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Religion and violence

The world today is faced with unprecedented and complex challenges arising from radicalisation and violent extremism. The backdrop to these phenomena is a series of identity-based conflicts, cultural and religious tensions. The conundrum for countries with diverse populations is the challenge of maintaining both unity and diversity. The threat to security from extremist elements within these communities is reaching alarming levels. Recent events in Paris, Brussels, Yemen, and Kenya, for example, reinforce fears that radicalisation affects the very security of our nation states. The response to these challenges has witnessed the introduction of new counter-terror measures, greater powers for the intelligence and surveillance services and heightened military activity. Despite these strategies, the problems of radicalisation and extremism are not diminishing. Rather, they are challenging our contemporary culture of liberal diversity.

In order to counter these challenges and the threats that they pose to communities around the world, multiple strategies to promote tolerance, acceptance, reconciliation, respect for cultural diversity and the freedom of religion are required. Principal among these is the need for an intercultural dialogue that is capable of promoting a disposition towards openness and democracy. The United Nations Global Counter Terrorism Strategy recognises the importance of dialogue and reconciliation to foster peaceful and inclusive societies. A high-level thematic debate of the United Nations General Assembly on Promoting Tolerance and Reconciliation: Fostering Peaceful, Inclusive Societies and Countering Violent Extremism in April 2015 noted, dialogue 'including among religious leaders – is a critical tool for fostering peaceful, inclusive societies that reinforce shared human values and a sense of common humanity'.

The relation between religion and violence, as well as between religion and peace- building or non-violent political and social struggle, needs to be better understood, particularly in reconciliation contexts. The way that religious communities think about and enact forms of non-violence and reconciliation under globalised and globalising conditions is an important resource for reconciliation struggles. However, these formulations already presuppose some clear notion of religion/religious that is separate from notions of secularity.

To date, there has not been a systematic examination of the religious dimensions of reconciliation processes. Such an examination is urgently needed in a geo-political context inflected with global conflicts that, while justified in the name of religion, are in fact the result of complex issues within a religious/secular context. Similarly, there has been little scholarly work on the nature of religious social engagement in reconciliation projects. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that it was Nelson Mandela who in a real sense revitalised and rejuvenated an ethic of reconciliation, an ethic that certainly ignited hope primarily because it

was built on the bedrock of compassion and forgiveness.

In a globalised world, negative 'soft power' influences easily permeate 'hard' national boundaries. While governments can try to control the flow of peoples, it has proven much harder to control the flight of ideas both good and evil. The urgent task for us is to engage ourselves in a more effective manner where we can deal with such issues collectively. We need to be cognisant of how important education is to countering the extremism that has engulfed our diverse communities. Indeed, the porous nature of community boundaries necessitates the urgency of dialogue and collective action at local, national and international levels.

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