Effective Giving as a Means to Interreligious Conflict Reduction

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Abstract

With more than 110 active armed conflicts in the world and more and more countries recording a drop in peacefulness, it is more important than ever to foster collaborative interfaith efforts and bring together groups of differently-minded people to help solve some of the world's most pressing problems. Previously developed theories such as contact theory and economic empowerment suggest that both social and economic factors need to be taken into consideration to reduce intergroup violence. Our proposal is that effective giving, a method of philanthropic giving to the most cost-effective charities in the world, meets the needs of both the social and economic criteria to reduce intergroup violence. At One for the World, an effective giving organization, we have seen how different groups of people can come together and form deep social bonds when aligned over a similar cause. We propose that using the same organizing principles as existing interfaith initiatives has potential to contribute to a reduction of violence and an increase in positive intergroup attitudes between those groups.

Keywords: effective giving, interreligious conflict, contact theory, Gordon Allport, Rubert Putnam, Benjamin Friedman, intergroup conflict, institute of economics and peace

Introduction

Today, there are more than 110 active armed conflicts in the world.[1] According to the Global Peace Index, 2024 saw 97 countries recording a deterioration in peacefulness - the most since the inception of the index.[2] While the origins of these issues are varied and complex, perceptions of religious difference play a central role in several of the most urgent conflicts of 2024. One of the most relevant and salient examples is the conflict in Gaza between Israel and Palestine, but there are also interreligious conflicts in the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger), Iran, Syria, and Yemen, to name a few.[3] All of this has extraordinary economic ramifications; 86 countries increased their military expenditure in 2024, another record since the inception of the GPI.[4] In aggregate, these conflicts have taken the lives of 174,790 people in 2023.[5]

Drivers of conflict

While the drivers of conflict are complex and immunerate, two main drivers can be acknowledged as significant and longstanding: the sociology of otherism and the economics of anti-social behavior.

Sociological narratives of otherism: Sociological factors of violence are most often observed in media and policy. From news headlines to radio broadcasts, and now spreading through digital and social media, the social context of violence is most commonly identified in the public sphere. Narratives of otherism, adoption of social hierarchy, and framing the presence of a religious other as an existential threat to the majority are common themes one can find in conflicts around the world. One key ramification of these tendencies is both dehumanization of the "other", in which the categorization to inferiorization pipeline leads to the common result in which religious others are understood to be less-than-human. Such outcomes are ubiquitous, as most cultural contexts has some identified group which is perceived as dehumanization[6].

But many of these social factors have their roots in human biology. Counter to the longstanding idea that out-group bias is solely a phenomenon of socialization, an increasing body of evidence suggests that out-group bias is an intrinsic human trait. Infants can demonstrate a preference for their in-group as early as three months[7], before infants are even able to understand language. This isn't to suggest that religious violence is purely deterministic, but rather, is more complex than simply a reflection of the environment in which one grows up.

Economic drivers of conflict: However, it is essentially to also acknowledge the economic factors that can influence interreligious conflict. Particularly, when the majority of household incomes in a nation stagnate in real terms, there's strong evidence to suggest that social cohesion decreases while group conflict increases[8]. In his book The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth, Benjamin Friedman highlighted how eras of economic stagnation in the United States correlated with stricter immigration laws, increased racial violence, and a decrease in egalitarian social policy. These trends have been studied across many countries and contexts, and has been observed in data from more than a century. In short, sociological narratives of dehumanization may provide the spark for violent conflict, but it increasingly seems that economic stress and uncertainty may provide the fuel.

Trends in solving religious conflict

In addressing interreligious conflict, and intergroup violence at large, the social and economic trends that make violence possible each require their own solutioning. To this end, the following solution themes arise.

Contact theory: One of the proposed solutions for intergroup violence reduction is Gordon Allport's "Intergroup Contact Hypothesis", which theorizes that bringing differing groups together with four key conditions would help reduce violence between those groups. These four conditions have been applied in a myriad of ways by researchers but the key concepts remain the same:
- ***Equal group status in the situation:*** The idea here is that groups have perceived equal status in the situation, though this condition has been used differently depending on the

circumstance. Some researchers have found that this condition promotes positive intergroup attitudes "even when the groups initially differ in status".

- ***Common goals:*** Active effort towards a goal that the groups share can help increase intergroup positive attitudes. In practice, this is most commonly seen on athletic teams, where people from varying backgrounds must come together to achieve a common goal. This then plays into the next condition, which is similar.

- ***Intergroup cooperation:*** Meeting goals as a group of distinct and diverse individuals only comes through cooperation rather than competition. In the famous Robbers' Cave Study, Sherif et al. (1961) devised barriers to progress that would require cooperation from the group in order to succeed. They found that the cooperation that took place to overcome these obstacles also developed positive relations between the groups.

- ***Support of authorities, law, or customs:*** Unsurprisingly, intergroup cooperation is more effective when backed by a seemingly impartial authority. It is often due to social institutions and systemic structures that certain groups have positive or negative relationships with other groups in the first place. Civil rights legislation is a relevant example of this, as it paved the way for not only many conversations and actions to desegregate the United States (to varying success), but it also set the stage for many more anti-discrimination laws to be passed. The caveat here is that authorities can play a role in intergroup violence to a large extent - for example, police brutality in the United States. Even if cooperation is found in a study or in a contained environment, it is not always possible to assume that this will extend into the larger social structures that run our everyday lives. [9]

While it is true to an extent that equal group status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support *can* contribute to more positive intergroup relations, these conditions are not infallible or applicable to every situation. Robert Putnam challenged this theory in "The Downside of Diversity" - in his research, he found that in American settings, ethnic diversity meant lower social capital. In other words, people living in ethnically diverse neighborhoods would "hunker down" or "pull in like a turtle" to isolate themselves from their communities, including those in their immediate social circles. This is surprising using the basis of contact theory, which would suggest that greater ethnic diversity in neighborhoods would lead to higher contact with differing individuals and thus increase positive attitudes towards those groups. This seemingly contradictory finding of Putnam's plays into what Scott Page calls "the diversity paradox", which posits that while ethnically diverse societies can tend to have lower social capital, they can also have incredibly positive effects in the workplace. This is why melting pot cities like New York City and Los Angeles drive economies and innovation.[10] Putnam also found that when positive attitudes *were* increased through contact, that positive attitude applied to entire groups, rather than individuals alone; in other words, a Jewish person who found common ground with a Buddhist would also generally feel more positively towards Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, etc. So although in the

short term, diverse communities can bring out the turtle in individuals, successful immigrant communities do foster a construction of new identities. [11]

Economic empowerment: Just as there is a theorized solution to the sociological components to conflict, some evidence suggests that economic influences can similarly reduce conflict. While assigning correlative patterns and causal pathways between economic measures and violence is rife with uncertainty, and perhaps some conjecture, there are key trends worth acknowledging.

Intuitively, we can deduce from Benjamin Friedman's work that if stagnation in real household income decreases social cohesion, then increases in household income relative in real economic turns would thus safeguard from such deterioration. And for this to be a societal effect, it would require an increase in real income in the majority of households to ensure reduced risk of conflict.

The Institute of Economics & Peace annually released their "Positive Peace Report" which measures relative standings of the attitudes, institutions, and structures that promote and sustain peace in various countries[12]. Namely, three of the eight pillars comprising the "Positive Peace Index", including:

- *Sound Business Environment:* a strong private sector that enables competition and economic productivity are key to driving a more peaceful society.
- *Equitable Distribution of Resources:* Inequalities in access to education, healthcare, as well as wealth and income pose threats to social cohesion.
- *High Levels of Human Capital:* In countries with skilled and educated citizens correlate with less violence. This may be driven by a secondary effect of access to better childcare, increased political participation, and/or the cultivation of social capital.

In short, while leveraging contact theory may mitigate the sociological narratives that drive communal violence, a holistic violence prevention strategy would be incomplete without robust economic policy.

Effective giving as a method of violence reduction

In looking for a solution for how to address both the sociological and economic drivers of conflict, effective giving as a collaborative interfaith effort has promise as an under-explored solution space for interreligious conflict.

Effective giving is a philanthropic practice that acknowledges that because human beings have limited resources, donations should be made to those charities that have rigorous evidence of impact - in other words, where our money can go the farthest per unit donated. Effective giving builds on the work of philosopher Peter Singer, who states in his book "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", that if one can use one's wealth to reduce another's extreme suffering at a small cost to

oneself, then they are obligated to do so. [13] The now very well-known "drowning child" thought experiment encourages people to think about how just as they would dive in to save a neighbor drowning in the pool next door, they should be willing to sacrifice to a certain extent to save drowning children on the other side of the world. It is also true that in many countries, what is a negligibly small amount of money for the donor is life-changing for the beneficiary due to purchasing power parity.

Giving effectively only makes a positive impact if cause prioritization, solvability, and neglectedness play a role in determining a charity's effectiveness. Should these not be taken into consideration, a charity could receive a plethora of donations and use that money ineffectively, thus not helping any particular world issue. In Michael Kremer's RCT study done in 1990, evaluating school interventions in Kenya, he found that none of the charity's interventions, from increased school supplies to free school uniforms, increased student performance. However, when he decided to test an intervention treating intestinal worms, which make children sick, he found that this increased student attendance by 25 percent. This type of study shows that it is not only important to donate "to the other side of the world", but to donate to charities whose interventions are cost effective, target a prioritized and neglected cause, and can make the biggest difference in beneficiaries' lives. [14]

Effective giving's positive sociological and economic impacts: With that above understanding of effective giving as a collaborative space, we can see how it meets the needs of both the sociological and the economic criteria to meaningfully contribute to violence reduction.

Firstly, effective giving can easily meet the requirements for meaningful progress through Contact Theory. Namely:
- An organizing party, such as an effective giving organization like One for the World, can play the role of an impartial convener, in which volunteer organizers from various faith traditions can trust to be impartial in its dealings with individual participants.
- By focusing on effective giving outcomes like "money moved" (total raised), or number of pledges (number of new donors), it would be easy for participants to perceive themselves as having equal power within the effective giving mobilization efforts.
- The mission of raising money to address the effects of extreme poverty would meet the criterion of having a shared objective. Furthermore, there is additional support through the shared value of philanthropy and service that all religious traditions hold.
- Lastly, ongoing efforts to both engage in and promote effective giving require continued collaboration, meeting the final requirement for humanization through Contact Theory.

Anecdotally, we've seen the effects of this in our organizing at One for the World. While to date our work has not explicitly targeted religiously diverse participants in our effective giving efforts, we have observed cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity in our participants and organizers. The byproduct of this collaboration has been the unusually strong social bonds created between

our participants, which have led to lifelong friendships, future job opportunities, and even in a few cases, marriages. Our proposal is simply to build upon that effect by intentionally creating interfaith effective giving efforts.

Secondly, the economic ramifications of effective giving directly interact with the components of the Positive Peace Report. More specifically, the organizations receiving effective giving philanthropy include organizations addressing malaria (Against Malaria Foundation and Malaria Consortium), vaccinations (New Incentives), and vitamin A supplementation (Helen Keller International). Each of these interventions directly contributes to the Positive Peace Pillar of "equitable distribution of resources". More specifically, these organizations are overcoming significant disparities in healthcare, where those living in extreme poverty lack access to these fundamental health services. Bringing these two effects together, interfaith effective giving would have a profound effect in efforts to counter interreligious conflict.

Weaknesses of this approach

One clear weakness of the proposed plan is that while effective giving organizations are inherently bringing communities together through effective giving, the organizations' focus on extreme poverty and charities taking on extreme poverty primarily in the Global South, means that the sociological and economic benefits of this solution will never overlap in the same location. The effective giving community that One for the World would build in New York City, for example, would be concerned with effective donations to communities not their own; donors would not be discussing extreme poverty, lack of access, or other socio-economic indicators local to New York. Similarly, One for the World is not building community or discussing extreme poverty with direct beneficiaries of this work, who primarily live in the Global South and have the best perspectives on their own communities' socio-economic struggles. This discrepancy is part of what makes One for the World's organizing challenging, as the focus will always be on bringing together different perspectives and insights and then using the collective vision and motivation for effective giving to donate to countries many of the donors have never been to or have little to no insight into. There is, at this point, no location One for the World operates where the economic and social aspects of this approach would come together in the same place.

Another weakness in using effective giving is the power imbalance that naturally exists between different groups upon bringing them together. As discussed in a previous section, contact theory emphasizes the importance of groups having equal footing entering an intergroup discussion or activity - however, in real life circumstances, it is much trickier to not only ensure equal status, but to create a relationship between those individuals that can transfer outside of discussion settings. One way to illustrate this is through the example of Seeds of Peace, an organization best known for their summer camps that bring Jewish Israeli and Arab youth into dialogue with one another. While many alumni of the camp can confidently say that it changed their lives, it is only fitting to wonder whether the cooperation, positive social interactions, and general humanization of one another can hold up against the social environment of Israel and Palestine.[15] As the organizer of these gatherings and conversations, it is our responsibility to take

these power imbalances into mind while simultaneously understanding that there are consequences regarding transferability that we cannot anticipate and should be sensitive to as and when they appear among donors.

Next steps for validation/invalidation

So far, this paper establishes the state of global violence, with a focus on interreligious conflict, as well as the most significant trends in the efforts to address such conflict. In applying these insights, effective giving stands as a significant yet unexplored avenue of interfaith peacebuilding. While there are notable challenges and weaknesses to this approach, expert collaboration, field research, and catalytic philanthropy could enable peacebuilding stakeholders to better validate the intervention. Furthermore, tests in validating effective giving as a means to interreligious conflict reduction would be to be conducted at increasingly large sizes, to test the scalability of the intervention more broadly.

A starting point for this would be to host a convening of interfaith and faith-based philanthropic institutions. This convening would enable collective exploration for where to test this approach, what communities may wish to participate, and lastly, the funding sources to develop a new interfaith effective giving ecosystem.

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