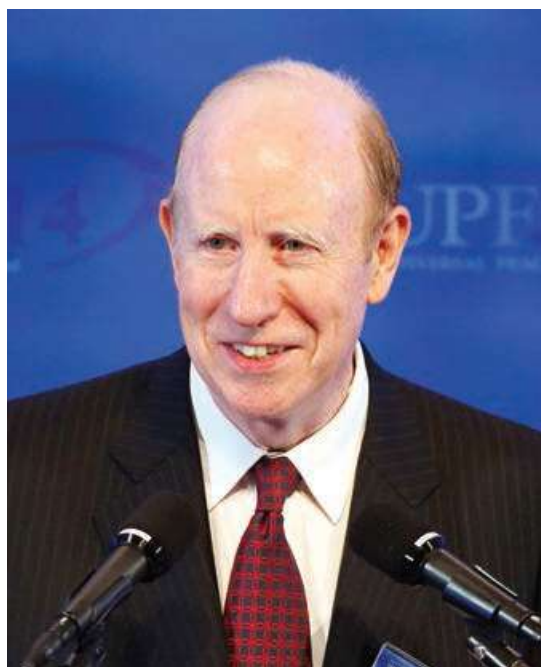


The Role of Religion in the Quest for Peace

Thomas G. Walsh

February 2015

President of UPF International



Religion remains a significant force in the lives of billions of people around the world. In effect, religion impacts global affairs. The great German sociologist, Max Weber, saw Protestantism, specifically Calvinism, as the root cause of northern Europe's development and the rise of modernity. Weber held that the way in which societies or civilizations explain justice theologically, as in theodicy, is absolutely decisive in shaping their worldview and their social systems. The doctrine of karma, for example, Weber argued, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* led to a kind of fatalism about life that was an inhibiting force relative to modernization and rationalization

Whether one accepts Weber's analysis of the social significance of specific religions' doctrines, his thesis that religious ideas have social consequences is valid. The Weber thesis has wide relevance in our current era, given that one of the most significant developments of recent decades has been religious resurgence. While, on the one

hand, this development has included the rise of various forms of religious extremism and fundamentalism, it has also been accompanied by a movement to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding.

The cold war era was very much a period where ideology was centered on the position one takes on liberty, equality and social justice. Geopolitical tensions between communism and democracy were related to debates about socialism versus capitalism, or more liberal, free societies versus more state-organized or state-controlled societies. Religion was relegated to the private sphere, not only by the communist countries but also to some extent by the liberal democracies.

Religion was viewed largely as a private affair. Concepts like separation of church and state or secularization were dominant. In the post-cold war era we witness a global resurgence of religion and a reassertion of the religious factor in world affairs. The shocking experience of the terrorist attack in New York on September 11, had a religious dimension to it. Of course, we all recognize the twisted and distorted thinking of terrorists, but there was some aspect of that senseless act that related to the religious, cultural, civilizational differences between people -- in this case, Islam and the West -- differences that are rooted in religious ideas, even if those ideas have been distorted.

Consider Mindanao in the Philippines. It is an issue where the religious differences, cultural differences as well as the political and economic factors are highly relevant to understanding what is going on there. A comprehensive analysis cannot exclude religion, alongside other factors related to politics, economics, history, and culture. From a social or scientific point of view or a political science point view, religion is seen as increasingly, even centrally relevant and significant.

When you look at politics in India, for example, the parties that have always been strong have actually been usually from the lineage of Mahatma Gandhi. He was deeply rooted in a religious worldview. The main party emerging at this time, the BJP party, is guided by *Hindutva* philosophy, or a Hindu nationalist idealism rooted in Hindu thought. Religion is clearly a factor. It's not the only factor, but it is a factor in world affairs.

Consider the Arab Spring and in particular the disaster in Syria. Syria, like Iraq, is characterized by sectarian divisions among Sunnis, Shiites, Druze, Kurds and Alawites; and then there are the Christian divisions between Orthodox, Catholic, Maronite, etc., that are very relevant factors to the political landscape. We cannot understand the conflict in Syria without knowledge of the religious dimensions.

This is increasingly being noted by political scientists. In the field of international relations, where religion was usually not discussed, it is becoming part of the core curriculum. The founder of the International Institute for Religion and Diplomacy, Dr. Douglas Johnston, published a volume entitled, *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*. Jimmy Carter wrote the introduction. And the former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, came out with a book called, *The Mighty and the Almighty*, talking about faith, politics and the United States of America. She strongly advocated for more religious

literacy among both academicians and government officials.

Such a shift does not mean that we are each called to become religious, or join a religion, or change one's religion. That's not the issue. Rather the point is to look at the world as it is, and to see things as they happen in the real world. In so doing, we come to see very objectively that religion is a very, very powerful force in the world. If we are going to understand the crisis in Syria, we cannot just understand it only as a geopolitical conflict.



Dr. Walsh with Pope Theodoros II, the Coptic pope of Alexandria and patriarch of the See of St. Mark

We must also consider the religious factor, the ethnicity factor and the cultural factor. This reality came out very strongly in the former Yugoslavia, after the coming apart of the USSR. The nations that came about – Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Slovenia, Kosovo – generally were each formed in accordance with religious and ethnic identities. Religion is often transmitted through the family line. It is not common for people leave the religion of their birth; thus, ethnicity and religion are often very much tied together. So people identify with ethnicity – as Serbian, or as Kosovars.

These identities have dimensions that are shaped by who we are culturally, civilizationally and religiously. This is impacting the United Nations. UPF's founder, Dr. Sun Myung Moon, proposed in an address at the United Nations in 2000 that the United Nations needs to appreciate more the significance of religion, and should establish within its system an interfaith council. He could see an emerging problematic aspect of the twenty-first century, namely, that geopolitics are becoming even more complicated as the religious sphere, the civil society sphere and the sovereign nation-state sphere are all actively engaged on the world stage. It is no longer just a game played by the nation-states or governments. Today there are many non-state actors, such as religion and civil society, actors that governments cannot control, and which cannot be ignored.

For this reason, the importance of religious literacy among political scientists and concerned citizens alike is increasingly important, at the same time, mutually respectful interfaith understanding among believers is equally, if not more important. We must understand one another not only geopolitically, but at a deeper level. That is why dialogue is important. A variety of institutions have emerged that underscore dialogue, mutual understanding and mutual respect.

One, which had its origins in Iran, as a response to Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, is known as the "Dialogue of Civilizations." Russia's Dr. Vladimir Yakunin and Austria's Dr. Walter Schwimmer, former secretary general of the Council of Europe, head up the World Public Forum "Dialogue Among Civilizations", with dual headquarters in Vienna and Moscow, and dedicated to promoting a dialogue among peoples that serve the ideal of peace for all peoples. The United Nations has its own "Alliance of Civilizations" program, led by the High Representative, Ambassador Nassir Abdulaziz Al Nasser, former President of the General Assembly.

In the area of interfaith relations, there are multiple organizations that promote dialogue, mutual respect and cooperation. These include Religions for Peace, World Congress of Faiths, The Parliament of the World's Religions, and the Universal Peace Federation.

"Dialogue among civilizations" is critical at this time. Thus we must seek to understand the heart and the soul of nations and the core values of people. Another aspect of the paradigm shift that I think Dr. Moon identified is the need for dialogue to replace conflict oriented dialectics.

Conflict and struggle must be resolved through respectful, confidence building and constructive dialogue. The way to peace is through a dialogical process. That was the message Dr. Moon took to Kim Il Sung in 1991, and to Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990. By promoting dialogue among the nations, among the

governments, among the people we can move toward peace. The dialogue should not merely take place between governments, but "track II" dialogue is needed, between peoples, between women, between the youth, as well as among artists and athletes, students and academics.

As we work for peace, we should give needed attention to this broad dialogue that includes not only the representatives of governments, and "track one" diplomacy, but the dialogue among people in all the richness of their identities and worldviews, including culture, religion, and ethnicity. UPF is committed to supporting this effort in an ongoing way, for the sake of peace.