalty was based on the absolute certainty that the Bible was the authoritative ‘Word of God’ and that (convenient) bits could be eclectically compiled regardless of context.\textsuperscript{24}

Directly linked with this certainty was the conviction about the absolute superiority of (the particular version of) Christianity, which ‘[a]s in Europe ... was equated with civilization and cultural refinement’,\textsuperscript{25} and which incorporated the beliefs in being chosen and being called (from John Calvin, 1509-1564) and in ‘creation ordinances’ about separate ‘intrinsic organic orders’ (from Abraham Kuyper, 1838-1920).\textsuperscript{26}

According to such inferences, the deepest underlying cause of the conflict seems to have been one that was both religious and socio-cultural. It apparently emerged when the meeting of the cultures of the South African inhabitants and the European settlers resulted in a clash of disliked differences, and when the settlers and their descendants began regarding their own culture, their own religion, and themselves, as superior.\textsuperscript{27} The discrimination and injustice they began inflicting upon the indigenous South Africans could therefore be seen as a socio-cultural and later a socio-culturo-political phenomenon. But it definitely had its roots in a religious approach plagued by an obsession with externalities – an obsession that was camouflaged by a missionary zeal to save souls across a social divide!

Three and a half centuries of South African history therefore provide endorsement of the two hypotheses presented above, as well as examples of the tragic consequences of external religiosity – however well-intentioned it may be preached and practised.

Taking our discussion further, we may now return to the first main question of this paper: Why does religion tend to cause and/or support conflict?

2.2 Conflictual tendencies typically present among observance-preoccupied religious groups

As we have been thinking ourselves into the beginnings and developments of religious groupings, we took note of the inevitability of external features in religious convictions and behaviours. We may have realised that such external features can have an enticing appeal. They seem to pull people along a line of least resistance. People tend to think it is easier to accept contents of faith than to give oneself in a relationship of faith, easier to try and obey ethical rules than to allow your mind and life to be changed, and easier to follow the majority than to identify with a minority.

\textsuperscript{24} For instance: ‘When the Law of Moses was being read aloud to the people, they came to the passage that said that no Ammonite or Moabite was ever to be permitted to join God’s people. ... When the people of Israel heard this law read, they excluded all foreigners from the community ... At that time I [Nehemiah] also discovered that many of the Jewish men had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. ... I reprimanded the men, called down curses on them, beat them, and pulled out their hair. Then I made them take an oath in God’s name that never again would they or their children intermarry with foreigners. ... I purified the people from everything foreign ... Remember all this, o God, and give me credit for it’ (Nehemiah 13:1, 3, 23, 25, 30-31).

\textsuperscript{25} Johnston and Sampson 1994, 184.

\textsuperscript{26} Johnston and Sampson 1994, 185.

\textsuperscript{27} Cf Brian Dale’s (America’s national religion, 2013, 17-18) discussion of American superiority and exceptionalism, and Nakanyike Musisi’s (Beyond religious wars: Rethinking 19th century Crescent and Cross relations in Buganda, 2013, 5) discussion of the way in which propagators of Islam and Christianity misunderstood Buganda’s openness as empty-mindedness.
As already emphasised, these external features, the core of which is often succinctly summarised as creed, code and cult, need not and should not be regarded as incompatible with inner change. It is an obsession with the externalities that does not go along with inner transformation. Unfortunately, however, it can happen that a majority becomes preoccupied with such features and reifies them into venerable objects. The unavoidable result is that inner change is sidelined and that absolute ‘certainties’ are mainlined.

This is precisely what did happen in early Christianity. The tragedy has been described as follows:

Regretfully with the dawn of ‘Corpus Christianum’, when Christianity became integrated with Roman ideology and culture, the church became encapsulated within sovereign absolutes, which are foreign to the freedom and intent of the Gospel.

In the Christian theology of the time, the distinction between faith as contents to be believed and faith as a relationship in which to live was recognised and the two kinds of believing were labelled with apt Latin phrases: fides quae creditur (faith which is believed) and fides qua creditur (faith by which is believed; faith by which real believing becomes a reality).

A fixation on ‘certainties of faith’

Although the early church fathers (who were indeed predominantly male!) took note of this distinction, their attention and argumentation remained focused on the contents of faith and therefore on correct doctrinal formulations. The ‘orthodox’ (‘right opinion’) majority positioned itself over against the non-orthodox or ‘heretical’ others. Each side defended its own views/interpretations against opposing ones, or even went into an attacking mode.

They apparently lost sight of the fact that Jesus ‘was different from the teachers to whom people were accustomed’ and that ‘[n]o summary of his “doctrine” has come down to us’.

They apparently did not realise that when something is believed, it cannot be proved, and when something can be proved, it need not be believed, and that therefore ‘certainties of faith’ was actually an oxymoron.

When an apparent majority of those early leaders – in their context and with their insight – chose option (b) of hypothesis 1 above, it had long-term (or all-time?) implications for the Christian Church that was taking shape. Currently, there are signs that the need is recognised...
for revisiting at least some of those choices. From the perspective of this paper, such rethinking may surely be encouraged.

Earlier, however, in the Christian establishment in South Africa, the implications of the option (b) route were clearly discernible. On the basis of the theological certainty that the Bible was literally, from beginning to end, the authoritative ‘Word of God’, the derived certainty about ethnic separatedness and social aloofness as divine imperatives was sermonised into naively trusting church members. In a decisive way this caused and fuelled the deplorable inter-ethnic tension and conflict.

Very interestingly, the obsession with certainties also led to *intra*-church conflicts and rifts. Both in Holland and in South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church split into three on account of different degrees of literalism in the interpretation of doctrinal issues. In one case this literalism was even applied to hymns, and only the rhymed *Psalms* were approved for singing in church services. Other hymns were rejected as unbiblical!

**A perception of superiority**

In these three (‘sister’) churches, loyal church members gathered for worship Sunday by Sunday, imbibing their ministers’ sermons as correct exegesis of texts from the Word of God. Very understandably, they took it for granted that this Christian religion, and especially the Reformed (non-Catholic) version they were devoted to, was the superior religion on earth. Such a mindset can obviously induce actions that cause tension and may even lead to conflict. People who are sure that their own religion (or political party) is better than others or *the* best of all, and that the others are by implication inferior, tend to propagate the purposeful expansion of their own version.

In the history of South African Christianity, this was indeed the case. The message of salvation from punishment for sin was spread with missionary zeal, and with the inevitable consequence of accentuating the divide between imported Christianity and indigenous ‘heathendom’. And after all, the military metaphor was not completely absent: ‘Forward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war’ was one of the hymns sung with good intentions.

**A captivity in own-groupishness**

The practising of religion in the observance mode can make a striking impression on people who do not know inner change from own experience. But, in spite of all the external features, effort- and duty-based religion cannot liberate any individual from self-centredness or any group from group-centredness. The old South African example provides a clear confirmation of this fenced-in-ness. Christians, very loyal to their creed, code and cult, limited their commitment to community to their own socio-ethnic group. They supported reaching out with a ‘soul-saving’ religious message, but were firm about staying socially apart from and aloof above the receivers of the message. They allowed themselves to be held captive within the racial and psychological barriers they themselves had erected and were guarding.

What we can learn from the old South Africa about conflictual tendencies harboured within religious believing and behaving, may then be summarised as follows:

- Presumed certainties of faith may persuade well meaning church members to defend their convictions by word and deed.
An assumed perception of the undoubted superiority of the religion of a group may convince the group that their religion deserves to be propagated among groups adhering to other religions.

Religious practices focused on the obligation to observe prescribed contents may precipitate tensions and divides.\(^\text{35}\)

The South African past and present do not only provide answers to our first question, why religion can cause conflict, but also to our second question, how religion can help to resolve conflict.

As a link between conflict-engendering captivity in an exclusive group and conflict-concluding transcending of boundaries in a liberated group, a very significant publication in Afrikaans may be mentioned. The author, T. T. Cloete,\(^\text{36}\) a renowned Afrikaans poet, was 88 when the book was launched at a Word Festival earlier in this year. Its title (as translated) is a thought prompter: *The other one is I*. The author is on a religious wavelength,\(^\text{37}\) but also on literary, psychological and philosophical wavelengths. The main theme of the book is that of self-transcendence, or, as he says, its synonym ‘empathy’. He elaborates on this topic and elucidates it in many and surprising ways, and quotes various poets, philosophers and other authors. For instance, Victor Frankl:

> Human existence ... is always directed to something, or someone, other than itself, be it a meaning to fulfil or another human being to encounter lovingly. I have termed the constitutive characteristic of human existence ‘self-transcendence’ ... The more (man) forgets himself\(^\text{38}\) – giving him to the cause of another person – the more *human* he is. And the more he is immersed and absorbed in something or someone other than himself the more he really becomes himself.\(^\text{39}\)

Cloete’s book is one example (of more) – coming from within the Afrikaans-speaking component of South Africa, who may mainly be held accountable for having instigated apartheid – which highlights that religiously minded people can do something towards preventing and resolving conflict.

3. How can religion contribute to effective (not superficial) conflict resolution?

From between the lines of our discussion thus far, several answers emerge clearly and forcefully. Obviously, when the indications are that a particular approach or attitude may promote conflict, the answer seems to be that the opposite direction has to be explored. Normally, it would be sufficient just to state the positive answer, but in the case of religion with its deeply rooted and firmly established traditions, it may be better also to emphasise the ways of thinking and doing that have to be phased out.

\(^\text{35}\) In an article entitled ‘Beyond Ethical Codes: A Call for Critical Thinking in Religious Culture’, Isidoro Talavera (2011, 1-2) emphasises that a code of ethics, in a context of ‘doctrinal certainty’ and ‘absolutism’, and driven by ‘legalistic demands’, ‘may engender conflict’.

\(^\text{36}\) His initials being used as first name

\(^\text{37}\) He was, for instance, involved in greatly improving the Afrikaans wording of rhymed Psalms and other hymns.

\(^\text{38}\) Pre-gender consciousness phrasing of Frankl’s time.

\(^\text{39}\) Cloete 2013, 90.
3.1 Promoting open-minded understanding instead of adhering to ‘absolute certainties’

When two parties cling to incompatible certainties, tensions and disputes inevitably arise. In religious conflicts, the non-negotiable matters are usually traditions, revelations, documents or doctrines. In other conflicts, each party tends to regard its positions and demands as unchangeable.

Such fixed-mindedness may be turned into open-mindedness, but, especially in the religious field, considerable honesty and courage may be needed to bring this about. It seems to be a typical phenomenon that a religion applies double standards with regard to honesty. On the one hand, honesty is held forth as an ethical prescription, but on the other hand, it is sidelined when traditional certainties are defended. In such a case, consistent honesty would dare to practise contextual interpretation and recognise contexts in which, for instance, metaphors were never intended to be taken literally. If at such a point, the metaphor or symbol is then reinstated, it may result in a breakthrough to conflict-resolving understanding – and in the removal of a conflict-causing factor.

In so many cases, a breakthrough to understanding is found to be a dramatic turning point in the conflict-resolving process. This can happen when for the first time one party grasps the perspective and the position of the other party. If this is reciprocated by the other party, the two parties experience mutual understanding and become motivated to undertake joint problem solving.

3.2 Practising modest dialoguing instead of propagating a ‘superior’ religion and/or culture

Conflict-resolving practitioners are often surprised when such mutual understanding is reached almost as by a miracle. Parties can of course not be induced or pressurised to understand each other. What can be done, however, is to create an atmosphere which discourages one-way propagating and encourages two-way listening and talking.

With regard to modesty, the double-standards issue may also be raised in the case of religions energetically propagating their message. While they may be preaching modesty, their missionary preaching may not be modest enough. And at any rate, inter-faith interest and dialogue may be a much more tactful and effective way of sharing the message of any particular religion.

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40 Cf: ‘Religion and its leaders must begin with an open, honest confession of the harms it has done’ (Brenda Overfield, For better or worse? Religion and the Common Good, 2013, 6).

41 In its commendable Religion and Peacemaking Initiative, the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) has, for instance, hosted a workshop on ‘Teaching about the Religious Other’. Its summary begins as follows: ‘Prejudice and ignorance about the beliefs and practices of the religious “other” often exacerbate conflicts. Religious stereotypes contribute to misunderstanding and foment animosity. ... It is particularly important that teaching about the religious other be introduced in schools, universities, and seminaries in countries where religious conflict is a significant problem’ (David Smock, Teaching about the Religious Other. Special Report 143, United States Institute for Peace, 2005, 1).

Practising receptive listening and frank talking is therefore a meaningful example that religious people who are inwardly transformed can contribute. This may serve as an encouraging model, not only in interreligious disputes, but also in all interhuman conflicts.43

3.3 Supporting conflict-resolving methods that are not merely pacifist but deal with underlying causes of conflict

An important part of the contribution just mentioned is the emphasis on talking things out. When parties are engaged in ‘talks’, superficialities and pacifist niceties are totally irrelevant. People who are still stuck in the effort mode of practising their religion may be inclined to advise parties in conflict to try to be nice, and to simply smile and shake hands. In the Christian context of South Africa, we have listened to well-meant sermons on one of the so-called beatitudes of Jesus: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’.44

In the same context, however, (three sentences earlier) Jesus is reported to have said: ‘Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness’.45 With ‘peace’, therefore, he must have meant peace based on justice, peace reached after having satisfactorily dealt with the root causes of the conflict.46 Religious people whose way of living radiates this orientation to justice and peace can accordingly fulfil a crucial role in preventing and resolving conflict.47

3.4 Recommending attitudinal change instead of outward observance

Probably one of the most important contributions that religion can make to conflict resolution is the emphasis on inner change – and particularly on the attitudinal change from unwillingness to willingness. Willingness is a pivotal need throughout the process of dealing with conflict. At the very beginning, the parties in conflict have to become willing to talk.48

During the talks they have to become willing to listen open-mindedly, to tell the truth, to accept the assistance of a facilitator or mediator, to understand the views and needs of their opponents, to undertake the necessary problem solving, and to reach an agreement. And thereafter they have to be willing to make their agreement work, and willing to restore and build relationships. It should be clear, therefore, that without the willingness of the disputing parties, the best methods are useless and the best mediators helpless.

Self-transcendent willingness cannot be brought about by outside influence or pressure, however. It cannot be an add-on to a self-centred mindset. Nevertheless, there are messages that may be communicated to an unwilling person or party: for instance, messages containing

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44 Matthew 5:9, Revised Version (In those days the Today’s English Version did not yet exist.)
45 Matthew 5:6, Revised Version
47 Cf. ‘Anytime a Religion of any faith or denomination seeks to bring Peace and Tolerance to where it does not presently exist, it can only be considered pertinent to the times, and vital for the coexistence of diverse societies’ (Overfield, 2013, 3).
48 To get parties so far, often requires most (or much) of the time and effort of mediators, and a term has therefore been coined for this process: ‘Getting to the table (or tree)’. And it has to be used so frequently that the abbreviation ‘GTT’ has become convenient.
encouraging examples and/or stimulating seed thoughts. And this is where inwardly changed religious people may share very meaningful views and be very good role models.

Apart from the valuable meanings encoded into their words and body language, there may also be the thrust of something that will be conspicuous by its absence from what they communicate. There will be no obsessiveness about the dutiful observance of external religious features.

3.5 Promoting structural change where needed instead of maintaining an unjust status quo

Observance-oriented religious systems are usually bent on preserving established structures within themselves and often also in their cultural environment. That was the static situation in the old South African ‘system’: established own-groupish interpretations of scripture and dogma, and enforcement of discriminatory divides in the ethno-socio-cultural setup. Such a system could not be revamped by mere attitudinal change; it had to be made over by thoroughgoing structural change.49

It may correctly be said that ‘[a]ll conflict is about change’,50 and that the required change is (almost) always structural and attitudinal.51 Here too, therefore, the religious contribution to conflict resolution can especially come from transformation-minded religious people – and not from observance-minded groups.

In South Africa, there were indeed whistle blowers and strugglers against apartheid who were operating in a religious context. They braved ostracising and kept pleading and pushing for the urgently needed attitudinal and structural change.52 And when eventually political leaders undertook the actual dismantling of apartheid, they were not only motivated by the socio-political vision ‘that in the new South Africa no one group should dominate another’; they were also ‘informed by ... religious convictions’.54

4. Recommendations

The possible contributions from the religious side discussed in section 3 are actually more than contributions to conflict resolution. They are also, and especially, contributions to the awareness that the essence of religion is not located in observance of external features, but is located in inner transformation. Therefore, the recommendations following in this section have a dual purpose:

49 In the racially compartmentalised family of Dutch Reformed churches such a change was initiated by the Belhar Confession in the early 1980s. Alfred Brunson has aptly emphasised this confession’s Scripture-based appeal for a living unity, true reconciliation and compassionate justice in the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa, an appeal which had to ‘be internalised and lived in the church and beyond’ (The confined public good of a confession: A practical-public theological reflection on enhancing the (public) good of the Belhar Confession in the Reformed Church family of South Africa, 2013, 8).

50 Mark Anstey, Managing change: Negotiating conflict, 1999, 3.

51 Jens-J. Wilhelmsen, Man and structures, 1977, 40.

52 In the new South Africa, the legacy of people as (alphabetically) Beyers Naudé, David Bosch, Desmond Tutu and Nico Smith is duly honoured. Archbishop Tutu has been praised for having ‘killed apartheid with love’. It should be added, however, that before the tyranny and heresy of apartheid dawned upon the regime, this love had to be a very ‘tough love’.

53 Cf Overfield, 2013, 3.

54 Such as F. W. de Klerk.

54 Johnston and Sampson 1994, 197, 196.
• Peaceful coexistence instead of (religious and other types of) conflict
• Spontaneous inner-change religion instead of effort religion

4.1 Experiencing and sharing crucially important insights into the essence of religion

If we focus our attention – actually our entire being there – on the remarkable (archetypal?) phenomenon of human religion, we may be stirred by an ineffable experience of being interrelated with divinity, humanity and reality.

Such an experience may change one’s thinking, believing and behaving – and also one’s way of talking about religious topics. Instead of passing on hearsay contents, one may then share something of the insight and inspiration that have become part of your being.

Religion originated from inner experience, and external features were secondary phenomena

When we make good and justifiable use of our gift of imagination and think ourselves into the beginnings of religion and religions, we may realise that religious experience must have been the core of the originating events, and that external features must have arisen as secondary phenomena and subsequent developments.

The essence of religion therefore lies in inner experience and change, and not in outward observance

When we explore the beginnings, the history and the current status of religion and religions, we may become convinced that the essence of religion cannot lie in the observance of outward structures or traditions, but must lie in inner experience and inner change.

External religious features may add value to inner meaning, but should not degrade religion into a matter of effort and duty

When we understand the reasons for the existence of external features and appreciate their potential meaningfulness, we may remain faithfully loyal to the traditions and ways of worship treasured by the religious groups to which we belong. At the same time, however, we should guard against, and warn against, the fallacy of a human-effort religion which focuses on ‘believing’ correct content instead of on inner change. (People who do not grasp the tragedy of the effort error in religion may be reminded about the apparent futility of effort love [‘trying my best to love her/him’].)

4.2 Applying such insights in contributing to the possible resolving of religious and other conflicts

Asking the breakthrough-promoting question why?

In this paper we did not merely ask which conflictual tendencies are present among religious people; we started with the question of why religion tends to cause conflict. Having experienced established religiousness in South Africa, I am aware of the antagonism against provocative why? questions. I have also experienced, however, the revealing and resolving power of why questions – or even of ‘why?’ as a single word question. I have found it a very

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55 Cf J. J. Knap, Van de Bekeering (On conversion), 1935, 109-110: ‘And just look at the genuinely converted human being: obedience comes spontaneously. His good actions emerge from the sources of love as fresh water bubbles up from the underground source without trouble or effort…. Spontaneously, or with effort, – there lies the touchstone.’
useful tool in mediating between parties in conflict, and I have heard how someone without any conflict resolution training has helped a friend to solve a serious problem by just repeatedly asking ‘Why?’ while the friend was telling the story.

**Listening receptively, and revealing the readiness to understand**

What happens around a table or under a tree is usually called ‘talks’, and frank, uninterrupted talking is indeed important. But even more important than the story-telling and the stating of positions and demands, is the *listening*. Parties should listen attentively and receptively. They should think about what they are hearing, and try to understand it, instead of just planning what they could say next. The attitude of a party who listens in such a way may be compared to a traditional custom (among a South Sudanese group) of reaching out to a party whose position is the furthest removed from your own.\textsuperscript{56} It may also be said, however, that what really happens is more than benevolent outreach; it is *inreach* of the being there of others into your own being there.

**Penetrating to the underlying cause(s) of the conflict**

People who realise that religion is not about externalities, but about inner transformation, are able to understand that differences in external elements can lead to conflict-prone situations, but that for effective conflict resolving, the inner attitudes behind the differing things have to be addressed. Where, for instance (as in the old South Africa), discriminatory laws and structures inflicted injustice on people, the underlying cause of conflict was deeper than injustice – it was the attitude of own-groupish superiority. More was therefore needed than the dismantling of structures; the polarising attitudes had to be changed (and still have to be changed where they are harboured even now).

**Cooperating towards a mutually satisfying solution of the problem(s) concerned**

When one party makes the breakthrough to understanding, it usually prompts the other party to do the same, and the resulting mutual understanding usually causes a chain reaction of wider spreading mutuality. From ACCORD’s three case studies of communities\textsuperscript{57} who resolved their deadly conflicts, the following deserves to be quoted here:

> At all three sites more than one aspect of mutuality was emphasised. Mutual understanding led to mutual trust. In some cases, mutual trust led to mutual relationship building. More generally, it led to mutual recognition and respect. From both sides, individuals and/or groups realised that the others also exist and also have their needs, their rights and their cultural contexts. They experienced the dynamic results that can follow and multiply once the isolation of prejudiced perceptions has been overcome.\textsuperscript{58}

These real life examples show that mutual understanding is crucial, and creative. The moment it happens, parties become jointly committed to problem solving and conflict resolution.


\textsuperscript{57} In two cases black and white, and in the third case black and black communities.

Remaining committed to implementing the solution agreed upon

Such a commitment, which emerges from a voluntary, inner change, does not need outside reminding or reprimanding in order to be maintained. The people concerned experience it as a new but inherent core element in their ways of thinking and living. Moreover, they experience it as an effortless dynamic. In each group, however, the people with such a commitment are usually only part of the whole group. There may also be those who accuse their negotiating team of having been sell-outs – which is an understandable reaction from people who have not had the experience of mutual understanding. It reminds us of our hypothesis about the original problem in the dimension of religion: it is not the thrill of the experience that can be passed on to others, but only an account of it. The probable reality of a non-understanding majority has to be reckoned with, therefore, as in religion so also in a post-conflict situation after a negotiated agreement. There are strategies that may be (externally) applied, such as monitoring the implementation of the peace agreement, or presenting scenarios of alternatives to the agreement. But those who have via mutual understanding reached a mutually satisfying agreement will remain inwardly motivated to implement the solution.

Living open-mindedly to understand and solve new problems

More than just remaining committed to implement one solution, however, such people usually remain ready to address and solve new problems for the rest of their life. After all, what we are talking about here, and have been talking about from the beginning of this paper, is not an effort to observe a prescription – of a religious tradition or a conflict-resolving method – but an inner change of mind and behaviour. For those of us who are experiencing such inner change, experiencing the following becomes completely natural: openness, understanding others’ viewpoints, problem solving, conflict resolution, relationship restoring and building, coexistential living.

5. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explore, on the one hand, why religion, of all things, often causes or furthers conflict, and, on the other hand, how religiously committed people can contribute to resolving conflict and promoting peaceful coexistence. Its main thrust may briefly be formulated as follows:

Religious leaders and followers who are fixated on the dutiful observance of externalities, however well-intentioned they may be, are oriented in a conflict-prone direction without realising it.

Those, however, who have discovered the real core of their religion and are accordingly focused on inner change, are living examples of conflict preventers and resolvers, and should honestly and modestly share their experience and insights. (Nothing prevents them from remaining loyal to external features, which, reinterpreted where necessary, can be quite compatible with a commitment to inner transformation.)

59 Cf the acronyms BATNA and WATNA for, respectively, best and worst alternative to a negotiated agreement.
From a transforming South Africa, where a particular religion was and is functioning in both these ways, seed thoughts as the following may be gratefully and modestly shared:

Fearless open-mindedness about the essence of religion and about the root cause of a conflict can make crucial differences.

Liberation from own-groupish superiority and divisive ‘certainties’ can open the way to genuine dialogue, mutual understanding, and a satisfactory level of coexistence.

Attitudinal change does not obviate structural change where it is necessary, but should be concomitant with it, and can greatly contribute to its scope and impact.

Willingness to understand, to cooperate, to change where needed, and to coexist with fellow human beings is the *sine qua non* of genuine conflict resolving, and of religious living and believing.

Sincere thanks for your open-minded attention and dialogic response.

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