

## **LEARNING FROM THE PAST: ROLE OF RELIGION IN PEACEBUILDING**

*Mohammad Shahabuddin\**

### **Introduction:**

From the crusades, inquisitions, and holy wars of the past to the jihads and religious conflicts of the present day, religion has a long history of implication in violence and war. Over the past three millennia, millions have been killed in the name of somebody's God-notwithstanding the strict proscriptions against killing affirmed by the world's great religions. Even today, religion is seen as a leading contributor to the 'intolerance, human rights violations and violent extremism' afflicting the world at the start of the twenty-first century<sup>1</sup>. This is how, Muslims all over the world has been stereotyped as 'terrorists' following the war against terrorism. In the South Asia only, we saw the rise of Sikh extremism, Hindu nationalism, and Muslim communalism, and all of them had a reverse gear, which obviously made 'religion' the focal point of national and regional politics. Hundreds had to die in the name of religion in very recent communal riots of Gujrat of India. Sinhala Buddhists are still fighting Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka, and Shia-Sunni fighting has become a norm of life in Pakistan. Therefore, any suggestion that religion might play a role in conflict prevention, resolution or transformation, often meet with a certain skepticism, if not outright opposition.

However, an in-depth analysis shows that the world's religious traditions, each in their own way, offer a rich abundance of insight and guidance for the promotion of peace. All the religions have the potential to make a unique and substantial contribution to peacebuilding. They all affirm the imperatives of cooperation and a peaceful human society. And they enjoin us all to respect each other and our communities, even as we pursue our own aspirations. The teaching of the world's religions offer wise counsel, healing, solace, and enduring hope. By seizing on the wisdom of these traditions, we are given the opportunity to transform

---

\* Mr. Mohammad Shahabuddin, LL.B. (Hons), LL.M., University of Dhaka is a Chevening Scholar.

<sup>1</sup> Carter, Judy and Smith, Gordon, 'Religious Peacebuilding: From Potential to Action', *Religion and Peacebuilding*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 279.

conflict's fearful downward spiral into an ascending spiral of peace. The challenge to this direction is to bring religious beliefs to the political agenda for constructive and practical effect. If we categorize,<sup>2</sup> the *first* challenge is to clearly understand the religious content in specific episodes of conflict and its connection to other casual factors of violent conflict, most notably desires to effect structural, economic, political, and social change, and *second* challenge is to integrate the wisdom, spirit, and techniques of the world's religious traditions into the politics and practice of contemporary conflict management, prevention, resolution and transformation.

Conflicts need to be 'seen' and 'read' properly, especially those that have major cultural, ethnic, and religious components. External actors may find it difficult to have access to knowledge unique to the situation that enables them to use their analytical framework properly. Religious leaders, because of their training and their role, can be better positioned in interpreting a conflict. Because they are closer to the scene of events, at ease with many actors, and familiar with the language and the issues at stake, religious leaders may offer important interpretative frameworks.<sup>3</sup>

The following sections will scan the peace messages of the major religions of the world and pick some examples of their practical implications.

### **Hinduism and Peace**

Remarkable feature of Hinduism is its pluralism. Unlike other world religions, which recognize a single dominant deity, incarnate prophet, and single sacred text, Hinduism comprises many sects with many beliefs and traditions. Obviously this connotation of plurality has successfully minimized tensions and conflicts within Hinduism.

Hinduism is not a religion of a single book or a founder. Four Vedas—Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva (approx. 1500-2000 BC) are the earliest source books of Hinduism, followed by the numerous Upanishads (500-1000 BC), also known as Vedanta. The Upanishads were followed by the epics, first the Mahabharata and later the Ramayana. The Bhagavad Gita (the songs of God) appears in the course of the Mahabharata.

---

<sup>2</sup> See *ibid*, p. 299.

<sup>3</sup> Bartoli, Andrea, 'Christianity and Peacebuilding', *Religion and Peacebuilding*, *supra* note 1, p. 158.

Peace is prayed for numberless times in the Vedas. The Arthava Veda has the following prayer-lines, an indication of sorrow over war and of a desire for reconciliation with strangers:

Let us have concord with our own people and concord with people who are strangers to us. *Asvins* (celestial twins) create between the strangers and us a unity of hearts. May we unite in our minds, unite in our purposes, and not fight against the heavenly spirit within us. Let not the battle cry rise amidst many slain, nor the arrows of the war-god fall with the break of Day. (Book VII: 52)<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, the word 'Shanti' (peace) occurs twelve times in the short prayers comprising the seventeenth verse of Chapter 36 of the Yajur Veda. Peace is sought in the celestial regions, in the intermediate regions, on earth, for herbs, trees, and plants, to all things in the universe, and to the one praying.<sup>5</sup> The verse that follows reads: "Strong one! Make me strong, /May all beings look on me with eye of a friend, /May I look on all beings with the eye of a friend, /May we look on one another with the eye of a friend" (Yajur Veda, 36: 18).<sup>6</sup> The Yajur Veda refers to forgiveness, compassion, and service as key values (40:6), but exhorts some verses later: O brave warrior, /Pounce upon your enemy/ Like an Eagle/And annihilate him" (4: 34).<sup>7</sup> Enmity and war seemed part of daily life around the Vedas' anonymous writers. Perhaps, because of this, the Vedas offer promises such as these: "The union of hearts minds /& freedom from hate I'll bring you. /Love one another as the cow /loves the calf that she has borne" (Atharva Veda, III: 30; i.).<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the Katha Upanishad opens with the oft-recited invocation for unity and peace: "May He protect us both. May He take pleasure in us both. May He show courage together. May spiritual knowledge shine before us. May He never hate one another. May peace and peace and peace be everywhere."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Bose, Abinash Chandra, *Hymns from the Vedas*, Bombay: Asia, 1966, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Gandhi, Rajmohan, 'Hinduism and Peacebuilding' *Religion and Peacebuilding*, supra note 1, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Supra note 4, p. 217.

<sup>7</sup> Vidyalankar, Pandit Stayakam (Ed.), *The Holy Vedas* cited by Gandhi, Rajmohan, supra note 5, 1986, p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> Supra note 4, p. 155.

<sup>9</sup> Swami, Purohit and Yeats, W.B., *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, New York: Macmillan, 1975, p. 25.