On Teaching Peace: Considering the Potential of University Courses on Faith and Conflict Resolution

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Abstract
Religion and peacemaking is an area of growing interest in higher education. Providing an overview of the development of peace studies as an academic discipline and the later shift towards the study of religion, I present several programs that are attempting to bridge this gap and to mobilize religious leaders to engage in conflict resolution. I also introduce the importance of an intellectual framework called Covenantal Pluralism that allows for shared objectives to be charted across programs.

Keywords
covenantal pluralism, religious liberty, peace studies, violent conflict

Introduction

The persistent rise in violent conflict is a pressing concern to all. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported that in 2023, over 120 million people were displaced worldwide due to conflict, violence, and persecution, and human rights violations.[1] This is the 12th year in a row that this number continues to increase. There are staggering statistics about the human and ecological cost of war, and research clearly documents the link between conflict and extreme poverty. Furthermore, the devastations of war and violent conflict undermine sustainable development and global humanitarian efforts that seek to link governments and non-governmental organizations to care for those in need. Much of the work of humanitarian relief and development is conducted through these international organs which are comprised of people from many different religious and cultural backgrounds. To facilitate collaboration, or at least to avoid offence, there has been a preference to engage with secular or "neutral partners" rather than with those of known religious affiliation.[2] There has been concern that trust not be undermined by religious agendas and that the neutrality needed to access areas of conflict not be compromised. While acknowledging these concerns, there is also a growing awareness that religious communities, institutions, and social structures can have a vital role in humanitarian efforts including conflict resolution.

The viability and strategic importance of religious actors in peace building is becoming more widely accepted in programmatic and academic literature. Concern for the suffering of humanity is not new to religious people, but the acknowledgement of their contribution in international forums has steadily grown over the past two decades. The inclusion of faith as a constituent element of conflict resolution has progressed from informal collaborative efforts of those working for peace to formalized structures. This can be seen in the United Nations World Interfaith Harmony week and the G20 Interfaith Forum, both which have stimulated increased support from donor states and foundations. Many governments now include freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) and International Religious Freedom (IRF) as a diplomatic theme or topical portfolio. This is indicative of the recognized need to increase the inclusion, participation, and

commitment of religious actors, both local, regional, and international to proactively strive for peace. This is high level recognition that faith-based institutions can play a significant role in alleviating suffering from violence and oppression, and in limiting conflict.

The inclusion of religious actors has stimulated collaboration among organizations and the pooling of resources, but there is a need for training programs to prepare these professionals. The field of peace studies, as opposed to the study of war and conflict, has become established in many universities and have made important contributions. There are now over 300 colleges around the world with programs in peace and justice studies, but there are very few that directly address religious engagement in conflict resolution. To stimulate this important area of study, online courses and training modules have become available through organizations such as ConnexUS, United States Institute of Peace, and Search for Common Ground. Such programs seek to train practitioners who will work with religious entities and to provide religious actors and institutions engaged in mitigating violent conflict with the foundational principles taught in the study of peacebuilding.[3] These trainings are only a first step, and yet they affirm the reality that navigating religion can be an issue for those working for peace, and that religious people can be mobilized and equipped to work for peace within their respective contexts. In this essay, I explore the theme of religion and peacemaking through the lens of higher education. Following a review of the development of peace studies as an academic discipline and the later shift towards including religion, I consider a theory of change framework that could prove useful in bridging the gap across these two disciplines and present several programs as case studies useful for those seeking to engage religious actors in conflict resolution and to design programs for training, research, and project design.

Academic convergence in religious and peace studies

There is an established stream of scholarship in the field peace studies. There is also a significant body of academic literature pertaining to inter-religious relations and dialogue. I am interested to draw themes from both to think about the interrelation of faith and conflict resolution. More specifically, I am thinking of the possibilities inherent in higher education, and in centers of learning that can equip those working in the realm of conflict resolution. In many programs the aim is to help development practitioners and diplomats go deeper into the realm of religious learning, but I am more interested in programs that engage religious leaders in the processes of conflict resolution. I find that religious leaders who are embedded in communities and social networks have tremendous potential for impact in social contexts where religious faith is central to identify and determinant in political leadership. Though both are important, on the practical level today, I would rather teach religious leaders about the mechanics of peace studies rather than government or non-government workers about religious studies. The former come with a constituency and are embedded in the community, and hold an authority seldom attained by the latter.

There has been a steady transition over the past 50 years in higher education from the study of war and military strategy to the study of peace and conflict resolution. Often regarded as the discipline's doyen, Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung provided a foundational distinction between negative and positive peace.[4] Negative peace is the absence of violence or war, but this can simply mean that one side was victorious, and it succeeded in subduing or annihilating its enemy. Positive peace, however, is characterized by the presence of social justice and the

integration of human society, this describes a resolution to the conflict in a manner that game theorists describe as a positive sum game, where even though there may be some winners and losers, the net result is that resources are somehow increased and an approach is formulated in which the desires and needs of all concerned are satisfied. A positive peace brings many variables and stakeholders to the table because it requires a win-win resolution.

Galtung and scholars in the discipline also defined the key concepts of structural and cultural violence. To address the root causes of conflict, peacebuilding must go beyond ending direct violence and tackle the underlying structures, whether social, institutional, or political that prevent people from meeting their basic human needs and rights. Some examples of structural violence as proposed by Galtung include institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism.[5] Structural violence and direct violence are said to be highly interdependent, including family violence, hate crimes, genocide, gender and racial and ethnic discrimination, and religious discrimination or persecution. Built upon and surrounding these forms of violence is structural violence, where social and cultural norms, political institutions, and government policies do harm through the prevention of basic needs and social exclusion and is perpetuated through discriminatory beliefs and power structures. Peacebuilding structures must address the root causes of conflict and support local capacity for peace management and conflict resolution.

Though the academic discipline of peace studies took shape in largely secular institutions, there have been significant contributions made by religious thinkers and activists. One example of this is the work John Paul Lederach, whose approach has been applied in conflicts around the world and was instrumental in founding programs at Eastern Mennonite University and the Kroc Center for International Peace Studies at Notre Dame. In this case, it is an example of a smaller Christian denomination (Mennonite) impacting larger groupings, both Catholic and Protestant, and calling for peacemaking to be seen as central to faithful religious practice. Lederach added to the discipline by coining the concept of "conflict transformation" as an additional process for constructive change initiatives that include and go beyond the resolution of particular issues.[6] Lederach argued that conflict is normal in human relationships and that conflict can be a motor of change, but there must be a right way to engage in conflict. The term transformation envisions the horizon on which people – including opponents – journey, namely towards the building of healthy relationships and communities, both locally and globally. The process requires a lens to see the immediate situation, or cause of conflict, with a view of the deeper relationship patterns that form the context of the conflict. There are no quick solutions, and so ways require human relationships at a deeper level to address forms and residue of structural and cultural violence. Looking through the lens, and taking account of the stories unfolding, a platform is to structure the relationships, whether as a community group or regional forum. From this platform, parties can begin to find creative responses and solutions. From my reading of Lederach, he says that the key to conflict transformation is relationship, relationship forged with a shared exploration of the immediate situation, of the history and context of this situation, and a framework by which to address immediate and long-term problems and solutions. This is where religious actors can be vital.

If relationships are vital for peace, and religious differences hinder relationship, how then can a bridge be built? How does one become prepared for relationship and how do these organic bonds form? Within religious studies there is a theory of change (ToC) that is gaining traction and that posits a way of engaging religious actors in conflict mediation and transformation can occur.[7]

A framework for collaboration

As noted in the introduction above, humanitarian work including efforts in conflict resolution has largely been regarded as a secular domain. Though this has allowed for the practical delivery of goods and services, it has limited the participation of stakeholder communities and on occasion causing distrust and skepticism of the project staff. Underlying this issue is the question of normative plurality versus universality.[8] Are theorists and decision makers willing to accept the plurality and hybridity of norms, and to refrain from imposing idealized secular democratic norms? The Western intellectual approach that has shaped higher education has carried the seed of an essentializing worldview that is hierarchical and characterized by dichotomous "self-other" constructions. It is in guarding against such attitudes that international relief and development has advocated a secular approach. Whether there has been enough course correction in academia is yet to be seen, thought there are plenty of promising examples which we will consider below. Within religious studies, more specifically in interreligious methodologies, there is a framework called Covenantal Pluralism (CP) that has been useful for conceptualizing the shared work of religion and peace studies.

At the root of these struggles is the question of pluralism: can multiple religions coexists peacefully and justly in a community? The question is not whether people of differing religious beliefs should inhabit the same space, for that has been the case from time immemorial. The issue is whether societies today can or will protect the rights of persons in their midst who hold to a competing religious belief. Professor S.I. Strong, a specialist in international law, has observed that broadly speaking, the state of religious liberty around the world is increasingly deteriorating.[9] Some have argued that this is an issue of governance, that is there simply is too much strain on economies and political systems to provide such protections. Others have argued that this is due to cultural values, namely some nations are less tolerant of difference, particularly when it comes to religion.[10] The need of the day, as Strong observed, is to identify an intellectual framework that combines the hard skills required for governance with the soft skills required for cultural engagement. Covenantal pluralism (CP) is one theory of change that continues to gain traction among those working in Freedom of Religion or Belief (FRoB), and that seems particularly promising for the subject of faith and conflict resolution. CP is a transdisciplinary paradigm that theorizes conditions whereby religious differences can be appreciated as functions of human dignity and liberty of conscience in every context.[11] CP provides terms and categories to describe and measure the conditions of a given context in a manner that can be helpful for the field of religion and conflict of resolution.

Built upon earlier frameworks for interreligious relations, CP decoupled the concept of pluralism from that of normative universality, the essentializing function noted above. It also clarified that pluralism does not assume the ultimate validity and efficacy of all religions.[12] It does not promote the setting aside or diluting of one's faith convictions. It called for, as Amir Hussain explained, for religious actors "to gain a deeper sense of each other's commitments."[13] Another important descriptor of the paradigm is the inherent call for action. CP was not designed purely for the study of "orthodoxy," or agreed belief, but also to stimulate the study and promotion of "orthopraxy," or agreed action, a process to activate religious institutions, civil society, and individuals to work together to protect human rights and to hold persons accountable to their obligations. Political regimes have leveraged religious discourse for political ends, most often without the consent of religious authorities, and this has been a detriment to their citizens. This has

taken the form of assertive secularism, but also of religious and nationalist authoritarianism.[14] CP was designed to safeguard religious liberty, and I believe this paradigm can be extended to the field of peace studies with empirical implications. The paradigm envisions the sort of academic and practitioner partnership required to maximize the potential of religion and conflict resolution, and this is what we will explore below.

It has been postulated that Covenantal pluralism requires three interlocking "conditions of possibility." First, there must be legal guarantees assuring the freedom of conscience and the free exercise of religion, as expressed not only in documents but also in the equal treatment of different religions and worldviews. Second, there must be proactive promotion of religious literacy, which requires a three-dimensional approach: knowledge of one's own tradition, especially the scriptural demands and resources related to engagement with others; knowledge of others' traditions and the theological logics and demands they entail; and knowledge of the cultural dynamics and contexts that facilitate or impede constructive engagement. Third, there must be social norms that insist on the cultivation and embodiment of mutual respect, without demanding that any religious group sublimate their own convictions. The identification of these three conditions provides a framework for practitioners to evaluate the situation within a context and to plan accordingly. The conditions also function as a diagnostic tool that is helpful to policy makers and civil society workers who are making action plans. Perhaps a country or area within a nation has passed legislation to strengthen legal guarantees, but it has not developed or disseminated adequate resources for religious or cultural literacy. The conditions of possibility are interlocking, so they must all be nurtured if lasting change and sustainable development are to flourish. It is important to note that these conditions are highly demanding. There is not a country in the world that exemplifies the perfection of any of these, and this is precisely the point of the framework. These "conditions of possibility" charter a cogent means for researchers, activists, and policy makers to discuss social dynamics of religion across contexts within the matrix of three interlocking conditions of possibility.

Universities and institutions of higher education provide the optimal venues for a CP paradigm to be applied to the study and training of religious actors in conflict resolution. This is particularly important for actualizing the third condition, namely that there must be social norms that insist on the cultivation and embodiment of mutual respect. Religious leaders and communities can take a lead in diffusing conflict and the tools and methods form peace studies can help to facilitate their engagement. One reason for this confidence is many institutions –though not familiar with CP, and without labeling their programs as peace studies – are already engaged in activities and are cultivating relational networks with similar aims. They are working to strengthen these three conditions of possibility. In the section below, I will introduce as case studies some institutions whose programs already have components useful in conflict resolution components and that with additional support can make a significant difference within their regions of influence. I have labeled these from the simplest to the most complex in their programing and structure to provide useful models applicable and possibly reproducible in other locations.

The first example is from Baylor University, Waco, United States. This is a top tier (R1) research university that is religiously affiliated in Protestant Christian tradition.[15] There is a growing number of students from many religions, and the Office of Student Life has a dedicated staff tasked with promoting diversity, equity, and belonging to all students through co-curricular

activities, particularly those of minority religious communities. There are classes with curriculum designed to teach the values inherent in CP, but there is not degree or academic major in peace studies or conflict resolution, or religion and peace. One course that I have taught explores the potential contributions of religious literacy for navigating a religiously diverse global society. Designed by Michael Whitenton, now at Inter-faith America, and Joanne Cummings, is built upon the assumption that religious difference is a resource for the common good—that we are better human beings and better citizens of a better society if we have authentic encounters across religious differences. Sometimes called "interfaith engagement," these encounters focus on story-sharing and cultivating relationships, rather than winning a debate or sorting out who is "right." According to social scientific research, such interactions spark authentic relationships, leading to positive attitudes towards, and appreciative knowledge of, religious traditions other than one's own. Students explore relevant scriptural texts and real-world applications of interfaith principles. As a result, students become able to articulate a theory and ethics of interfaith dialogue and collaboration, drawing upon close readings of primary sources and analysis of case studies vis-a-vis the most foundational works in this new field of inquiry and praxis. This is a course which is largely reproducible in any academic institution, and it contributes to religious literacy. However, the course does not fit into a degree program. The course and related student activities involve a few guest speakers but has little collaboration with religious leaders in the surrounding community and does little in the field of political advocacy or government policy.

Another example is the Master's Program in Religion in Peace and Conflict from Uppsala Universitet in Sweden.[16] This university awards a Masters of Arts in Theology for successful completion of the program. The program is completely virtual, and it is designed to inspire and equip practitioners in any context who are interested in the moral and ethical predicaments faced in the world today and the role given to various religious traditions. It is intended to connect faith with public discourse and to promote religiously and ethically based social activism. This provides course materials that blend religious studies and peace studies and an online forum for guest lectures, dialogues, and shared learning. Unlike Baylor, where learning is in person and grounded in one location, this program of study is global in reach though not based in one location and does not seek to create an embodied community of practice. The learning is made available, and there is a network of learners. The course promotes religious literacy and cultural values, but it stops short of addressing issues of policy and governance.

A third case study is provided by the University of the Religions and Denominations (URD) in Qom, Iran.[17] Started from an Islamic Seminary, the university specializes in the study of diverse religions and denominations and was designed to promote interactions and dialogues for representatives of different faiths. The vision of strengthening peace is listed as a priority, but the study and research programs focus upon religion, and upon providing a scholarly introduction to Islam and to the Shia tradition. There are degree programs in religious studies, international courses and consultations, and the program allows for inter-religious understanding and religious literacy, but there is not an academic program in peace or conflict studies, nor an emphasis on policy that would strengthen assurances of religious liberty for all. One distinct feature of this program is the strong affiliation with a network of religious leaders through the seminary who led mosques and other institutions. This has allowed for the promotion of religious literacy and the promotion of cultural elements that are essential for promoting peace and engaging a larger community constituency for mutual understanding and respect.

A fourth example is the Peace and Counter Terrorism Program at Minhaj University, in Lahore, Pakistan.[18] This university was also started from a sharia college (seminary), but has grown to offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in many difference courses, including this program that seeks to integrate courses in peace studies, conflict studies, and religious studies. The degrees prepare scholars for employment in government departments and in humanitarian organizations. The university welcomes international students and its faculty and student body have representatives of multiple religious traditions and denominational backgrounds, including Sunni and Shia Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Christians. One additional benefit of this university's model is that it has a strong affiliation with a network of secondary schools and with alumni from the sharia college who leads mosques and other institutions. This has allowed for the promotion of religious literacy and the promotion of cultural elements that are essential for promoting peace and engaging a larger community constituency. The degree programs also have policy elements are their research attempts to influence governance and to promote the religious liberty of all persons. With such a large network of religious leaders, one area of growth could be to provide certificate trainings or programs that engage local this leadership in promoting the three elements of CP.

Another case study can be seen in the Indonesia Consortium for Religious Studies in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.[19] Started in 2006, this is a graduate study program formed by the cooperation of three universities, representing three established models for education, the government, Islamic, and Christian. The consortium brings together students and faculty from the three universities into one location where they teach, study, and research together. The shared location and faculty provide a more level playing field that allows for the experience of religious and cultural diversity. The city is a thriving center of international learning, and the program can benefit from this cosmopolitan atmosphere. The central theme of the program is religious, but research pertaining to peace is supported, though there are not courses pertaining directly to the subject. There are courses pertaining to religious literacy and cultural promotion, but not for policy and governance.

There is also the program in Peace Studies and Theology, at University of Notre Dame, a Christian university in the Roman Catholic tradition located in United States.[20] This is one of the most developed programs and it was designed to integrate religious studies and peace studies. Undergraduate and graduate degrees are granted, and there is an active range of international courses and consultations. The stated aim is to help scholar-practitioners to think theologically about peace and conflict. In some ways analogous to URD in Iran, at Notre Dame students are immersed in the scriptural foundations of the Christian faith, as well as in the liturgical, spiritual, ethical, and pastoral dimensions of the Christian tradition. Though available to persons of all faiths, the program brings the academic study of peace into the realm of religious studies, which can spread influence through religious leaders in the associated network of churches and institutions. The program promotes religious literacy of other faiths, the promotion of cultural values that welcome other religious viewpoints and has a robust engagement in policy and governance.

Presented above is selection from among many other possible examples of universities who are providing learning and research opportunities at the intersection of religion and peace making. These were considered according to the CP theory of change paradigm, which as described above

provides a diagnostic framework to assess conditions within a context according to conventions in international convention of freedom of religions and belief (FoRB). The selected examples were presented according as part of my ongoing research to identify best practices for academic programs at the intersection of religion and peace. These brief case studies function as a rubric useful to others considering project design and course development. In your city or region, for example, there might be a university offering a single course, like at Baylor, or a full degree program as seen Uppsala. There might be a peace and conflict degree that includes religion, as seen at Minhaj University, or a theology degree that includes coursework in peace studies as seen at Notre Dame, URD, and at the constituent institutions in Indonesia. These each have their strengths, and they provide practical examples to those who are interested in adding elements to an existing program, or to purpose build a degree or certificate program. This is intended to not only inspire but also to seed ideas for practical steps forward. Might Qatar, for example, under the leadership of Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue and the resources of Education City and Qatar University convene a program that builds upon these examples to envision a leading global center for the study of religion and conflict transformation?

Looking ahead, one aspect that one seeks to build upon is the importance of identifying conflict dynamics that are unique to each context. Conflict is contextual, meaning that there are unique elements to a respective community. Though there are foundational aspects, the solutions are not one size fit all. Anyone seeking to engage in peacebuilding activities, both to prevent what might seem like a looming conflict, and to work in ongoing conflict zones it is vital to how to engage with religious actors and institutions, during times of both peace and conflict. There are peacebuilding concepts that are useful to practitioners and with lessons that can be broadly taught. There are other elements, however that are overtly religious and more contextually significant. What is needed today is a growing number of people who are growing in knowledge and experience of both elements, and who are engaged in ongoing relational networks. Though topical trainings are important, they will always be limited by the quality of the relational network into which an intervention is introduced. The impact, however, can be strengthened through regional partners who sustain relational networks across the boundaries of conflict. These are partners who agree to a foundation theory of change like Covenantal Pluralism that undergirds the journey not only of peacebuilding but also the larger goal of conflict transformation. There are many forums from which these efforts can be promoted, but universities provide the most promising location to make a difference and a lasting change.

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