

## What is the Religion, Culture, and Conflict Research Group?

Popular culture and art reflect the significant preoccupations of the world in unpredictable ways. Popularized on Irish rock band U2's *Vertigo* tour and featured in the recently released concert film U23D was a design of the word "coexist". The word is stylized to incorporate the shape of the crescent moon symbol of Islam as the letter c, the Star of David as the letter x, and a Christian cross as the terminal letter t.<sup>1</sup> In various locations along the *Vertigo* tour, lead singer Bono would don a bandana with the "coexist" symbol as he began singing the paean to conflict resolution "Love and Peace or Else". Invoking the legendary religious elements in international conflict, particularly the Israeli-Arab conflict, he would elicit the phrase, "Jesus, Jew, Muhammad, it's true... All sons of Abraham. Father Abraham, speak to your sons. Tell them, no more!"<sup>2</sup>

The catchy logo that Bono and his band used latched onto a widespread frustration with the developments of the last decade that have brought religion and its foundational role in culture into stark relief as a motivator of international conflict.

There is particularly good reason for us to be concerned that coexistence is threatened. This is a time when words spoken by a pope in an otherwise obscure academic speech lead to massive worldwide indignation and protests. It is a time when likewise obscure publication of admittedly provocative cartoons may do the same, as took place in early 2006. Closer to home, it is a time when the extension of special arrangements or "reasonable accommodations" has become the lightning rod for criticism of the extension of Canadian multiculturalism to include religious differences, as took place in the wake of the famous Herouxville declaration of January 2007.

The salience of global divisions rooted in religion and religious discourse seems only to be growing. I say that it seems to be growing: in fact, religion has always had an important role to play in public life throughout the world. In the wake of the events of September 11, 2001 and those following that seemed only to deepen a geostrategic divide prognosticated by Samuel Huntington, the media and the academy have responded to this, one of the newest social fads. In response to many critics who argued that his prediction was based upon overly simplistic observations about civilizational solidarity, it is said that Huntington's best response was that his prediction was parsimonious. Scholars who wish to move the discussion of religion, culture, and conflict into the future must deliberately seek to problematize this relationship, to rid it of that all-too-attractive parsimony.

One broad school of thought suggests that religion itself is the problem. Some, such as Irshad Manji, argue that there is a "trouble with Islam" that is rooted in ancient traditions of violence and intolerance that have not been challenged within the Muslim world

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<sup>1</sup> One should note also that in alternate versions, the coexist symbol incorporates iconography of other religious traditions as well.

<sup>2</sup> In a tragic display of art imitating life imitating art, the original creator and popularizers of the logo were nonplussed by its appropriation and this has sparked a legal fight over its ownership. See Kevin Hutchinson, "Can't We all Just Coexist", @U2 [online] <http://www.atu2.com/news/article.src?ID=3995>

itself.<sup>3</sup> Somewhat more rooted in a critique of the decline of Islam as a civilization are the assessments of Bernard Lewis.<sup>4</sup> Others would suggest that religion is more generally problematic, as a growth industry of atheists and ardent secularists have arisen in the last few years, including Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins. Perennial gadfly Christopher Hitchens has written a particularly blunt assessment that religion is the root of all manners of evil in his recent book *God is not Great*.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have increasingly picked up the perspective in their criticisms of religious resurgence. Debates in Canadian politics over the place of religion, particularly in the face of Court decisions favouring same-sex marriage and reasonable accommodation, have led many to castigate the universalism of religion as a culprit in societal disorders. For example, Shadia Drury, Canada Research Chair in Social Justice at the University of Regina, wrote in 2006:

There is at least one reason why religion destroys political peace and order. That reason has to do with the singularity, absolutism, and intransigence of the religious point of view. Politics is the domain of plurality and diversity. It is about how people who do not share the same understanding of ultimate reality, people who do not share the same matters of ultimate concern, people who differ about the meaning of life, can nonetheless live together peacefully... So, to insist on oneness, unity, and homogeneity is to insist that our deep truths are the real ones and that all others are abominations. This is invariably a coercive posture.<sup>6</sup>

Such critical assessments of religion in politics envision a public sphere devoid of religion as an impetus for political behaviour. Such a public sphere would not necessarily eliminate conflict and division among human societies, but it would at least distill the issues over which people engage in conflict to their temporal and proximate material interests and eliminate the baggage of spiritual and philosophic import as just so much mumbo-jumbo.

By contrast there are those who see religion through Gandhian glasses, who argue that religion is too potent and too important a force to be ignored in public policy or the reconstruction of peace. Muhammed Abu-Nimer, himself involved in hosting and studying the process of interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding, argues that religion has a particularly important role to play here: “Spirituality is at the center of the interfaith encounter and is the most powerful feature of interfaith dialogue because it allows change in participants’ attitudes.”<sup>7</sup> In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, the Dalai Lama averred that “I believe all religions pursue the same goals, that of cultivating human goodness and bringing happiness to all human beings. Though the means might appear

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<sup>3</sup> Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam: a Muslim’s call for reform in her faith*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, New York: Harper, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, New York: Twelve, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Shadia Drury, “Response to Right Rev. Peter Short and Dr. Bisson”, *Religion is About Life: SIPP Briefing Note 14*, May 2006, 9. [http://www.uregina.ca/sipp/documents/pdf/BN14\\_final.pdf](http://www.uregina.ca/sipp/documents/pdf/BN14_final.pdf) [accessed 8 February 2008]

<sup>7</sup> Muhammed Abu-Nimer, “The Miracles of Transformation through Interfaith Dialogue”, in

different the ends are the same.”<sup>8</sup> This reflects a common perspective, most likely to be presented by the Eastern religions, that all religions have similar goals and that emphasizing the differences between their teachings is counterproductive. Instead, we should seek to tap into their commonalities and celebrate the richness of their diversity. Public policy can be enriched through engaging religious organizations in the consolidation of collective identity, through funding faith-based social service agencies, by affirming the fact that all human beings throughout history have sought religious answers to life’s questions in ways that are at least as scientific as the modern rationalist project.

There are dangers in the application of each of these viewpoints. On one hand, the ardent secularist position throws the proverbial baby out with the bath water. Clearly religious movements have had extremely important constructive roles to play in mitigating social injustices throughout history. They have at least as much potential as mere human agency in cultivating just solutions to world problems and in mediating conflicts among competing factions. For every violent religious extremist there are at least as many self-sacrificing and irenic personalities motivated by religious impulses. On the other hand, the unfettered embrace of the religious impulse as a spiritual quest mines the importance of the quest but runs the risk of leveling an uncritical attitude toward religious traditions, or of minimizing the important differences that make religious viewpoints unique and important.

The Religion, Culture, and Conflict Research Group was founded in 2005 to seek intellectual and practical ways to posit a third way. We do not seek a solution to conflict among religious traditions by eliminating faith from the public sphere or by critiquing faith into irrelevance. Neither do we uncritically embrace all religions in the qualities that seem superficially to unite them. We are interested in exploring the various ways in which religious traditions and doctrines relate to cultural practices and ways of thinking, and in turn how both religion and culture relate to fostering or ameliorating conflict. We seek to *take religion seriously* in all its forms. We are convinced that in taking religion and religious differences seriously there is no inevitability of clash. Rather, we seek a forum in which people who take religion seriously may discuss their differences and use reason to unpack the wealth of insight that derives from their traditions.

The priorities of the group reflect the diverse interdisciplinary backgrounds of its members. The members include Jens Zimmermann, Canada Research Chair in Interpretation, Religion and Culture, whose research interests involve the philosophic and hermeneutic roles of religious interpretation and literary theory; John Dyck, whose research interests are in normative philosophy with relation to aspects of community and forgiveness; and Paul Rowe, whose research interests relate to the empirical study of religious groups in civil society in its global and regional dimensions.

At one level, this involves the use of religion as a constitutive force for Western and other societies and cultures. The Western rational tradition in particular has strong cultural

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<sup>8</sup> “The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama: Acceptance Speech 1989”, *Nobelprize.org*  
[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1989/lama-acceptance.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1989/lama-acceptance.html) [accessed 8 February 2008].

roots in the Christian faith and the development of Christian scholarship. Is it possible to explore the religious roots of other cultural traditions with a view to delving into the details of the Western tradition, of contrasting it with other traditions, and thereby learning how religious narratives and hermeneutics guide public life and policy? When we understand the true religious roots of modern societies and cultures, will the understanding itself help to prevent civilizational clash? Good-faith efforts to try to bring these traditions into dialogue have often been misinterpreted or misapplied. They embody significant dangers, as was demonstrated in the wake of Pope Benedict XVI's address at Regensburg, Germany, in September 2006. The challenge to compare the rational traditions of East and West must be done carefully and without Orientalist superiority, but at the same time it seems a promising place to sort out the ways in which simplistic application of religious fundamentalist and revisionist approaches neglect the fullness of our religious traditions. By approaching these traditions with respect and interest one might avoid the simple conflation of faith and culture that radicals use to short circuit religion.

At another level, religion needs to be explored in its normative and philosophic dimension. Religion has long had an important role to play in inspiring and paralleling the development of all philosophic traditions. The important philosophers and normative theorists of the past cannot be divorced from the religious tradition of which they were a part, and many of our basic Western liberal values stem at least in part from those philosophers of the past who had specific religious convictions or loyalties. Beyond this, important normative concepts used in political theory and philosophy today are covered by the religious theologians and mystics of the past. In other cases, important religious concepts have yet to be mined by the normative philosophies of the present. Important ideas of this sort come from Hinduism and Jainism – himsa and ahimsa (violence and non-violence), dharma (duty), and satyagraha (“truth-seeking”, the Gandhian form of non-violent resistance); from Islam – umma (nation or community), shura (consultation), ijihad (independent reasoning), and ijma (consensus); from Judaism – mishpat (justice), tsedaqah (righteousness), and hesed (“lovingkindness”); from Christianity – forgiveness, submission, the separation of church and state, just to name a few. These categories only scratch the surface of important public and social values that work in conversation with the major religious traditions.

Beyond the cultural and normative implications of religion are the various ways in which religion relates between individual groups and organizations within civil society. Religion is not simply a concept to be conceived in the mind. It also has lived and compartmentalized application in societies. And so we turn our interest to case studies and insights from particular religious groups involved in politics and public life. These groups harness their power through individual adherents and organizational capacities. They include churches and parachurch organizations, madrasas and sufi orders, political parties from the Christian democratic movements of Europe to the Islamist and Hindu-nationalist groupings of the Middle East and South Asia, and more.

Obviously, the project looks at religion from such diverse dimensions that it is inherently interdisciplinary. In particular, contributions to our work come from the fields of

philosophy, history, and political science and philosophy. Occasional contributions will come from a variety of other fields and from religious leaders themselves.

Certainly the foremost preoccupation of studies in religion in conflict at the global level in the present day surrounds the relationship between Islam and Christianity. Thus it seemed fitting that the first symposium run by the research group sought to dissect the place of Islam in the Canadian and global context. Guest speakers elucidated the Islamic tradition with regard to conflict, the problem of suicide bombing, and Muslim engagement in Canadian public life. Speakers challenged typical stereotypes of Islam and demonstrated the ability of Muslims to deal constructively in contact with Western traditions and models of interaction.

The second symposium is upcoming and brings together several commentators and researchers on the relationship between religious narratives and public policy and politics. It is entitled “Politics and the Religious Imagination”.

The popular logo “coexist” that I mentioned in my introduction is a useful picture of the ways in which religion needs to be addressed by scholars. Religions are given their due: each is intact in the form of a particular letter but they come together to form a word that coheres and makes sense. This does not ask the religions artificially to lay aside their peculiarities and unique doctrines in order to be a part of a greater understanding of the whole. When held distinct and intact, religions have important roles to play both in commending peace and in inspiring the passions that lead to conflict. Our interest is in understanding the whole and thereby placing them in proper profile.