

A Thesis Presented to
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Modern Conflict Resolution Efforts:
Faith-Based and Sport-Based Approaches

Samantha Dannick

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Date_____

Under the Supervision of:

Chair: _____(signature)

Committee Members:

_____(signature)

_____(signature)

Introduction

Of the multiple ways to approach conflict resolution, the sport-based and faith-based models discussed here are only two of many options. That being said, they are two very dissimilar approaches. What can be learned from each of them? More specifically, given their fairly specialized scopes, what can be extrapolated from these approaches and applied to a more generalized body of knowledge?

One commonality that can be found between faith-based conflict resolution efforts and sport-for-peace initiatives is that they are both relatively accessible. As discussed in the sport section, provided that the proper measures are taken, everyone can participate in sports one way or another. Not only that, but thanks to the reach of the Olympic Games and the widespread popularity of soccer, there are sports which are recognized and played all over the world. This commonality can be exploited in order to give different people something in which to participate together. When one can get people not just to play on the same field, but to go beyond that and play on the same team, a door has been opened for a dramatic increase in communication with and humanization of what will soon be a former enemy.

Although it may not be apparent, faith-based initiatives also benefit from accessibility. First of all, some faiths are incredibly widespread (Christianity and Islam are just two examples of faiths with more than a billion followers each). Even when people are of different faiths, they may find a connection simply by virtue of having faith. Some faiths, such as the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, may also share scriptures, stories, and ideals. When the emphasis is on these sorts of commonalities instead of the differences between the traditions, disparate people may find a way into a greater understanding of the “other.” Put simply, a person of faith may find more in common with another person of faith – even if it is a different

faith – than with someone who is apathetic on the topic of religion. This is not to say that faith-based approaches are only useful in the context of religious conflicts, they can be effective in secular conflicts as well, but they do provide another approach which may enable people to speak the same – or at least a more similar – (figurative) language

Eric Hoffer observes that “the problem of stopping a mass movement is often a matter of substituting one movement for another.”¹ The aim of both faith-based efforts and sport-for-peace initiatives is, in a way, to do just that. Part of what they accomplish is to divert the efforts of combatants – be it onto the soccer field or into a meeting hall. When someone joins a team, especially one which also contains the “other,” he is embracing the new identity that comes with a place on that team – an identity as an athlete and not as a combatant. Faith-based initiatives often try to harness and refocus participants’ religious beliefs and passions on acting for peace instead of acting for violence. Neither of these approaches is necessarily trying to eliminate the energies of their participants, they are trying to turn them to accomplishing a more productive instead of destructive end.

Both approaches, also, when they are most successful, have a broader reach than just putting an end to violent conflict. The more successful efforts encompass social development on a much wider scale. This is a vital recognition of the reality that socio-economic inequality and hardship are among the underlying causes of most, if not all, violent conflicts. Even those conflicts that may be framed a certain way (through a religious lens, for example) are usually in reality just putting a gloss on these same underlying issues. It is only by addressing these issues, instead of being distracted by and focusing entirely on the most visible aspect of a conflict that a meaningful, long-term change can be made for the better. The best conflict resolution efforts, no

¹ Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 18.

matter what approach they take, will address the causes of a conflict, not just the symptom of the conflict itself. This is not to say that the conflict need not be addressed, but it is to say that the conflict must not be the only thing being addressed.

Hoffer also notes that “to wrong those we hate is to add fuel to our hatred. Conversely, to treat an enemy with magnanimity is to blunt our hatred for him.”² Blunting hatred of the “other” is the other primary, and perhaps most significant, endeavor of both faith-based and sport-based approaches to conflict resolution (as well as, presumably, any other approach). It has been observed time and again that the key to enabling oneself to really maltreat another human being is to dehumanize them. Dehumanizing language can be found in many conflicts, from “cockroaches” in Rwanda to “gooks” in Vietnam; Nazi propaganda often drew parallels between Jews and rats. It is much easier to act inhumanely when one is not dealing with humans.

In both faith-based and sport-based efforts, participants often interact with people of the “enemy” population. This interaction need not take place explicitly within the confines of a discussion of participants’ similarities and differences (for example); exposure of any sort is usually for the better. In fact, some initiatives couple this interaction with the socio-economic development discussed earlier. Participants from different backgrounds work together on a common project helping to address a problem in which they all have a stake. It is through this sort of exposure – whether it is working together for the good of the community or playing together on a field for the love of the game – that the enemy can be rehumanized. This rehumanization, in turn, can help deescalate a violent conflict or a simmering feud. It seems clear that the above elements are a few examples of those which can and should be applied not only to sport-based and faith-based initiatives, but to all endeavors for conflict resolution.

² Ibid. 93.

In the following sections, I will review some of the available literature on sport-for-peace initiatives and faith-based conflict resolution. This review will include more in-depth discussion of the above elements in both types of initiatives, a look at some of the pros and cons of each approach, and some notes on the practical application of these approaches. There is much more information on this subject available than I have been able to include here, but I think that I have compiled a fairly comprehensive overview of a field that deserves more attention. There is an abundance of literature studying conflicts of all shapes and sizes. In this paper, I endeavor to add to the comparatively much smaller body of literature on conflict resolution.

Sport-for-Peace Initiatives

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of trying to use alternative approaches to accomplish all sorts of humanitarian goals. These goals range from: HIV/AIDS awareness, education, and reduction; to education in general; to conflict resolution and peace-building. This last goal will be the focus of this paper, and will be looked at through the lens of the relatively new approach of using sports in an effort to achieve this goal. Sports schemes have grown increasingly popular in recent years, and they are now incredibly widespread. However, there are questions that remain relatively unanswered regarding this approach. These questions include the common-sense issue of what works and what does not, what these schemes can be expected to accomplish, why they have become so popular, possible origins of the trend, and, most importantly, whether or not they work – either as advertised or at all. I will attempt to address these issues, although I recognize that I will only be scratching the surface.

The contribution of sports to inciting and escalating conflict probably comes to mind just as easily as their contribution to peace. However, the relation is not as strong as, say, that of religion and conflict. More often than not, sports are considered analogous to violent conflict without necessarily being violent in the sense of causing fatalities, and even when real-world conflict does result, sports usually seem to be, at worst, a tipping point or the straw that broke the camel's back. Soccer, in particular, has been credited with creating especially violent conflict – whether it has to do with its sheer popularity, something about its fans, or something about the sport itself is unclear, but people don't seem to riot over cricket in quite the same way. Looking beyond riots, there was the so-called "Soccer War" between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, which has been attributed to a match between those two national teams. What didn't get quite the same amount of press was that there had been longstanding hostility and escalating tensions

between the two countries before the match.³ Attributing that war solely to the soccer match is like attributing the start of World War I solely to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand – inaccurate and simplistic, but not necessarily entirely untrue. In any sort of conflict, the causes are complex and difficult to pin down.

Conflict on the field may be easier to examine, and many point to the violent language used by players and fans as a demonstration of the conflict inherent in sport. Terry Butcher, who played for England in the 1990 World Cup, provides an excellent example of this mindset. “Off the pitch I was always an ordinary, mild-mannered bloke,” he said, “But put me in a football shirt and it was tin hats and fixed bayonets. Death or glory.”⁴ The parallels are also pointed out by Robert Coover, who observes, “There are, it sometimes seems, only two universal games: war and soccer . . . Perhaps they are simply variations of the same game.”⁵ This may be the case (it depends on how broadly one defines said game), but it must be noted that – overall – the relationship between sport and conflict is not as dramatic as it may be made out to be. Hooliganism, riots, and metaphorical wars, while significant, are still not the same as the extensive wars, genocides, and other bloody conflicts fought over other differences people find between themselves and others. One should note, though, that I do not wish to give the impression that, because they are less dramatic, conflicts relating to sport should be ignored.

That being said, sports have been used to promote peace, at least somewhat, since ancient times. We can probably trace the roots of the movement all the way back to the first Olympics and the original establishment of the Olympic Truce. In ancient Greece, at the time of the

³ Jay Mallin, “Salvador-Honduras War, 1969: The ‘Soccer War,’” *Air University Review*, March-April 1970, E:\Salvador-Honduras War, 1969.htm.

⁴ Nick Hornby, “Faded Glory: Taming the Hooligans,” in “The Beautiful Game: Why Soccer Rules the World,” *National Geographic*, June 2006, 55.

⁵ Robert Coover, “Morality Play: Soccer as Theater,” in “The Beautiful Game: Why Soccer Rules the World,” *National Geographic*, June 2006, 61.

Olympics all conflict would cease in order to enable athletes, spectators, etc. to travel safely to and from the Olympics, and this trend lasted for centuries.⁶ In recent years, the Olympic Truce has been revived and has achieved much more than the original desired effect. Not only have athletes and spectators been traveling safely, but the Truce has opened the door for more substantial advances both for warring states and for civilians within conflict zones. Cease fires resulting from observance of the Olympic Truce have made it possible for humanitarian efforts to reach people who need help.⁷

The Olympic movement has accomplished a lot of good. However, the realm of sports for peace initiatives has expanded its scope dramatically. This may be for a number of reasons, not least of which is that international (inter-state) conflicts are not necessarily the biggest issue in modern times. Instead, “most conflicts exist within the nation-state,” meaning that, not only must the Olympic Truce be expanded to preserve its effectiveness and accomplishments, but the door is opened to a host of other sport-for-peace initiatives operating within countries, not just between them.⁸

Sport has been lauded as being universally accessible, which is one of the reasons that these sport for peace initiatives are popular around the world. Sport has been described as an “international symbol and messenger for peace,” by virtue of its internationally recognized connection with the Olympic Games and their accompanying Olympic Truce.⁹ Many organizations are now attempting to tap this connection with their own initiatives.

⁶ Akinori Hirasawa, “Olympic Truce: Sport and Peace” (A Background Paper for IPB Athens Conference, October 2003), 1, http://www.deportesostenible.es/doc/Internacionales/50_true.pdf

⁷ Ibid. 2-3

⁸ Ibid. 7

⁹ UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace, Report, *Sport for Development and Peace: Towards Achieving the Millennium Development Goals*, 2003, 16. http://assets.sportanddev.org/downloads/16__sport_for_dev_towards_millennium_goals.pdf

Another aspect of the universality of sport is that, at least in some games, the rules are widely known and easily explained and grasped. In addition, these widely prevalent sports are popular around the world, so the same sport can be used to approach a variety of people. Football (soccer) is the sport that comes immediately to mind in this case. It requires little equipment, and little explanation, and it is widely known and popular even in developing nations.

One needs to be very careful, however, in going down this road. In the same way that sports are accessible and effective to some, they are not necessarily as universal as many would like to believe. The United Nations, which takes the idea of sport for peace seriously and is invested in the concept, is very conscious of this fact. It notes that those wishing to implement sport for peace (and development) strategies must ensure that they are operating under a “sport for all” philosophy.¹⁰ Even as substantial parts of the population will be reached through sports, an equally substantial portion may be excluded by the approach. People with disabilities, as well as people who just are not very athletic or otherwise good at whatever sport the program is utilizing can easily find themselves excluded, either directly or indirectly. The “sport for all” model dictates that people must not be excluded on the basis of ability.¹¹ Taking this one step further, they should participate on as equal a playing field (so to speak) as possible. Anyone who has been picked last in a gym class knows just how discouraging and alienating an experience feeling unable to contribute (or like nobody wants one’s contributions) to the team can be. Sports are dangerously prone to being just as exclusive as they can be inclusive.

Nowhere is this more important than in the world of women in sports. There is a longstanding history and tradition of excluding women from any sort of athletic endeavor. For

¹⁰ Ibid. 2

¹¹ Ibid.

years, stereotypes of women as weak and unsuited for sport “fuelled gender-based discrimination in physical education and in recreational and competitive sport, sporting organizations, and sport media.”¹² That phenomenon was prevalent even in Western cultures with a fairly good track record as far as women’s rights and equality are concerned; it doesn’t take much imagination to picture how much more common and extreme it must be in societies much further away from egalitarianism. In Africa, it is far from unheard of for girls to stop attending school when they reach puberty; how much more difficult might it be to get them onto a sports field?

Women have to fight against a lot of socio-cultural pressure to participate in sports. But, it’s not necessarily limited to women – the gender roles attached to some sports can hinder men’s participation as well (though probably not as prevalently).¹³ This division is built right into the structure and rules of many sports already. One need only to look at the Olympic Games for an illustration of this: there are sports in which men and women may both compete, but not against each other, and there are sports which are designated as specifically for either men or women; sports in which men and women are considered to be equal enough to compete against one another are few and far between. When the media reports on female athletes (which it does not do very frequently) the focus is rarely on their athletic achievement and much more commonly on their appearance, which is unhelpful, if not counterproductive, to the task of advancing gender equality.¹⁴

These gender and ability oriented obstacles make the use of sport-for-peace initiatives more difficult. A program that excludes half of its target audience will not be nearly as effective as one which includes the vast majority of people. This challenge may be a speed bump for the

¹² UN Division for the Advancement of Women and Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Women, Gender Equality, and Sport,” in *Women 2000 and Beyond*, December 2007, 2.
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/Women%20and%20Sport.pdf>

¹³ Ibid. 15-6

¹⁴ Ibid. 26

implementation of some programs, but when it is overcome it has the potential to be a huge boon for women – especially in societies where gender equality is an almost unheard of concept. A United Nations report explains that “the participation of women and girls in sport challenges gender stereotypes and discrimination, and can therefore be a vehicle to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.”¹⁵

It must not be forgotten that conflict affects all parts of the society in which it occurs, even though some of the effects may be more indirect than others (it is not only the people on the front lines who deserve or need concern). Also, societal problems and instability promote and perpetuate conflict – there is a reason that sport-for-peace and sport-for-development initiatives so often go together. Just because this paper is focusing on the former does not mean that the latter should fall by the wayside. The emphasis on the necessity for “sport for all” – maximizing access and participation for all – is one way to try to ensure that all of those affected, all of those in any given society, can benefit from sport-based initiatives put into place.¹⁶

Of course, just as conflict permeates societies, it permeates activities. As mentioned earlier, we must not forget that sports, in particular, can be hotbeds for conflict. After all, by definition, sports are competitive and make up a world where conflict thrives. Although “it is not uncommon for sport to be excluded from discussions of conflict by very definition, among other reasons because of the mistaken assumption that conflict means destruction of the opponent,” we must be careful not to do so if we intend to attempt to use sport to combat conflict.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid. 3

¹⁶ UN, *Millennium Development Goals*, 2

¹⁷ Günther Lüschen, “Sport, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution,” *International Social Sciences Journal* Vol. 34 No. 2 (1982): 190

Sport is a special type of conflict because of this distinction – that destroying the opponent is the last thing most athletes want to do. By destruction, what is meant is for debilitating physical harm to come to an opponent. Most competitors don't want that, even as they may hope to destroy their opponents figuratively by virtue of a crushing defeat within the rules and customs of their sport.¹⁸ Sports conflict strikes an interesting balance because the opponent is needed, it fosters interdependence among members of a team and between rival competitors (whether teams or individuals).¹⁹ Many sport-for-peace initiatives endeavor to capitalize on this necessary association when they bring members of opposing groups onto the same sports field. The ideas behind this include getting them to work together for a common goal or at least to find some common ground on which to bond.

Integrating members of opposing groups on the same teams would probably be an even more effective strategy if sport-for-peace organizations can implement it effectively. It would seem to be a necessary (or at least highly beneficial) step to take for a number of reasons. First of all, drawing on Günther Lüschen's work, being on the same team (rather than on opposing teams) would force not just association (putting up with one another, maybe even going so far as to value the opponent for his necessity for the game to exist) but cooperation (working together in order to achieve the common goal of defeating the opposing team).²⁰ Even then, however, organizers and coordinators must exercise caution, because competition in sport is not only

¹⁸ The practice of intentionally harming one's opponents is not unheard of, but it is very taboo. There have been cases in professional American football and hockey in which the message is conveyed to players that, should some targeted player be injured, the player causing the injury would not be penalized and may even be rewarded. However, these offers must be kept under the table, and scandal ensues when they come to light. At the time of this writing, several coaches of the New Orleans Saints football team are facing suspension and the team a fine because it emerged that they were targeting specific players for injury. As quoted by Judy Battista in a *New York Times* article dated April 6, 2012, player Warren Sapp expressed this distaste for destruction of the opponent: "Come on man, you don't talk about the game in terms of hurting people."

¹⁹ Günther Lüschen, "Cooperation, Association, and Contest," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 14 No. 1 (March 1970): 21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/173595>.

²⁰ Ibid.

between two opposing teams (or individuals), but also within and amongst teams. Lüschen outlines several reasons why competition can be expected in cooperative teams, including coach or management induced competition, players competing to see who can be the most cooperative (e. g. by focusing attention on a disliked team member), and trying to succeed individually while the team is losing (this may be exacerbated by an individualistic sport/structure of the game or by an individualistic culture).²¹

Some of these sources of competition, like coaches and management inducing competition – which they do in order to force players to reach new heights when compared with their teammates for fear of being replaced – may be easily managed by ensuring that the staff of the program are aware of the possibility of such a mentality arising and consciously working against that kind of atmosphere. But others will be much more difficult to work around. In an individualistic culture, there will almost certainly be people trying to outshine their teammates in order to achieve personal glory (especially if the team is losing badly – they may feel that cooperating to advance the team is a lost cause and instead begin working to turn the situation to their advantage as best they can). This will also be the case in sports in which, while it is necessary to cooperate with a team in order to achieve success in the game against the opponent, there are also definite star or glamour positions on the team while other players are relegated to supporting roles (individualistic sports, not to be confused with individual sports, which I will discuss later). Meanwhile, in cultures where cooperation and team-playing is highly prized, the breed of competition in which each player wants to show that he is the most cooperative (by focusing attention on a disliked teammate) may arise. Not only is this a competition for cooperation, but it may result in other members of the team being neglected/ignored, possibly to their detriment and to the detriment of the team as a whole.

²¹ Ibid. 23-4

Uniting people through sport also runs the risk of reinforcing (or simply transferring) conflict. Players may unite by working together against someone else, implementing teamwork with the attitude that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Existing rivalries may also be exacerbated by sports contests because outside rivalries may be connected to them.²² The Olympics have been heavily criticized for promoting nationalism – an attitude most would agree is counter-productive to peace-building efforts.²³ Sport-for-peace initiatives must be very careful that they are not worsening divides instead of alleviating them, especially given the competitive nature of most sports.

The trick may be to make the sports activities noncompetitive enough that players don't feel pressured to triumph over either their opponents or their teammates. This is the approach taken by some sport-for-peace program developers and organizers, who put their focus more on the physical activity end of the spectrum and try to avoid the competitive sports side of things. The danger in doing this, however, is that removing too much of the contest from the activity may make the program boring for participants and cause people to become frustrated, lose interest and actually quit the program. Removing any level of contest (the everyone's-a-winner strategy undertaken in so many youth sports competitions in the United States) may also remove some legitimacy from the program itself. Furthermore, not only legitimacy is at stake here; funding may be at risk. Competitive, elite sports are the ones that spectators want to watch and thus where the money is. Organizations which have this aspect covered, and therefore have the resulting funds, may be able to afford to support charity sport-for-peace initiatives – the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) come to mind, but NGOs and government-supported initiatives may have a

²² Günther Lüschen, “Cooperation,” 28

²³ Akinori Hirasawa, “Olympic Truce,” 4

tougher time (both in terms of funding and legitimacy). The funding issue is one danger sport-for-peace initiatives must avoid – not only ensuring that they don’t lack for funds, but also that they are not diverting resources away from other effective programs.²⁴

So, how do you solve a problem like competition in sports? After all, with competition comes conflict among competitors, and the whole point of sport-for-peace initiatives is to reduce conflict and help build the infrastructure needed to develop a lasting peace (eventually, anyway). First of all, sport for peace initiatives that have been successful have not had sports as the only, or even necessarily the primary focus. In order to be successful, the evidence seems to say (what little evidence there is, anyway), sport-for-peace programs must be holistic, focusing on many aspects of the individual. The recommendations of the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group say that to be effective “these programs must be focused on the whole youth . . . explicitly promote positive values . . . and empower youth by helping them to set goals, make effective choices, practice responsibility and leadership, and contribute.”²⁵ “Sport for all,” then, may be taken to mean not only including all people, but also including all parts of people. In most cases, the rules and skills associated with various sports are separate/removed from everyday life, so it is unsurprising that initiatives that focus solely on the sports and developing sporting skills will probably not translate very well into lasting lessons that participants can take away from their time in the program and apply to their lives.²⁶

This is not to say, however, that sports cannot be used to teach life skills. Quite the opposite, in fact; many programs use sports as a vehicle while building in lessons around them.

²⁴ Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group, “Sport and Peace: Social Inclusion, Conflict Prevention, and Peace-building,” in *Harnessing the Power of Sport for Development and Peace: Recommendations to Governments*, (Right to Play, 2008), 236. http://www.righttoplay.com/International/news-and-media/Documents/Policy%20Reports%20docs/Harnessing%20the%20Power%20-%20FULL/Chapter6_SportandPeace.pdf

²⁵ Ibid. 216

²⁶ Günther Lüschen, “Cooperation,” 26

Making sure that any given program does this is a key part of its potential success. What experience seems to teach is that, while incorporating lessons that go beyond simple sports skills may not necessarily mean a program will be effective, not doing so will almost certainly ensure its failure. In all of the materials published regarding developing, managing, etc. sport-for-peace initiatives, the need for the program to be greater than simply sporting activity is consistently recognized.

As I have said before, the field of sport-for-peace initiatives is relatively new. While some connection between sport and peace may have its roots in ancient history (the Olympic Truce), it is only in recent times that people have begun to see and develop sport's potential to benefit individuals and societies which aren't necessarily nation-states. As such, there has not been much research done on what specific elements make these programs effective and why. People have learned from experience and extrapolated some elements which seem to work, and these recommendations are largely what make up the materials directing people and organizations who want to develop these programs. However, actual empirical evidence and unbiased studies are few and far between. Of course, given that the way that sport-for-peace programs seem to work is by being used in conjunction with other programs, it shouldn't be too surprising that the multitude of variables makes evaluation of the effectiveness of a sport-based approach difficult.²⁷

But, there have been at least a few empirical studies which would seem to address and support some of the claims being made in the literature. Among these were some examining the effects of martial arts training on aggressive attitudes and even juvenile delinquency. One study was looking at the influence studying karate had on the "attitudes toward violent conflict

²⁷ Andy Smith and Ivan Waddington, "Using 'Sport in the Community Schemes' to Tackle Crime and Drug Use Among Young People: Some Policy Issues and Problems," *European Physical Education Review* 10 (2004), <http://chesterrep.openrepository.com/cdr/bitstream/10034/11868/6/smith%26waddington.pdf>

resolution” of male and female practitioners as compared with practitioners of other sports as well as a non-athlete control group. Among male participants, the researchers found that they all had higher positive attitudes toward violent conflict resolution (VCR) than the female participants, but that males who practiced karate (karateka) had a lower positive rating of VCR. In contrast, while all the female participants reported lower positive ratings of VCR, the female practitioners of karate rated it much more positively than those who did other contact sports, non-contact sports, and no sports at all.

This result was contrary to the researchers’ expectation that since “a typical feature of martial arts is an emphasis on nonviolent conflict resolution,” karate practitioners could be expected to see violent conflict resolution negatively. In their conclusion, the researchers hypothesize that “women may associate karate with a right to defend themselves physically against assault, while men tend to associate karate with nonviolent defense.”²⁸ This evidence would seem to indicate that sports with an appropriate philosophy can influence the attitudes of those who may support violent conflict resolution (a conclusion also advanced by the evidence of the other studies I will look at). And, perhaps more tellingly, it is a step towards confirming that sports participation can empower women. Granted, making women violent would not be the desired effect, but enabling them to stand up for themselves, especially in societies where they traditionally cannot, and are victimized as a result, is probably not a bad thing.

Two other studies also focused on martial arts training and its impact on aggression (and, in one of them, on the related phenomenon of juvenile delinquency). They both examined the differences between traditional and modern martial arts. In the studies, the traditional method focused on meditation, a philosophy of respect, etc. as well as martial skills while the modern

²⁸ Kaj Björkqvist and Lasse Varhama, “Attitudes Toward Violent Conflict Resolution Among Male and Female Karateka in Comparison with Practitioners of Other Sports,” *Perceptual and Motor Skills* Vol. 92 No. 2 (April 2001): 586-8

method focused only on martial skills, without addressing the thoughts and mental state of practitioners.²⁹ This distinction can be related to the distinction between sport-for-peace initiatives which are holistic and those that focus solely on the sports. What they both found was that traditional training seemed to reduce aggression (and juvenile delinquency), while modern training at best didn't help and in one of the studies actually made its students more aggressive.³⁰

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A notable factor of all of these studies is that they focus on martial arts disciplines. These could be safely categorized as individual (not necessarily individualistic) sports. These would serve the purpose of eliminating too much competition (and resulting conflict) between opposing teams and among one's own team. In such individual sports as these (equestrian sports and gymnastics may be other examples), the primary competition is oneself, and the way to success lies in improving oneself and one's own abilities rather than beating out one's opponent (or teammate). While they may encompass competitions, in training, the focus must necessarily be on building skills with a mind to use them for oneself rather than against one's opponent. The exception to this idea may be sparring in martial arts. But, in appropriately traditional schools (as found by these studies), the focus should be on the individual kata (forms) rather than on sparring matches – a heavy focus on sparring is a hallmark of a modern school.

So, what does all this mean for the young field of sport for conflict resolution and peace? As a concept, it is not exactly new – its roots can be traced back into ancient history – but its modern incarnation is attempting to do things that the ancient Greeks would probably not have considered possible (or even necessarily desirable). There is still much to be learned about how

²⁹ Michael E. Trulson, "Martial Arts Training: A Novel 'Cure' for Juvenile Delinquency," *Human Relations* Vol. 39 No. 12 (1986): 1137

³⁰ Ibid. 1135

³¹ T. A. Nosanchuk and M. L. Catherine MacNeil, "Examination of the Effects of Traditional and Modern Martial Arts Training on Aggressiveness," *Aggressive Behavior* 15 (1989): 158, DOI: 10.1002/1098-2337

best to implement these programs, and unfortunately, a fair amount of it will probably be learned by trial and error. However, even in the short time that they have been around, there have been some sport-for-peace schemes that have had enough success that it seems clear that we should not give up on this field.³² What has been shown is that these schemes can be worthwhile and effective if approached and implemented appropriately. Perhaps the most important aspect of this, as shown both through experience and with some research, is that these initiatives must address the whole person of their participants – sports are not necessarily the answer, they cannot stand alone. What they are is an effective vehicle with which people can make meaningful changes in their lives and societies, and one of those changes will, hopefully, eventually be a lasting peace in all sorts of societies plagued by conflict.

³² Jonathan Schienberg, “Sport for Development,” UNICEF, accessed April 11, 2012, http://www.unicef.org/football/index_intro_33799.html.

For example, UNICEF-supported sport-for-peace initiatives can be found in Sudan, Somalia, and Sri Lanka, and they are reported to be effective in helping to restore normalcy in post-conflict situations and in promoting peaceful interactions among potentially rival groups.

There are other examples to be found if one searches hard enough, but the practice of developing and implementing sport-for-peace schemes is still relatively young (especially when compared with the lengthy and well-documented history of faith-based conflict resolution efforts), so they are not nearly as numerous or readily available.

Faith-Based Conflict Resolution Efforts

When people, especially secularists, are asked to consider the relationship between religion and conflict, more often than not their thoughts immediately turn to religion's role as a source of new conflict or an exacerbation of existing conflict. These portrayals, unfortunately, are not undeserved. Religion has begun and worsened many conflicts throughout history. It is probably fair to say that for as long as we have had religion, somebody has been fighting about it with somebody else. Scholarly research in the field of conflict studies reflects this situation – there is a plethora of information on religion and conflict. However, the piece of the puzzle that these researchers and laypeople are missing is that religion also has a role to play in conflict resolution. When we fail to consider this alternate role, we not only shortchange the billions of believers who would never consider using their faith to harm one another, but we also shortchange the many people who are actively using their faith to do good in the world. In addition, we close the door on a conflict resolution method which has proved effective in some situations.

I intend to give an overview of religion as an antagonist in conflict situations, because it is an aspect of the situation that cannot be ignored. Next, I will examine the complexity of the situations which may be underlying conflicts for which religion has been blamed – it is important to find the root cause to address and not just focus on the symptoms. Then, I will turn my attention to religion's place in conflict resolution efforts. What role can or should religious elements have in conflict resolution efforts? What are some resources unique to faith-based conflict resolution? What approaches have been taken in faith-based conflict resolution efforts? Finally, I will consider a case study of a dramatic and effective example of faith-based conflict resolution in Nigeria.

Mark Juergensmeyer notes in *Terror in the Mind of God* that religion is “not innocent” but that it “does not ordinarily lead to violence. That happens only . . . when religion becomes fused with violent expressions of social aspirations, personal pride, and movement for political change.”³³ Hamideh Mohagheghi points out several elements which lead to religion being blamed for conflict. These are: “the truth claims of religion” which “demand people’s unreserved submission to the will of God and, therefore, to the will of His representatives on earth;” that “religions have done and still do actively or passively take part in the annihilation of peoples;” and that the attitude of good vs. evil leads to the implication that the “good” (“us,” obviously) can use any means necessary to establish God’s kingdom.³⁴ This concept of “divine struggle” or “cosmic war” is what Juergensmeyer highlights as “what makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless.”³⁵ This should not be overly surprising – when ultimate good is pitted against ultimate evil, one must do everything possible to ensure that good will prevail. Sometimes people think that the world they live in is part of that “cosmic struggle” which leads to the religious extremism and terrorism that Juergensmeyer discusses in his book.

However, the concept of the “divine struggle” descended may be adding an unnecessary level of complexity to the explanation. I think that the idea of a division between good and evil, with every in-group defining itself as “good” and all others as “evil,” is sufficient cause by itself. People need not be actively engaged in trying to eradicate “evil” from the earth to have that mentality affect their attitude. Any sort of in-group vs. out-group attitude can exacerbate a conflict situation; religion provides an opportunity for that distinction, and then makes the line even clearer: not only is there an “us” and a “them,” but we are “good” and they are “evil.”

³³ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* 3rd edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 10.

³⁴ Hamideh Mohagheghi, “Interreligious Dialogue in Conflict Situations,” *European Judaism* Vol. 37 No. 1 (Spring 2004): 85, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=e6a71839-d8ac-4377-9554-e9222c1a652c%40sessionmgr15&vid=5&hid=24>.

³⁵ Juergensmeyer, *Terror*, 149.

Dehumanizing the enemy is vital to conflict, especially violent conflict, and calling someone “evil” is a good start to achieving that goal.

Although I consider this point especially important to the consideration of religion’s role in conflict situations, the “various sources of related danger” found in religion may be summarized as follows: absolutism; intolerance; increased aggression and willingness for violence; and the legitimization of extreme action.³⁶ It is worth noting that the sources/implications of religion’s involvement in conflict identified by scholars seem to be fairly consistent. In as complex a situation as this, this agreement is reassuring – after all, identifying causes is a necessary step to finding solutions.

In attempting to identify causes of conflict, though, one needs to be careful not to jump to conclusions. As David Smock explains, “religious identity has often been used to mobilize one side against the other . . . But to describe many such conflicts as rooted in religious differences or to imply that theological or doctrinal differences are the principle cause of conflict is to seriously oversimplify and misrepresent a complex situation.”³⁷ Unfortunately, it is very tempting to point to a conflict in which religion is involved and place the blame squarely on the shoulders of said religion. We may be tempted to do this for a number of reasons, including our desire for simple explanations of complex issues. Perhaps there is a cultural tendency to want to boil everything down to ideas (as opposed to more concrete issues), or a reluctance to consider more concrete causal factors – either because we cannot see them or because if we were to acknowledge them we would then feel obligated to do something about them. This last point may sound cynical,

³⁶ Jeffrey Haynes, “Conflict, Conflict Resolution and Peace-Building: The Role of Religion in Mozambique, Nigeria and Cambodia,” *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* Vol. 47 No. 1 (Feb. 2009): 53, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=5f26b69a-b80a-43f9-bfc3-2460f0ac9b29%40sessionmgr13&vid=3&hid=24>.

³⁷ David Smock, “Religion in World Affairs: Its Role in Conflict and Peace,” *United States Institute of Peace Special Report* 201 (Feb. 2008): 2, <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/sr201.pdf>.

but I would argue that most people would feel significantly less guilty for not getting involved in an intractable religious conflict than for not getting involved in preventing hunger.

Of course, this is not to say that religion is blameless in these conflicts. But it is important to recognize that “religion becomes intertwined with a range of causal factors . . . that define, propel, and sustain conflict.”³⁸ A major one of these factors is the issue of identity. This harkens back to my earlier point about having an “‘us’ vs. ‘them’” division between conflicting parties. Religion can and does provide an identity in its own right, but it can also deepen divisions formed along ethnic or nationalistic lines. For example, in the Middle East, the Israeli identity is tied up with Judaism just as the Palestinian identity is tied up with Islam – despite the fact that there are Christians on both sides (although this observation is complicated by the fact that Israel identifies itself as a Jewish state). Because of this conflation of ethnic, nationalistic, and religious identities, people of any one of them may be somehow held accountable for all three (and that is not even to mention the political identity that is tied up with the nationalistic identity). Because there are so many Muslims, Christians, Jews, etc. in the world, the circle of suspected/potential (and sometimes actual) enemies of these conflicting parties is much larger than it might otherwise have been.

Conflicts may also, after having been fairly secular, take on religious overtones with the introduction of religious rhetoric by one side or another. Some leaders may introduce a religious element when they feel that their support may be waning or otherwise inadequate. One need not look far for an example of this; one can see American political candidates (especially Republicans) emphasizing their Christianity in an attempt to bring out the party’s base. They are using religious identity “to mobilize one side against the other.”³⁹

³⁸ Ibid. 3.

³⁹ Ibid.

Now would be a good time to draw a distinction between religious identity and religious demands in a conflict situation. This distinction may be most helpful when considering a conflict situation like a civil war – an internal conflict where there may be fewer identity differences between the two parties. Isak Svensson studied the impact that religious demands had on the likelihood that a conflict would be resolved through negotiation.⁴⁰ The religious-secular distinction may be illustrated with the example of territory – a fight for the Holy Land (Israel and its associated territories) in contrast to a fight for another piece of territory without that sort of association and claimed history. What he found was surprising; it seems to contradict much of what previous studies on religion and conflict have said. First, the intuitive part: “if the belligerents’ demands are explicitly anchored in a religious tradition, they will come to perceive the conflicting issues as indivisible, and the conflict will be less likely to be settled through negotiation.”⁴¹ But he goes on to say that “by contrast, whether the primary parties come from different religious traditions does not affect the chances for negotiated settlement.”⁴² In other words, the likelihood of a negotiated settlement in a conflict appears to be unaffected by the disparate religious backgrounds of the participants as long as the terms/goals of the conflict itself are not defined religiously.

Svensson examined a data set of all intrastate conflicts – governments vs. rebel groups – between 1989 and 2003 (“217 conflict-dyads in seventy-three countries”) and broke them down along various lines.⁴³ These divisions included whether the factions belonged to the same or different religious traditions (“religious dissimilarity”), whether the conflict ended in negotiated settlement or not, and an examination of the demands being made (“religious incompatibilities” –

⁴⁰ Isak Svensson, “Fighting with Faith: Religion and Conflict Resolution in Civil Wars,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 51 No. 6 (Dec. 2007): 930-949, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27638586>.

⁴¹ Ibid. 930.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. 935.

“if at least one side in the conflict-dyad, the rebel group or the government, has made demands that are explicitly referring to religion,”).⁴⁴ Using these distinctions, he examined the correlation between religious dissimilarity, incompatibility, and whether the conflict ended in a negotiated settlement or not. Religious incompatibility appeared to have a much greater impact on negotiated settlement than religious dissimilarity did. While I would hesitate to draw any definitive or dramatic conclusions for all conflicts involving religion from this one, very specific, study, it does highlight the importance of considering multiple issues and facets of a conflict instead of writing the whole thing off as religious – or even lumping together the religious elements.

The primary culprit in the conflicts Svensson found to be unlikely to be resolved through negotiation was the perception of indivisibility of goals. Negotiation is based on, well, negotiating – which means making compromises. However, he argues that “whenever the positions of the belligerents in internal conflicts are explicitly anchored in religious aspirations, the belligerents will perceive the contested issue as indivisible.”⁴⁵ Indivisibility incorporates “integrity” and “nonfungability” – the perceptions that division compromises value and that “the issue cannot be substituted for or exchanged for something of equal value.”⁴⁶ Although perhaps not a civil war, the fight for the Holy Land illustrates these concepts well: dividing the land is not a viable solution for many involved in the conflict, and no other territory will do. It is the Holy Land – the territory is special because of its religious history, and both sides feel entitled to (and that they must have) all of it. In addition to indivisibility, Svensson argues that religious contributions to the intractability of conflict are “asymmetrical time horizons” – the long-term thinking/timescale of religions means that those involved feel less need or pressure to end a

⁴⁴ Ibid. 936.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 933.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 933-4.

conflict sooner rather than later – and “religious outbidding” – when a secular conflict is reframed religiously in an effort to gain external support.⁴⁷

Svensson’s study found that “conflicts with parties belonging to different religious traditions are not more difficult to settle than conflicts where parties belong to the same religious tradition.”⁴⁸ At least in the case of the intrastate conflicts he was surveying, religious dissimilarity posed little to no issue to whether or not the conflict ended in negotiated settlement. Religious incompatibility, in contrast, appeared to be a much more significant influence. This implies that those attempting to resolve and prevent conflict can and should try to prevent the stakes in a conflict situation from taking on a religious dimension, because that will make negotiating an end to the conflict that much more difficult.⁴⁹ But, the fact that the conflicting parties are of different religious identities is not a reason to write off the conflict as intractable.

Acknowledging the “danger of abuse,” Mohagheghi points out that in conflict situations “religion serves as an element of identification and provides stability, orientation and order.”⁵⁰ This observation serves as a fair beginning for the discussion of religion’s role on the other side of conflict – as part of the solution, not part of the problem. Religion can serve as a resource for victims in conflict and post-conflict situations to keep them from losing hope entirely in a situation that may seem hopeless. This hope may stem from the bigger-picture, more abstract nature of religious belief (an abstract belief in a better afterlife, for example) or from more concrete scriptural resources.

These resources, both abstract and scriptural, are an example of the unique position faith-based conflict resolution efforts have in a field of many different approaches. Ida Glaser

⁴⁷ Ibid. 943.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 944.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Mohagheghi, “Interreligious Dialogue,” 86.

believes strongly in the beneficial role that awareness of religious history and scripture (of “Biblical Babylon and Israel”) can have in conflict situations.⁵¹ She notes that (specifically Christian) scriptures can help those involved in conflict situations acquire the “will to embrace” and start moving toward reconciliation.⁵² This inspiration moves beyond mere dictates, though, focusing not so much on “deciding the kind of social arrangement we should seek” as on “fostering the kind of selves we should be.”⁵³ Taking lessons from the scriptures, we should be charitable selves, understanding selves, and forgiving selves. The Christian scriptures may have the most well-established reputation for endorsing these attitudes, but these messages can be found in many scriptures – including those of Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and others – if one takes the time to study.

Granted, this attitude is made possible, at least partially, by the scriptural teaching that justice, vengeance, and the allocation of land are God’s monopolies – so it is not that they should not be a concern, merely that they are not a human concern.⁵⁴ Glaser argues that the “assurance of justice is needed if people are to forgive” and the promise of divine justice can make people feel less like they have to impose that justice themselves.⁵⁵ A measure of caution must be taken here, however. The danger is that people will get too caught up in the conviction that God will provide and will fail to act on their own behalf.

Perhaps in an effort to address this risk, another team of religious scholars takes the opposite tack from Volf as cited in Glaser’s article (scriptural dictates are about ourselves, not our actions), they instead argue that “any scripturally based abstract principles for peace and

⁵¹ Ida Glaser, “We Sat Down and Wept: Biblical Babylon and Israel as Resources for Conflict Situations,” *The Round Table* Vol. 94 No 382 (Oct. 2005): 641-651, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=c97ddd4a-c125-4d8d-9992-d770257b86fb%40sessionmgr15&vid=5&hid=10>.

⁵² Ibid. 641.

⁵³ Ibid. 642.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 646.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 644.

justice must be translated into practical steps that faith communities can take.”⁵⁶ When faced with these two seemingly contradictory injunctions about what to do with one’s scriptural resources, one may not know on which to rely. But, I do not think that they are necessarily mutually-exclusive. They can be blended with the advice of the old adage that “God helps those who help themselves” – scripture can and should be about attitude, but in the interest of being a good citizen of the world and having good relations with one’s fellow man in this life, one should not stop there. Instead, one should take the scripture-inspired attitudes of forgiveness and compassion, taking assurance that justice will be carried out in the end, and work on bringing those attitudes to bear in life.

Indeed, there are actually scriptural commands that people must take action in the world. For example, there is the Jewish commandment of *Tikun Olam*, which is variously translated as “repairing the world,” “perfecting the world,” and “making the world a better place.” *Zakat*, the requirement that one give a portion of one’s wealth to charity, is one of the five pillars of Islam. The Christian Gospels are made more moving by their descriptions of Christ’s actions, not just his words.

But, what about all of the descriptions of violent acts also found in scripture? What about the accounts in various religions of them taking part “in the annihilation of peoples?”⁵⁷ The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) held a conference for leaders of all three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) in which the representatives examined their religious texts for what they have to say about conflict. All of them acknowledged that there are “sections

⁵⁶ Susan Thistlethwaite and Glen Stassen, “Abrahamic Alternatives to War: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on Just Peacemaking,” *United States Institute of Peace Special Report* 214 (Oct. 2008): 13, <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/sr214.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Mohagheghi, “Interreligious Dialogue,” 85.

that support violence and justify warfare as a means to achieve certain goals.”⁵⁸ However, many passages used to do so in “contemporary situations” are inaccurate in one way or another – they are mistranslated, taken out of context, or “interpreted in historically inaccurate ways.”⁵⁹ And, all of the religious leaders at the conference emphasized that all three faiths have many teachings and mandates “that promote peace and present the means to achieve it.”⁶⁰

The task for leaders and teachers in all faith communities then becomes emphasizing the latter and discrediting the former. This practice becomes more pressing the closer a community is to a conflict situation – especially one presented in religious terms. In other words, everyone should teach a scriptural message of peace, but it becomes even more important when teachers must overcome an alternate message being presented. The delegates to the USIP’s conference proposed means of combating these competing interpretations: “textual and historical criticism, better translation, and a more complete understanding of passages’ contexts within the greater corpus of scripture and tradition” can call into question “religious ideologies of violence.”⁶¹

Using scripture to endorse not just a peaceful attitude but peaceful action is a vital step. But, scriptural injunctions can also be used to address the underlying causes of conflict. As I discussed earlier, conflicts involving religion are not necessarily about religion, but about economic, social, or political disparity, and the conflicts are then framed in religious terms in order to garner additional authority or support. As the USIP delegation put it, “so often the root cause of conflict” is “the obstacles that prevent economic, social, and political development.”⁶² Scriptural commands to help those in need (by giving to charity or otherwise) and to promote the good of humanity as a whole can help address these issues.

⁵⁸ Thistlethwaite and Stassen, “Abrahamic Alternatives,” 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. 6-7.

⁶² Ibid. 12-3.

Another resource that faith-based efforts have to their advantage is that they may be able to get into situations and address issues that more traditional (secular) approaches cannot. As David Smock elaborates, “when communal identities, particularly religious identities, are key causal factors in violent conflict, traditional diplomacy may be of little value in seeking peace or conflict management.”⁶³ This is not to say that faith-based efforts should be used in place of secular approaches, but they “can complement secular peacemaking productively.”⁶⁴ In some cultures/societies, where religion may be a more integral part of everyday life, faith-based conflict resolution may be more appealing to or resonant with people.

Faith-based organizations (or individuals) getting involved may also benefit from a “reputation for neutrality and compassion” which may help people be more open to their efforts.⁶⁵ Just as conflicting community members may turn to their religious leader for help in settling a dispute, conflicting communities may be willing to turn to another religious agent. There is an assumption that in acting as arbiter, the religious representative will be impartial, understanding, and wise. This reputation is helpful not only for individual religious authorities, but for faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It may be even more important for an NGO to have such a reputation because, depending on its organizational structure, it may not have individuals in a conflict zone long enough to build a personal reputation with the community.

Having a reputation by virtue of being faith-based may help them to get a foot in the door. After all, the importance of reputation to cooperation has been noted by many studying cooperation. As Vincent Buskens describes, “the notion behind reputation is that actors receive

⁶³ David R. Smock, ed., “Religious Contributions to Peacemaking: When Religion Brings Peace, Not War,” *Peaceworks* 55 (Jan. 2006): 1, <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/PWJan2006.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 4.

⁶⁵ Haynes, “Conflict, Conflict Resolution, and Peace-Building,” 65.

information about the behavior of their partner from third parties and use that information to decide how they are going to behave themselves.”⁶⁶ This information is received “from others with whom they have some kind of relation,” – like other people of their faith.⁶⁷

We must not forget either that, in addition to being neutral and compassionate, religious leaders have authority – both God-granted authority and community-granted authority. Depending on one’s religious beliefs, what one’s religious leader does may inherently indicate the right way to do things – that is what one is commanded to do and that is the moral thing to do. If a religious leader is regarded as God’s representative here on earth, then his/her authority has implications not only for this life but for the next (if one believes in that sort of thing). Beyond that, where there is a faith community (and there often is) the religious leader has authority in the community part of that as well, not just the faith part. Given their status as community leaders, religious authorities are in a strong position to lead by example. For many peace-building efforts, gaining the support and/or endorsement of religious leaders is an important part of their course of action for exactly this reason.

Regarding the importance of both aspects of this value of community authority, the Muslim representatives to the USIP’s conference explained, “The legitimacy of the third-party intervener stems from his religious, social, and cultural rank,” and these may be more important for a mediator than “legal training or other formal education credentials.”⁶⁸ Regarding community involvement, they also note that “Islamic conflict resolution . . . is based on communal and collective solidarity . . . mediation or arbitration . . . tends to involve additional

⁶⁶ Vincent Buskens, “Social Networks and the Effect of Reputation on Cooperation,” (paper prepared for the proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Social Dilemmas, March 30, 1998), 1, <http://www.fss.uu.nl/soc/iscore/papers/paper042.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 2.

⁶⁸ Thistlethwaite and Stassen, “Abrahamic Alternatives,” 9.

people from the community and extended family.”⁶⁹ Although the representatives were speaking for Islamic conflict resolution, their observations are applicable to non-Islamic efforts as well, especially in areas (like East Asia, for example) where a similar value is placed on the community.

In short, there are several components which may help faith-based conflict resolution efforts be more successful than purely secular efforts in some situations. These include being able to draw on scriptural authority for a message of peace. Being rooted in scripture incorporates both historical authority and divine authority into one’s message. One may also need to use scripture to fight scripture if it is being used to justify violence and conflict. Religious leaders need to target these teachings with alternatives, and demonstrate that peace is the true message of the scriptures being cited. Religious authorities can also draw on their authority and reputation in order to propagate a message of peace and to lead by example in their communities.

Third-party religious organizations or individuals entering a conflict situation as mediators or to provide humanitarian aid also reap the benefits of being a religious authority. They may be better able to get a foot in the door or become more involved in some situations than secular efforts. The value of a religious context in some cases may be illustrated by an observation made in 2005 when a delegation of Iranian religious leaders visited the United States to promote increased understanding between Iranians and Americans. It seemed that “the Iranians were much more comfortable discussing sensitive issues with Americans when the discussions took place in a religious context,” even when it was only their location – meeting in a “townhouse owned by the National Prayer Breakfast” rather than congressional offices.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Smock, “Religion in World Affairs,” 5.

My research focused on two approaches to faith-based conflict resolution: interfaith dialogue and the involvement of third-party, faith-based NGOs. Although these approaches are the focus of this paper, I would hasten to emphasize that these are not the only approaches out there and that their application is much more nuanced than the overview that I will give here.⁷¹

Faith-based NGOs act in some cases like secular NGOs – bringing supplies, humanitarian aid, mediators, etc. (depending on their purpose and resources) into areas in need of aid (including both areas in conflict and areas at peace). However, although there may sometimes be similarities, “in most instances the diverse religious orientations of these faith-based organizations shape the peacebuilding they undertake.”⁷² An advantage that NGOs have is that they can include peacebuilding efforts (which need not only address religious conflict) with “more traditional relief and development activities,” which may be more effective than attempting either in isolation.⁷³ This relates back to the underlying issues which are involved in many conflicts, such as economic or political hardship and/or disparity. For example, World Vision (a Christian organization) works to reduce poverty and economic disparity, promote “civil society development,” and enhance “respect for human rights,” with the intention that participatory community development programs “can help prevent violent conflict.”⁷⁴

When they enter a conflict situation, faith-based NGOs may be able to address the factor of religious complications, in addition to these root causes, as well as the violent conflict itself. This is not to say, though, that faith-based NGOs can be magical cure-alls. If they are able to

⁷¹ There are also various efforts involving and supported by religious leaders/authorities in communities leading by example, domestic and international government sponsored efforts, and secular NGOs and community leaders/authorities, to name a few other approaches.

⁷² David Smock, “Faith-Based NGOs and International Peacebuilding,” *United States Institute of Peace Special Report* (Oct. 22, 2001): 2, <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/sr76.pdf>.

⁷³ Ibid. 1.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 4.

effect change, it more likely than not will be long-term and decidedly undramatic. In order to increase their reach and chances at success, “faith-based groups need to forge partnerships with secular NGOs, the diplomatic community, international organizations, and even international military structures that play critical roles.”⁷⁵ This recommendation underscores the fact that conflict situations are complex and inveterate, and should be addressed on multiple fronts to give the best chance for successful intervention.

Another of these fronts with which faith-based NGOs can become involved is the local front: “faith-based NGOs can work collaboratively with local religious groups to promote reconciliation, respecting local faith traditions and empowering local groups.”⁷⁶ One example of how they might do this is to mediate, facilitate, or otherwise encourage interfaith dialogue. On the ground, interfaith dialogue helps to combat the dehumanization of the “other” – this dehumanization makes it much easier to attack outright or otherwise harm the “enemy” – by promoting understanding and humanization of the other instead.

“At its most basic level, interfaith dialogue involves people of different religious faiths coming together to have a conversations” explains Renee Garfinkel in a report on “evaluating interfaith dialogue programs.”⁷⁷ This deceptively simple concept, though, can have dramatic results: “interfaith dialogue can unlock the power of religious traditions and provide the inspiration, guidance, and validation necessary for populations to move toward non-violent means of conflict resolution” – although dramatic, immediate results are not necessarily guaranteed (or even likely).⁷⁸ In most cases, interfaith dialogue may be thought of as a first-step, or as a supplement to other activities (by itself it doesn’t necessarily incorporate action outside of

⁷⁵ Ibid. 2.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 7.

⁷⁷ Renee Garfinkel, “What Works? Evaluating Interfaith Dialogue Programs,” *United States Institute of Peace Special Report* 123 (July 2004): 2, <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/sr123.pdf>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

conversation). Dialogue can create space “where religion can be made visible, common humanity affirmed, the ‘other’ recognized, and constructive solutions . . . achieved.”⁷⁹ It can also “establish a common foundation, affirm shared humanity, sort out religious elements in a conflict, and open space for the ‘other’ in one’s own religion” and “clear the way for political discussions.”^{80 81} For example, interfaith dialogues among adherents to the Abrahamic religions can draw on shared scripture as a way of establishing that “common foundation” and perhaps finding a “space for the ‘other.’” In Nigeria, Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye (who will be discussed later) incorporate the sacred texts of both Christianity and Islam in order to illustrate a common message of peace and forgiveness when they facilitate dialogues.

One may notice that in those two lists the concept of affirming the humanity of the “other” appears twice. In my opinion, that reinforcement of humanity is the key. It is much more difficult to hate someone that one knows than to hate a nameless, faceless stranger. It is only when both sides recognize the “other” as just as human as themselves that progress can really be made. Exposure to the “other” will help with that. Participants come to realize that not only does the “other” not have two heads, but they do have hopes, fears, and loved ones, just like them. Granted, simple exposure will not be enough, and when that exposure takes place in the context of competing for resources (be they food, jobs, money, etc.) it will likely be ineffective at best and counter-productive at worst. But, when attention is paid to having not just exposure but productive exposure, progress is even more likely to be made.

⁷⁹ Trond Bakkevig, “Religious Dialogue and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East,” *NOREF Report* (Feb. 2011): 1, http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/e954e530c0f574c541b70ad7e0cc1568.pdf.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 3.

⁸¹ “Inter-religious Dialogue,” The National Conference for Community and Justice, accessed April 11, 2012, <http://www.nccjctwma.org/whatwedo/inter.html>.

In America, the National Conference for Community and Justice (formerly the National Conference of Christians and Jews) incorporates interreligious dialogue, along with other programs directed at children and adults, in its efforts to foster understanding of the many different religions found in America’s pluralistic society.

Being face to face with the “other” can help combat the dehumanization which makes the worst of the atrocities sometimes seen in conflict situations possible. Once that has been established though, then interfaith dialogue can also promote understanding between the conflicting parties. Discussing the situations in the Middle East, but with an observation that can be applied in most cases of interfaith dialogue, Trond Bakkevig notes that “religious dialogue takes place in the midst of a situation characterized by polarized views of the same situation” – and the dialogue can help each party see the legitimacy of the other’s perspective and concerns.⁸²

And, not only can interfaith dialogue increase understanding of the “other,” but it can help increase understanding of one’s own position. In articulating one’s beliefs to another in order to help them understand, one may come to see that there are parts that don’t make sense or that are more nuanced than one first thought. This idea of increased understanding encompasses more than just one’s own positions though; it will extend to an understanding of one’s own group as defined by those positions. And this understanding of both oneself and the “other” is vital because “true tolerance is contingent not only upon gaining a more sophisticated view of other groups, but also of gaining a similarly complex view of one’s own.”⁸³

An approach to interfaith dialogue advocated by many in the field of faith-based conflict resolution, and specifically of interfaith dialogue, was developed by Daniel Steele. Steele’s approach emphasizes personal storytelling, asking for and granting forgiveness, and addressing underlying issues of justice.⁸⁴ Steele’s use of storytelling “uses the participant’s experiences to help them relate to members of other faith communities” – yet another approach to humanizing

⁸² Bakkevig, “Religious Dialogue,” 7.

⁸³ Garfinkel, “What Works?” 4.

⁸⁴ David Smock, “Divine Intervention: Regional Reconciliation Through Faith,” *Harvard International Review* Vol. 25 Issue 4 (Winter 2004): 47, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=4c1a6d6e-9f04-4731-84dd-dfce64040758%40sessionmgr4&vid=5&hid=21>.

the “other.”⁸⁵ Asking for and granting forgiveness demonstrates that both parties acknowledge that they are not blameless in the conflict. When each side admits that and accepts it, then the mutual understanding and respect being developed in the dialogue can grow. An example can again be found in Nigeria, where a breakthrough was made in an early dialogue facilitated by the Imam and the Pastor when a Muslim participant admitted to the charges that a Christian participant made regarding the behavior of Muslims in general. When the Muslim participant admitted that the actions were wrong, it stunned the Christian participants, inspired their own admission of wrongdoing, and got the ball rolling for a productive dialogue.⁸⁶ These results and observations should not be too surprising – it is much easier and more productive to have a conversation when people are willing to make concessions and admit their own imperfection.

Finally, we return, once again, to addressing the root causes of conflict, which are less often religious differences than issues of justice (or, rather, injustice). This last step has the added benefit of getting the participants in interfaith dialogue to collaborate on issues in which they all have a stake. These issues may be things like the economic or educational development of the community as a whole – that everyone involved is invested is the important part. Working together on a project that is not defined in or by religious terms continues to have the participants spend more time together concentrating on what they have in common rather than their differences. One must note, though, that while establishing similarities is important, that does not mean that a discussion of differences does not have a place in interfaith dialogue. On the contrary, ignoring differences rather than exploring them in the relatively safe and respectful atmosphere of interfaith dialogue will lead to a failure to develop a complex understanding of oneself or the “other.” A conversation in which certain issues (which are probably fairly

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Smock, “Religious Contributions to Peacemaking,” 18.

pressing for the participants) must be avoided is not a genuine conversation, and as a result the participants may not be as invested in or open to the dialogue.

But, returning to the concept of collaboration and its importance, that is where the story of Pastor James Movel Wuye and Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa (the Imam and the Pastor) comes in. Their story begins with each of them when they were both militants on either side of a violent conflict in Nigeria. The conflict was geographic and economic (thanks to unequally distributed resources) and came to be defined in religious terms (the primarily Muslim north vs. the Christian and animist south). Casualties numbered in the thousands. Their story hasn't ended yet; as of now the conflict in Nigeria is still going on (and may be escalating with the influence of the Islamic extremist group Boko Haram). Pastor Wuye and Imam Ashafa are working at the grassroots level through workshops and facilitating interfaith dialogues "giving young people a secure place to learn about other groups, teaching them ways in which their own religious tradition supports peaceful coexistence, training them in conflict resolution skills, and addressing their personal, practical issues."⁸⁷

What is the story behind such a dramatic turnaround? Between then and now, both Pastor Wuye and Imam Ashafa lost important parts of their lives – a hand and a mentor and cousins, respectively – and otherwise saw the consequences of violent conflicts, witnessing deaths on both sides. They met while they were both working on a government response to a public health crisis to which they were both assigned. Following that, a mutual friend encouraged them to continue to work together on subsequent projects for both of their communities. Both

⁸⁷ Garfinkel, "What Works?" 5.

remained suspicious and doubtful for many years, but they were eventually able to embrace the message of forgiveness and understanding espoused by both of their faiths.⁸⁸

Pastor Wuye recalls as a turning point in his life when he was told, “‘you cannot preach Christianity with hate,’” and being asked to consider whether Jesus would “‘fight the Muslims or preach to them.’” Imam Ashafa also found his turning point (although he does not point to such a specific moment in time) through a reconsideration of what his faith says about forgiveness. He listened to sermons, prayed with others, and otherwise engaged in difficult consideration of his beliefs and attitudes. He says that “‘the Quran was my source of healing’” (which Pastor Wuye might also say about the Bible). Their specifically religious inspiration for the change that they were able to engender in their lives highlights the dramatic potential that religion has to promote peace. While change did not come quickly or easily for the Imam and the Pastor, through spiritual journeys, which they went through both separately and together, they have begun to truly and effectively work for peace, and to help others begin to do the same.⁸⁹

It is a well-studied fact that religion often has a hand in creating and/or worsening conflict in the world. What has received less attention is that religion has a (much more natural) place in conflict resolution as well. Faith-based initiatives have resources to draw on that are unique to them because of their religious status (scriptural authority, for example) which may be especially effective in some communities or conflicts. Both faith-based NGOs and interfaith dialogue efforts can draw on those resources and contribute to the continuing effort to make the world a more peaceful place. Although it has thus-far been overshadowed by its more sensational opposite role, religion’s true place is in conflict resolution.

⁸⁸ Renee Garfinkel, “Personal Transformations: Moving from Violence to Peace,” United States Institute of Peace Special Report 186 (April 2007): 3-5, <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/sr186.pdf>.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

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