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## Post-Lecture Discussion

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## Post-Lecture Discussion

SPEAKER: DOUGLAS M. JOHNSTON  
MODERATOR: REV. PATRICK D. GAFFNEY, C.S.C.  
SPEECH: "RELIGION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION"  
DATE: FEBRUARY 21, 1992

*Rev. Gaffney:* [Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame.]

Comments or questions from the floor?

*Participant:* You mentioned in Sri Lanka they accepted the religious help because they couldn't see any ulterior motive that the outside body brought. But couldn't that always be a weakness or isn't there a danger that the outside religious group will come in and create a new conflict by destroying or trying to change the culture? I am thinking of the Catholic Church going into Central America, while they are helpful, if you will, to Indian groups. It also may destroy some of the Indian culture, while bringing in the Christian values. Down the road there is a conflict of which religion is it, the native Indian religion or the Catholic religion? Isn't there a danger that there may be an ulterior motive that may lead to heightened problems?

*Dr. Johnston:* That's a very insightful question.

The group to which I was referring with respect to Sri Lanka is a group that is widely known; their only agenda is peace-making. Period. They are not out trying to proselytize, influence, or do anything else. There are several groups that I could name that fall into this category, where no one, but no one, questions their motives.

And when you speak of the Catholic Church as a possible third-party intervener like that, what one finds is that where the Catholic Church has been most useful in resolving conflict is where its temporal power is called into play. The Pope has been very active in this regard as in the Beagle Channel Islands dispute between Argentina and Chile. There you had two Catholic countries that could appeal to the Church to provide a face-saving way out of a situation which they had not been able to resolve and

which seemed totally beyond the reach of an approach along the lines that Roger Fisher was suggesting earlier.

So the Catholic Church doesn't really fit the mold of being the dispassionate third-party who is only interested in peace. By the same token, the mold that it has fit has been very useful in the Philippines, in Poland, and in the Beagle Islands. There is a moral authority there when all other authority breaks down that can be appealed to and in which people believe. It usually takes Catholic populations to make that work, however.

*Participant:* My question is: What about religion as a justification for war?

*Dr. Johnston:* That's a very broad question and one that would take a long time to respond to in a meaningful way.

As I mentioned in my comments, the contribution of religion as a divisive influence in the affairs of man is widely known and recognized. What we are attempting to do here is to turn a little bit of that conventional wisdom on its head and examine ways in which religion and spirituality can be used as an advantage in these kinds of situations.

I don't think we are far enough along in our research to be able to determine the entire range of causal relationships. I'm not sure we ever will.

One of the things that religion typically introduces into the equation—and this is a very difficult thing to get at through the methodology that Roger Fisher was describing—is an attitude that suggests, “My mind is made up, and it would be blasphemous for me to think differently than I am because of my religious convictions.” That's a very, very difficult attitude to address.

So the best I think one can do, as I was suggesting, is to look at the different religions and examine their theology in seeking a rationale to support the practice of conflict resolution. I might tell you, by the way, that each of the case studies that I described have in common the fact that in almost every instance they are Christian examples. Now, the peace-making mandate in Christianity is widely known; it has been implemented on any number of occasions. We went to great lengths to look at other religious experiences to find comparable kinds of case situations. An initial precondition we felt had to be met was that the situation had to be recent enough for most of the principal parties to still be living so we could pass the test of good scholarship through compre-

hensive interview and the like. We also needed to have situations that were resolved on a positive note so one could make the case that there had been a positive contribution leading to a good outcome. Unfortunately, after chasing about fourteen different leads, none of them met these tests. It was very difficult.

*Father Lewers:* [William Lewers, Director of the Center for Civil and Human Rights.]

I appreciate your comments since I've worked for some five years for the Catholic Bishops of the United States and directed their office in Washington on international policy.

But it seems to me that there is a caveat, a word of caution needed because there can be an attempt by political forces or ideological forces to manipulate religion, to manipulate churches, to manipulate the religious community.

I can give you a rather egregious example of that. When the Reagan administration failed to convince the Catholic Bishops of the United States of the correctness of its policy in Central America, primarily Nicaragua and El Salvador—because we were very much in opposition to the policy of the Reagan Administration in those two countries and in Central America in general—it then tried what, in effect, was an end run. They advocated and implemented the institution of diplomatic relations between the United States and the Vatican for the very first time. That was not sought by the Vatican. That was not sought by the Catholic Bishops of the United States. That was sought by the Reagan Administration, thinking that the Vatican would prove more malleable on the questions of Nicaragua and El Salvador and the economy than the Catholic Bishops of the United States. It was a sheer effort at manipulation.

So while I applaud your paper and the view of the positive effect these organizations may have, there is, I think, a word of caution and a caveat necessary.

*Dr. Johnston:* That is a very thoughtful comment and a helpful one, and we are mindful of those possibilities.

In the Nicaraguan case, the person who was on the point was John Paul Lederach from the United States. He, in fact, was doing things that ran counter to the Reagan Administration's efforts. The Administration did not want there to be a resolution of differences between the East Coast Indians and the Sandanistas because that would enable the Sandanistas to focus solely on the

Contras. One can only speculate as to the sources, but John Paul was receiving kidnapping threats against his family. It was a very dicey situation, and you're absolutely right about manipulation.

Let me give you an example of the kind of thing that I think makes sense to acknowledge. When you speak with the former ambassador from South Africa, Piet Koornhof, he will tell you categorically that the only forum where the blacks and the whites could come together in South Africa was the Church. That is terribly important for us to recognize as a nation. If we want to influence things in a positive way, then we should be aiding and abetting that process, trying to facilitate those activities, but in such a manner that it doesn't make the churches look like pawns. Our ambassador can do a great deal on the scene by way of where we place our emphasis and support. In many instances, our motives are, in fact, rather altruistic. Sometimes they are just the opposite. But it seems to me that in these situations where we're really trying to provide good offices for a successful outcome, we should recognize the potential and do what we can to exercise it.

*Professor Walshe:* [Peter Walshe, Professor, Department of Government, University of Notre Dame.]

Just a brief comment. I think there might be some misunderstanding of your term and then, if I may, ask a question. We talked about a situation in Mozambique and the way in which the governments had become leftist, a big debate about how messy it was. And then you used the phrase "this spawned the RENAMO movement." I think that's very misleading. RENAMO was not spawned in an action against FRELIMO in Mozambican politics. RENAMO has its roots in Rhodesia. It was generated from outside. The RENAMO fighting structure was then later taken over by South Africa and kept alive in the Transvaal. It was then funded by extreme right-wing Portuguese groups who wanted to keep it active. And it was then supported by right-wing groups in the United States like the Heritage Foundation and right-wing church groups.

So that phrase—you're obviously dealing with it in a shorthand way in a short paper, but I think it's very misleading to say that it spawned a reaction in Mozambique against the FRELIMO. It was generated from abroad.

*Dr. Johnston:* That is an important correction, and I welcome your input.

*Professor Walsh:* I would agree with Father Lewers that I think it's possible for great powers to take over the latest movement and manipulate it and produce a premature settlement of the dispute. Conflict resolution at first sight seems admirable, of course, who would be against it?

But if we're going to talk about religion and conflict resolution in a broader sense, it's not simply the relatively short-term history of bringing groups together. There is a second function of religion, many perhaps, which is, in fact, to confront injustice. And it's quite possible to argue that short-term solutions, which cut short a process of working out justice, is, in the long run, a disservice. So it's not a matter of just thinking about conflict resolution in the short term, but whether religious movements, for example in the Philippines or South Africa, could be supportive in their thrust for justice in a way that creates tension and may prolong conflict—whether you should permit and encourage the State Department and others to support populist movements to the point where these justice issues are really faced rather than short circuited.

*Dr. Johnston:* You have raised a terribly important question, and that, too, has its down sides, for instance if you look at what liberation theology has led to in certain situations in Latin America, with priests taking up arms and promoting the kind of movement toward change to which you have referred.

I see a need for balance. First of all, I think the Church has to be non-violent in its quest for justice.

*Professor Walsh:* I think the Church's function in South Africa, where it has supported a liberation movement, the Church's input remained nonviolent. The Church was behind a whole series of nonviolent tactics within South Africa. But there were many elements in the right-wing of the Church, even in the State Department of the United States, who were polarized on this issue and very opposed to the South African Council of Churches and the South African Catholic Bishops, apparently keeping the conflict alive. Because what the Church was doing in South Africa was saying, "Look, we don't compromise on apartheid; it has to be dismantled." If you wanted to get in prematurely at that point, it would have compromised apartheid. And that's the issue I'm raising.

*Dr. Johnston:* I understand your issue, but I don't think your assumption necessarily follows. With the exception of the Dutch Reformed Church, the role of the churches in South Africa was a leading role; they were on the cutting edge in promoting the abolition of apartheid. No question about it. It's interesting, though—once that momentum was established and solidified with the promulgation of the Rustenberg Declaration in November of last year, in which apartheid was declared to be sin, Bishop Tutu in particular, and the Church more generally, withdrew because the political process had caught up with the Church.

The next thing that happened is that the Church started coming under criticism for not doing enough to address the problem of violence. So what did they do? They got back into the political mainstream and teamed up with the business community in sponsoring a forum at which the parties could come together to sign a declaration of nonviolence, something the government had attempted to do itself without success. In South Africa, the Church is looked to as being in the vanguard of promoting social justice and change.

Let me give you another case in point, kind of an interesting one. For many years, Kenya and Somalia engaged in border hostilities because the northern third of Kenya was Muslim and identified with Somalia. After each of them achieved independence, it was more than a little artificial that this territory was assigned to Kenya rather than Somalia. So there was a secessionist movement going on. It was in this context that the President of Somalia, Siad Barre, visited Washington for some official meetings. In the course of those meetings, he became involved in discussions with some spiritually motivated lay persons associated with the National Prayer Breakfast Movement. These lay persons had access to President Moi of Kenya on a personal basis. They asked each of these leaders if they could possibly come together to resolve these hostilities between their respective countries. Both replied that it would be impossible—tantamount to political suicide. But the group worked on both presidents. One is a Muslim, the other a Christian. They finally agreed to come together in a "spirit of fellowship." They settled their differences and the hostilities ceased.

Now you look at the situation and say, well, how significant was that? Sure, the hostilities ceased between Kenya and Somalia, but if you look at what's happened since, Siad Barre has gone the way of a despot, and Moi is under severe criticism for not moving to a multiparty democracy. In that situation, I would submit that

this sort of activity doesn't always equate to a "Damascus experience" in which the parties are suddenly transformed into wonderful people from then on. It is rather a situation where they were not going to come together under secular circumstances, but they were able to do so on a spiritual basis.

I talked to Moi, and I asked him how significant that meeting was. And he said, "Before the meeting, we had war; after the meeting, no more war."

*Professor Walsh:* Why I'm concerned about this is because it seems to me that the short-term processes you're talking about are a legitimate function for conflict resolution. But underlying that is going to be the role of the churches that's going to occur all over the globe in many places, I think, in dealing with persistent economic polarization. And then there is going to be long-run tension with the existing economic war and the policies of the I.M.F. and the World Bank. That's a long-term thrust for justice where the issues cannot be handled quite as easily.

*Dr. Johnston:* I understand. I take your point, too. Thank you.

*Rev. Gaffney:* It's only fair I call on Roger Fisher since he was refuted during the actual text.

*Professor Fisher:* [Roger Fisher, Williston Professor of Law, Harvard Law School.]

In the literature, if you find something needs to be written, someone will find a hole.

I think it's useful to distinguish between where all these disputes or so many of them are between groups of different religions that none of them are about religion. They are not arguing the Trinity. The religion is simply a marker to tell the teams apart. When Harvard plays Yale, there's no dispute about the color of the jerseys. The jerseys tell you which team you're on, and the people divide along that line.

I do think one of the troubles with conflict resolution is this suggestion that it may be too early to resolve the dispute. This suggests a static solution. We want to pursue justice peacefully. We want to pursue justice at minimum cost and needless bloodshed and so on and so forth. It's an endless list. So it's a problem; it's a process that goes on.



But I'm wondering and I want to ask: Many of these religious personalities, religious leaders well-motivated and so forth could benefit in courses on simply technique, from the Catholic Church in Rome, to the Quakers, to other groups. Do you think that some good academic institutions could sponsor workshops for religiously-motivated people that want to get with this business so you can train people in everything we could offer as well as all that they bring? I think there is a combination of talents that are needed. But I find that even the Vatican during the Vietnam war had a terrible problem with the apostolic delegate who had no notion about this theory at all.

*Dr. Johnston:* Well, our goal is to strive toward that as one of our objectives. The first group we are trying to influence is the Foreign Service Institute. And the Director of the Foreign Service Institute has told us that if we come up with something substantial, they'll run with it. So we have that commitment up front. That helps us in the foreign policy arena.

Again, that's sensitizing. You know, people understand how deeply embedded that spiritual dimension is in much of the rest of the world. And then the goal is to go after the religious side of the equation. I don't know exactly where that's going to take us, but our hope is to inform the religious communities in the same way about these kinds of issues, and not just about the spiritual aspects but also the techniques for how one goes about bringing the parties together.

I think that Dayle Spencer was exactly right. There is enough strife out there for all of us to spend our entire lives working the problem, with plenty left over, so it really gets down to the level of the individual. The more folks we have from the churches who are empowered and informed along these lines, all to the good.

I probably presented this too simplistically, because the gentleman in the rear there has raised some very provocative and, I think, farsighted questions. But as I mentioned with respect to Ghandi and others, they were seeking social change, but on a nonviolent basis. And that is what the churches did in the recent East German revolution, the same kind of thing. They helped promote the agenda, they provided cover for the resistance movement, and church leaders and members actually provided the leadership for the local councils that governed the country for the first three months after the overthrow.

So I think there is a useful role, and Roger's distinction is very important. It's not static. It's about process. It is dynamic and continuous.

*Participant:* To study the Church as a united entity may be somewhat misleading in different conflict situations. It seems that, certainly from my experience in South Africa, that the reasons why the Church became important may not be entirely always related to the religious or theological mission of the Church, but may have a lot to do with simply the availability of an institutional structure, the availability of financial resources, the availability of political and social space, moral legitimacy, and a nonviolent approach. And that really one needs to look in each conflict situation at how these different factors became important, not just to treat it as perhaps a unified entity.

*Dr. Johnston:* I don't disagree with that at all. In fact, in every one of these case-study situations, you find a unique blend of different ingredients that were at work. Often, the one that seems to stand out is the moral authority represented by a group or a church that is trusted not to have ulterior motives, that can remain neutral while bringing the parties together. And that seems to be the principal ingredient. But the other factors that you spoke of, in varying degrees do come into play.

One of the reasons, for example, that the Church was so effective in bridging the gap between the resistance movement and the government in East Germany was because it had played a somewhat similar role under the Communist regime. To some extent, those who played that role in some of the East European countries were totally discredited once the revolution took place, because they were perceived as having been in bed with those fellows before.

There are so many nuances in this business that it is very difficult to generalize or oversimplify. I do submit, though, that there is tremendous potential out there for people who are adequately informed and who have the commitment to make a positive contribution where, in most instances, no contribution at all is now being made.

*Participant:* Just from the discussion, it seems apparent that religion and conflict resolution can play two roles. On the one hand, it could be an aid to peaceful change, such as the examples you

mentioned in Sri Lanka or South Africa; but on the other hand, in liberation theology, it could be a way to pander to religion in order to achieve certain political goals, to incite violence, or to incite revolution, and in that way would perpetuate conflict rather than resolve it.

How can we avoid one use of religion, but also use it as a peaceful agent of change?

*Dr. Johnston:* Well, I'm not quite certain I know the answer. I would repeat what I said earlier, that I think the Church's involvement should be a nonviolent involvement. Look in Yugoslavia right now, and you have priests on both sides of the line. You have Croatian and Serbian priests with machine guns around their necks. That's not what this is supposed to be about.

But I don't have a good answer, other than the fact that the Pope has tried to place very tight constraints on liberation theology as practiced in Latin America, for example.

And, you know, all too often, these things get down to what's laid on a person's heart. They may be wearing priest's garb or they may not. And you can't always control that.

But all I am suggesting here is that if you can accept nonviolence as a prerequisite, then I think you can move forward at promoting peaceful change that will lead to justice and a better situation for the parties, that can bring the parties together in some sort of an agreement.

*Professor Walshe:* A point of clarification. To associate liberation theology with violence is a profound misunderstanding of liberation theology. It's associated in most parts of the globe with nonviolent process. That was certainly the case in South Africa.

*Father Lewers:* I would like to agree with Peter Walshe on that point. Having lived and worked in Latin America, I do not know of liberation theology being used to further the cause of violence. Reference was made earlier to priests taking up arms in Latin America. I only know of one, and that was Camillo Torez in Columbia back in the 1960s. It has not been a frequent occurrence.

*Dr. Johnston:* I am probably guilty of having maligned liberation theology, but that is the supposed context for a number of situations at the grass-roots level where priests were out in front in

trying to promote change, but not necessarily on a nonviolent basis.

*Professor Walshe:* If we had liberation theology in Yugoslavia, we may not have had quite the extreme divisions of conflict that we have now. We might have had a greater emphasis on nonviolent processes.

*Rev. Gaffney:* This is a very important point, but we have room for about two more questions, and hold to the new agenda items so we can expand our frontiers.

*Professor Wallensteen:* [Peter Wallensteen, Professor of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University.]

I was looking at your seven cases, and I thought they were a rather mixed bag of very different things, I take it that was deliberate to help you to answer some of the questions.

Clearly, in some cases, the church actors, religious actors have been promoting nonviolent change between the parties in the conflict and pushing in a certain direction. I mean, there is a movement toward democracy in the Philippines and you have the South African situation. That's one kind of conflict management or conflict-handling technique you could say if you want to.

In a couple of cases, it is clearly a case of the churches actually being involved in the negotiations. The Sudan would be the prime example of this, I guess. And in other cases, it is reconciliation after the war. That's quite different, and I suppose, that's deliberate.

*Dr. Johnston:* It is deliberate.

*Professor Wallensteen:* That's an interesting point. And I think that helps you to answer the questions and that helps you with these guys over here.

I was wondering, and you mentioned it yourself, that all of these were basically Christian churches that were involved. You mentioned you were trying to look for other cases. Does it mean you did not find any Islamic cases, for instance? That surprised me.

*Dr. Johnston:* We actually did not. In Islam you are much more likely to find a Muslim mediating differences between fellow Mus-

lims, than you are to find that sort of mediation taking place between a Muslim and another religion. But although we searched quite hard, we weren't even able to find a case that met the tests of currency and successful resolution in the Islamic context. That doesn't mean it's not out there. We just weren't able to find it.

*Professor Johansen:* [Robert Johansen, Professor, Department of Government, University of Notre Dame.]

I was just curious about whether you've looked very much at a quite different role that religion plays. These examples draw heavily on a kind of third-party or mediating role by religious groups or individuals in intergovernmental conflict. But religion obviously plays a strong role also in either sanctioning or constraining, a willingness to use force on the part of parishioners or the mass public in any society. And I'm wondering if your study is looking at that at all?

*Dr. Johnston:* No, it's really not. In terms of the Church sanctioning the use of arms by its parishioners, that's the other side of the equation, the divisive side. We're trying to get at something that's narrower, more specific, and positive.

*Father Lewers:* But it also constrains. It may constrain the use of force even at that mass level.

*Dr. Johnston:* It may, indeed, and, in fact, I would submit that is exactly what it did, for example, in the Philippines. Again, this was the nonviolent approach to social change. The Church was out front in keeping the process nonviolent. And the same thing happened in East Germany in Leipzig. There the government was attempting to provoke them into violence, so that they could react. But the churches held to their high ground. That, I think, is one of the key elements: the capability, the leverage, the influence of the Church to keep its parishioners nonviolent.

*Rev. Gaffney:* We had a very instructive discussion.

*Dr. Johnston:* Thank you. It was very instructive to me.