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Frameworks for dialogue:
**Interfaith action
in times of conflict**

Stein Villumstad

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Frameworks for dialogue:
Interfaith action in times of conflict

Stein Villumstad

Norwegian Church Aid

FRAMEWORKS FOR DIALOGUE:
INTERFAITH ACTION IN TIMES OF CONFLICT
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1. Introduction

Religion is important in the lives of large majorities of the world's population. On an individual level people's lives are guided by their religious beliefs and values. The social significance of religion is played out through and in religious communities and institutions, of which historic roots, to a great extent, determine their nature and functioning. Their leaders are the custodians of values, history and social power.

In a number of contemporary conflicts throughout the world, whether international or domestic, religion is mentioned as one of the factors. Even in wars without religious overtones, religious leaders have involved themselves to various degrees. There are examples where they are the 'cheerleaders' of nationalistic war-mongers. There are also examples where they constructively initiate or support peace efforts, or speak out against injustice. The legitimacy and credibility of religious leaders are significantly enhanced when they act jointly across denominational and faith divides.

This paper looks at dialogue for interfaith action in times of war, based on the involvement of Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), together with the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), in three cases: Ethiopia and Eritrea, Sierra Leone, and Kosovo. The three cases are introduced in narrative form in the first part with the main emphasis on the Ethiopia/Eritrea process, since NCA involvement in this process has been the longest and most comprehensive. The other two are used as supplementary evidence and for comparative observations. The second part discusses interfaith dialogue and action within some conceptual frameworks of dialogue and conflict transformation. In the final part, the three cases are revisited in order to apply some of the frameworks discussed in the second part.

2. Religious leaders challenged to act: Three examples

2.1 Ethiopia/Eritrea

“Religious fathers called upon the peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea not to bear any resentment against one another as a result of the conflict that raged between the two countries. Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church said there would not be war hereafter between the two countries. ... At a press conference they gave at the Bole International Airport the religious fathers said they have conveyed a message of peace to the people of Eritrea to bury the past and work for a better future. The Ethiopian religious fathers who travelled to Asmara returned home February 14 after concluding their visit to that country.”¹

“At a public gathering at the United Nations Conference Centre yesterday, the religious leaders of both countries have reiterated the importance of peace to the leaders and peoples of the two countries ... ‘My hope – my stubborn optimism – is that with your spiritual and pastoral guidance, with your prayers and actions, lasting peace will return to the land of Ethiopia and of Eritrea and their people will once again enjoy a life of dignity and prosperity’, ... [the special representative of the Secretary-General of the UN, Legwaila Joseph Legwaila] said.”²

For the first time since the war between the two countries broke out in 1998, the Eritrean and Ethiopian people witnessed delegations publicly visiting each other in their respective capitals. The significance of the meetings was further underlined by the high levels of leaders participating in these talks, with the massive popular support of their religious communities. The joint visits of the religious leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea were the culmination of a process that experienced countless high and low points.

A significant breakthrough occurred more than two years earlier during a meeting. Twenty men in full religious pontifical, across religious and national divides and tensions, spontaneously broke up the formal meeting. They rose, walked about in the room, hugging each other and sharing greetings of peace.

1 Addis Zemen, newspaper, Addis Ababa, 15 February 2002

2 Addis Zemen, newspaper, Addis Ababa, 16 February 2002

This emotional and colourful episode took place in a secluded hotel in Norway in the early fall of 1999, and was sparked off by an historic agreement reached around the table.

After serious and difficult negotiations, starting almost a year earlier, the religious leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea had finalised a joint appeal to the peoples of their countries. They asked them to work for peace in their respective religious traditions, to reach out in support of those who were suffering, and to open their hearts to forgive and thus to end hateful propaganda. The backdrop of the appeal was the war between the two countries which, in just more than a year, had killed thousands of people, displaced hundreds of thousands and caused serious humanitarian crises. In the same meeting, they prepared joint letters to their two governments, in which they respectfully urged them to make the utmost effort “to end the hostilities”, and asked for a meeting with their respective heads of government to share their reflections.

The religious leaders of the two countries had signed on the same piece of paper for the first time. Religion united influential people in efforts to work for peace, despite the popular belief that it is a divisive element which aggravates conflicts. The signatories to the two documents were the Patriarchs of the Orthodox churches, the Archbishops of the Catholic churches, the Presidents of the Protestant churches and the Sheiks of the Muslim councils.

The talks between the religious leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea started in August 1998. NCA contacted the respective religious communities, shared its deep concern over the outbreak of the war a few months earlier, and offered to facilitate a process between them.

NCA has not been a peace organisation traditionally, but with a long history in emergency relief and development assistance in the two countries, there was a legitimate rationale for taking the initiative. Significant for NCA's decision to intervene was also the absence of any ecclesiastical agenda that could create suspicion or confusion.

Taking their local contexts into consideration, it was not a *fait accompli* that the religious leaders would come together as a group. Particularly in Ethiopia, there has been a history of some tension between religious and denominational institutions and communities. Internal conflicts inside some of the denominations, and between the countries within denominations were characteristics of the context in which the process was to start up.

When the two delegations first met confidentially in Norway in November 1998, the atmosphere was tense and cautious. Politeness and superficial friendliness characterised the initial hours and days. They managed, however, to agree upon a platform of shared values and a commitment to peace that should guide their future dialogue. This kindled hope among the groups, and

gave encouragement to the people in Ethiopia and Eritrea who were suffering from the war and were longing for peace.

The process, in which NCA co-operated closely with the WCRP, continued with shuttling activities by the facilitators to the respective countries, and by a number of new encounters in three other countries. (The ongoing process will be analysed in more detail later.) For most of the duration of the war, the religious leaders were the only significant groups from the respective countries who met face-to-face. At one critical point, the process broke down. Two weeks later, a major military offensive started in which thousands of people were killed. Careful and patient facilitation brought the two groups slowly back together, resulting in the episode in the Norwegian hills, only one event in an ongoing and volatile process.

2.2 Sierra Leone

On the other coast of Africa, the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) had taken courageous steps to end the extremely cruel and inhumane civil war in the country. Their actions brought them to the official negotiation table in Lomé in the spring of 1999, during which the government and the rebel movement tried to reach a peace accord.

The following incident illustrates the position of credibility and trust that the IRCSL had attained among the people of Sierra Leone. The talks in Lomé dragged along for an extended period, and the religious leaders decided to return to Sierra Leone until some new developments became evident in the negotiations. The decision was mainly made to save scarce economic resources and to respect their primary duties as religious leaders. Some of them, as expressed by the respected Muslim leader, Haja Madi, were met by the following aggressive statement when they returned to Freetown: “Get yourself back to Lomé immediately, and do not return to Freetown until you have secured a peace agreement!”³ The statement reflected an immense war fatigue, coupled with considerable expectations of and trust in the religious leaders.

The religious leaders, at certain moments during the internal conflict that started in 1991, had discussed what could be done. A more concerted effort was initiated when they, under the auspices of the WCRP, established the IRCSL.

Following the massacres in Freetown during December 1998, the IRCSL stepped up its activities. Contact with the government was initiated on the highest levels and the president was urged to search for a negotiated peace. Simultaneously, contact was made with the rebel movement, and the IRCSL managed to establish radio contact with them. The Council further agreed to

3 Verbal communication with author, June 1999

meet with rebel leaders in the bush. Medicines and some other essential humanitarian supplies were brought along to the bush meeting. In return, the religious leaders asked for genuine gestures that would prove the seriousness of the rebels' commitment to continue a negotiation process. As a result, more than 50 children held hostage by the rebels were released.

Although the main actors in the Lomé negotiations were the UN and the Economic Community of West African States under the leadership of the Togolese president, the parties to the conflict insisted that the religious leaders should also be included in the negotiations. Their moral strength and popular legitimacy were essential for the negotiations even to proceed.

During the process, which started with consultations with the president of Sierra Leone and culminated in the peace accord of July 1999, the WCRP, supported and accompanied by NCA, was actively involved as resource and facilitator.

The main challenge for the IRCSL was to gain the acceptance of the rebel group, since the religious leaders were all based in government-controlled areas. Their basic religious values, principled positions and even-handed behaviour rather soon served to build the necessary trust with the rebels and helped to develop a relationship between these two groups.

It is well-known that many questioned the peace accord, and that it did not hold. A new outbreak of tragic violence the following year introduced entirely new dynamics. For this reason, the role of the IRCSL during the peace talks is not put into question. Its role remains important, in particular its attempts to work for reconciliation and the rehabilitation of the most vulnerable groups.

2.3 Kosovo

During the summer of 2000 a group of religious leaders from Kosovo also gathered in the hotel in Norway where leaders from Ethiopia and Eritrea had met. They had been involved in intermittent consultations for some time. They met for the first time under the auspices of WCRP during the spring of 1999. Further two meetings were held during the spring of 2000. These meetings had not yielded significant results in terms of action. They were mainly aimed at producing a common platform from which they made a joint statement to the people of Kosovo.

NCA and the WCRP, both organisations present in the Balkans, rekindled the contacts, and invited representatives to the consultation in Norway.

During their negotiations in Norway, the religious leaders of Kosovo were able to work out a plan of action, which committed them to concrete actions in support of peaceful co-existence, reconciliation and the rehabilitation of the different ethnic communities in Kosovo.

Religious leaders were not seen to be significant opinion makers in Kosovo, but the action plan arrived at in Norway was well-publicised in the national media. The symbolic significance of the action plan was obviously far beyond its importance on the ground. Expectations for the systematic follow-up of the plan gave hope to people tired of hatred and fear.

2.4 Comparing Ethiopia/Eritrea, Sierra Leone and Kosovo

There are fundamental differences between the conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and in Sierra Leone and Kosovo. The religious landscapes and cultures are also rather different in the four countries. In Ethiopia and Eritrea, there is a comparable culture of loyalty evident in religious institutions. The joint appeal from Oslo in September 1999 was therefore a bold step forward. As religious leaders were the sole channels of face-to-face communication between the two countries during the war, their significance may be gauged even better. The religious leaders of Sierra Leone took a significantly more proactive role when they literally travelled to the bush to meet with the rebels and urged the parties to come to the negotiation table. The *de facto* influence of the Kosovo religious leaders is said to be relatively limited. Their joint public action was quite visible and contrary to many divisive actions taken by other groups and individuals.

In spite of differences in the three contexts and approaches, there is one key common denominator in all three examples. The religious leaders accepted their role and responsibility in working for peace across religious tensions and divides. In all three situations, religion and religious values were dynamically used as a common platform for action. The values are ‘deeply held and widely shared’, and therefore central to human life. Another commonality is that religious dialogue was not an academic or theological exercise, but consisted of focused preparation for joint action. Finally, a combination of local action with some external support and facilitation is common to these examples. External actors in these cases, however, were not entirely new to the local scene. Longstanding partnerships with religious institutions in the respective countries were already established. As part of the global ecumenical network, NCA can be characterised as an ‘inside outsider’, while the WCRP is an organisation with the respective religious communities as members.

3. Dialogue and interfaith action in conflicts: Some frameworks

3.1 Religions as part of social reconstruction in conflict situations

Malvern Lumsden⁴ claims that trauma spanning generations is the key to many conflicts. He refers particularly to the Balkans, South Africa, Rwanda and Burundi. His main argument is that the children of parents traumatised by war are vulnerable to become active players in future violent conflicts. To prevent this, appropriate therapies must be offered. The need for individual or group therapy is obviously far beyond any form of qualified reach. Lumsden subsequently develops the notion that there are three distinguishable levels of social reconstruction, which he introduces as ‘zones’: “the outer, social world”, “the inner, psychological world”, and a third, the “transitional zone between the two, the zone of ‘play’ in childhood and ‘culture’ in adulthood.”⁵

Lumsden argues that the inner zone is too individual for comprehensive social reconstruction, and the outer zone too closely linked to political and formal structures. . These close linkages do not provide room for changes that may have social impact, while at the same time not being sufficiently identity-linked to result in lasting changes. The ‘third zone’ provides for this space, in which play and culture can be used systematically in conflict transformation.

In Lumsden’s interesting analysis there is little mention of religion. Religion is one of several spheres mentioned in the outer world. Religion does not appear in the inner world Lumsden refers to, or in the third zone. It would be interesting to develop the notion of the three zones further from a religious perspective, particularly the potential of the so-called third zone.

Belief belongs to the inner world, while religion is institutionalised in most societies. Religious expressions and rituals are played out in what could be regarded as the third zone. Belief and religion cut across Lumsden’s three levels, and represent continuity and coherence. In this respect, religion could be a powerful tool for social reconstruction and historic therapy. A further study of religion in this context would probably not only find religion as a potential constructive factor, but also as a carrier of rigid traditions that perpetuate conflicting lines.

Lumsden concludes:

4 Malvern Lumsden in I Jeong, Ho-Won (ed), *Conflict Resolution: Dynamics, Process and Structure*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Hants, pp. 131-151

5 Ibid, p. 133

“The effect of trauma on the individual is to break down a coherent sense of self ... Protracted war destroys the integrity of social systems and services ... In a sense, the problem of post-war society is to help individuals rediscover or reinvent a meaning to their lives, and to help social groups (re)negotiate shared meanings.”⁶

Lumsden promotes the exploration of the third zone as an important tool. From an operational perspective, it would be quite interesting to explore the role of religion in this zone, based on its existing function in the inner world as personalised belief, and in the outer world as institutionalised religion.

3.2 Spiritual inclusion in peace and reconciliation concepts

Hizkias Assefa⁷ approaches the spiritual space in peace and reconciliation processes within a similar, but more comprehensive paradigm. His analysis complements a possible expansion of Lumsden's spheres. His paradigm includes the source of belief and religion: God. He builds his paradigm on four values and principles for peace, among them the following two:

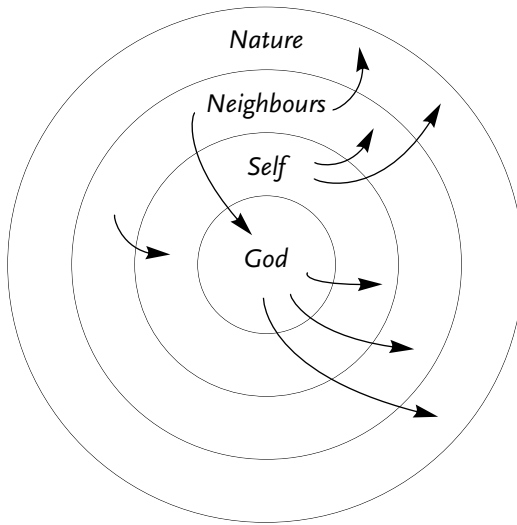
- People's deeper needs are not totally incompatible. Parties to a conflict can identify common interests and objectives, and these may be part of acceptable solutions.
- Conflict resolution – and therefore peacemaking – involves a restructuring of relationships, in which voluntarism, equality, participation and respect are key qualities.

Based on the search for commonalities and the restructuring of relationships, levels or circles of relationships have to be considered. In the process of transforming conflict and searching for reconciliation, there are four dimensions of relationships that need to be addressed.

- The first dimension concerns God. Reconciliation with God, in Christian thought, means creating harmony with God by mending the conflict that separates the individual from God.
- The second dimension is found within the individual. In Christian tradition, this is closely linked to reconciliation with God.
- The third dimension concerns neighbours and the human community at large. In biblical teaching, people are asked to reconcile with their neigh-

6 Ibid, p. 150

7 Hizkias Assefa, *Peace and Reconciliation as a Paradigm*, Nairobi, 1993



bours before asking for reconciliation with God. The Lord's Prayer provides an example: "And forgive us our trespasses, as we have also forgiven our trespassers." The prayer presupposes a certain chronology, demanding that people deal with fellow human beings before dealing with God. Even stronger evidence is found in the Sermon on the Mount: "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."⁸

The fourth dimension is found in nature. Human beings are God's creations and are the custodians of nature and ecological systems. Abuses and inappropriate exploitation of nature create conflicts with others, distort inner lives and contradict God's intention with his creation: "For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him."⁹

In this paradigm, religion is central. Although it has been developed from a Christian theology, similar value systems and theological arguments are found in other religions. Obviously, the other Abrahamic religions could also identify with such a value-based paradigm.

8 Matthew 5:23-24

9 Colossians 1:16. See also Romans 8:19 and following verses.

3.3 The nature of dialogue

This article explores how elements of dialogue may be used in an interfaith context to achieve joint action. It is thus useful to look at some characteristics of dialogue and how these may relate to religious actors. The following elements are drawn from Inge Eidsvåg.¹⁰

- To enter a dialogue means to accept that the opinions and arguments of the other participants are available through a common language. All parties need to comply with this expression of mutuality and follow the inherent rules of argumentation and context, truth and honesty.

In an interfaith context, this means that the participants need to search for this common language within their religious realm. One of the main challenges in interfaith dialogue that occurs in a political context is that the participants easily adopt the political discourse and propaganda rather than their religiously mandated language and inherent rules. On the other hand, when religious actors reach consensus on language and rules, they already set an example for other dialogues and consultations that need to take place in a complex conflict situation.

- The participants in a dialogue must be allowed to represent themselves. They define and explain their own positions and arguments, and trust that these are respected as such. No one is allowed to claim that the opponent carries different opinions than those s/he actually expresses.

Genuine religious actors should be well equipped to respect this principle of self-representation. The inclination to analyse the opinions of others in the light of personal approaches and assumptions is, realistically, more imminent for religious actors due to the fact that religious beliefs and constructs are deeply integrated in personal identities. Another experience is related to the alignment between and bridging of religious and political positions and arguments, which was mentioned in the previous element. Religious leaders have a tendency to ‘theologise’ political arguments, and as such operate on two conceptual levels without openly declaring this duality. Communication will therefore be vulnerable to biased assumptions.

- The ideals of one participant should be compared with other participants’ ideals, as should lived life be compared with lived life, past sins with past sins etc. There is no dialogue if the galvanised ideals of one party are held up against the past transgressions of the opponent

¹⁰ The following bullet points are synthesised translations from: Inge Eidsvåg, *Erfaringer med dialog: Vi er i relasjoner*, in *Nasjonal dialog om tro og livssyn*, Verdikommisjonen, December 2000, p. 9.

If religion is not at the heart of the conflict, this principle should be catered for through due process. A statement of shared values and principles is normally issued in most interfaith conflict resolution processes. When religions are central to the conflict, the “fair representation” principle is quite demanding.

- Only equals can participate in a dialogue. Power imbalance between master and slave contradicts the very foundation of dialogue. People with quite different formal and informal power and positions in society may very well sit together in dialogue. Equality in the dialogue context needs, however, to be established before the dialogue can start.

In most cases, participants in religious dialogues represent majority or minority communities. Ethiopia has an additional element. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church represents not only the majority, but also an historical relationship between state and religion, which has given the church a privileged status. Religious dialogue in the Sudan, with a declared Islamic government structure, poses an even stronger challenge to the principle of equal power in the dialogue situation. One possible approach to this challenge may be to explore Lumsden’s concept of the ‘transitional zone’ (the zone of culture) in the religious hierarchy.

NCA is not involved in theological discourses between religions. Dialogue is valuable in itself, but has a wider and more practical purpose. Dialogue is not only an activity in meetings or conferences. It is a way of responding to common concerns and problems in people’s lives. Besides communication and exchange of knowledge, it offers opportunities for practical engagement in matters of concern at different levels, including the grassroots level.

In addition to initiatives related to conflict, the potential of religious dialogue in facing the challenge of HIV/aids has already been demonstrated. Interfaith initiatives have developed in a number of countries to mobilise the potentials of the local religious communities in combating the disease and caring for people living with aids.

One significant observation is that HIV/aids is not a divisive issue, but rather a joint challenge, which needs concerted efforts to address it properly. Religions are platforms for mobilisation. In defining the interfaith relationship as action rather than pure dialogue, clear objectives and common causes are negotiated to facilitate joint action.

One of the interesting aspects of working together for a common cause – whether addressing HIV/aids, or peace and reconciliation – is to explore the common basis for this work. Even rather practical tasks may be jeopardised if this is not established. A genuine dialogue, albeit very practical in nature, should recognise and respect differences. At the same time, it should seek to discover and appreciate common values.

3.4 Dialogue for what? Interfaith action

In the context of conflict, it is important to see dialogue as an element in moving both religious communities and leaders to take action that contributes to peacebuilding, social reconstruction and reconciliation. Most actions will likely be taken by local communities. Statistics currently show that most conflicts are violent and occur within communities or states, rather than being international in nature. Interstate wars peaked in the mid-1980s. Even social conflicts have decreased since the early 1990s, but there were still close to 50 serious conflicts being waged in 2001.¹¹

Cynthia Sampson¹² identified four approaches or areas of action for religious institutions involved in peacebuilding:

- Education includes *non-violence training* for use in confrontational stages in conflict. Conflict transformation training is needed in hot conflicts and in post-conflict phases. A particular segment of the latter is “preparing people for peace”. Training in human rights, non-violence, conflict resolution and the principles and processes of democracy are elements.
- *Advocacy* is historically known through the Mahatma Gandhi movement. The role of religious institutions during the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa is a recent example. The role of the churches in the ‘People Power’ revolution in the Philippines is another. The actions by the religious leaders in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sierra Leone and Kosovo described in the introductory part of this paper, also fall under this category.
- Religious actors can successfully *play intermediary roles*. The World Council of Churches and the All Africa Conference of Churches mediated a peace accord for the Sudan in 1972. The mediation by the Inter-religious Council of Sierra Leone contributed to the peace accord for the country in 1999. The initial intention of the religious leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea was also eventually to be involved in some type of mediation.
- *Observation* provides a watchful physical presence intended to discourage violence, corruption, human rights violations, or other threatening and undesirable behaviour. Religious bodies and religiously affiliated humanitarian

11 Ted Robert Gurr, Monty G Marshall and Deepa Khosla, *Peace and Conflict 2001: A Global Survey of Armed Conflicts, Self-Determination Movements, and Democracy*, Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland, 2001

12 Cynthia Sampson, *Religion and Peacebuilding*, in: *Peacemaking in International Conflict: Methods & Techniques*, ed. I William Zartman and J Lewis Rasmussen, US Institute of Peace Press, Washington DC, 1997

ian and human rights organisations are present in most conflicts in the world. Carrying out humanitarian assistance, monitoring human rights and observing elections are examples of observation. A more activist form of observation is that of civilian peacekeeping teams. Religious 'peace teams' are in place in a number of conflict areas, including Central America and the Middle East.

Adam Curle¹³ suggests that the different roles have strengths and value in different stages or phases of a conflict. While education and conscientisation are relevant in a build-up to violent conflict, observation, negotiation and confrontation are particularly relevant interventions during open conflict. Education and advocacy would be key in a post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation phase.

3.5 The role of religious institutions in comprehensive peace processes

The importance of different actors in peace processes depend not only on their own perceptions, but on how their roles are being considered by other stakeholders in the conflict.

The notion that religious communities are active peacemakers does not always reflect the reality. Religious communities are also invariably conflict arenas. Religion may be part of the conflict, or the social conflict may play out within the religious communities and institutions. On the surface, this may be seen as an obstacle for religious institutions to be involved in peace and reconciliation processes. However, it could also reflect that popular organisations are needed in comprehensive reconciliation processes. The simple reason is that they are part of the conflict. The progressive religious institutions increasingly realised this during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.¹⁴

Although it is acknowledged that religion may be a source of conflict, it is equally important to explore it as a source and platform for peacemaking. There are a variety of good reasons to search for constructive roles that can be played by religious institutions and their leaders.

The respect for and protection of religious freedom are in the interest of religious communities and essential for any real participation in serious peace processes. The legitimacy of religious actors in the wider context implies that they can legally be partners for peace. In most situations, the interests of religious minorities are more at stake if religious freedom is not respected. An

13 Adam Curle, *Making Peace*, Tavistock Press, London, 1972

14 The argument in this paragraph is found in Atle Sommerfeldt, *Ingen snarvei til forsoning*, in Inge Eidsvaag (ed.) *Demokrati og fredelig konfliktløsning*, Universitetsforlaget AS, Oslo 1966, pp 39-53.

OSCE roundtable report¹⁵ points to several different discriminatory actions in addition to outright persecution that are frequently applied in contradiction to religious freedom: the denial of the right to assembly, the refusal to issue permits to build houses of worship, the discriminatory funding of certain religions, unequal taxation of religious groups, and the misuse of religion to promote political ends. Such discriminatory actions jeopardise further roles to be played by religious actors. Religious freedom is therefore essential to religious communities, and this cause will eventually be part of the role religious actors will bring into play.

Most actors in society see religion – as identity identification – as increasingly important. Religion is therefore placed higher on the peacebuilding agendas of governmental and intergovernmental bodies. Religious representatives should be part of negotiations on political settlements of conflicts according to an OSCE roundtable discussion.¹⁶ Some of the conclusions of this roundtable seem particularly relevant in the context of this paper:

- Religious leaders should be invited to participate in negotiations on political settlements of conflicts, as religious leaders are often seen as symbols of the conflict.
- Governments should actively support religious coalitions, and maintain a focus on human rights and equality.
- Educational curricula should be reviewed to remove antagonistic perceptions of other religions, and promote global ethical values rather than dogmas.

These three recommendations point to different roles for religious leaders and communities. Firstly, they should play a role, influencing the political discourse. Secondly, they should be respected as key civil society communities and leaders. Thirdly, they should be seen as important opinion makers particularly for grassroots groups, including educational arenas.

Within this framework, the diagram of roles and actors in the conflict management and peacebuilding process proposed by John Paul Lederach¹⁷ is quite useful.

Religious leaders fall in the category of ‘middle range leaders’ in Lederach’s diagram. As indicated by the arrows, which do not appear in Lederach’s orig-

15 OSCE, Report: Supplementary Meeting on Freedom of Religion and Belief, Vienna, 22 March, 1999

16 OSCE, Religion and Conflict Prevention, Roundtable conference organised by the Norwegian chairmanship of the OSCE, Rapporteur’s Report. Oslo, 23 June 1999

17 John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, Institute of Peace Press, Washington DC, 1997.

TYPES OF ACTORS

Level 1: Top Leadership

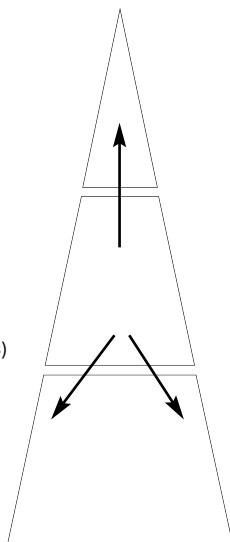
- Military/political/religious leaders with high visibility

Level 2: Middle Range Leaders

- Leaders respected in sectors
- Ethnic/religious leaders
- Academics/intellectuals
- Humanitarian leaders (NGOs)

Level 3: Grassroots Leaders

- Local leaders
- Leaders of indigenous NGOs
- Community developers
- Local health officials
- Refugee camp leaders



APPROACHES TO BUILDING PEACE

- Focus on high level negotiations
- Emphasises ceasefire
- Led by highly visible, single personality mediator

- Problem solving workshops
- Training in conflict resolution
- Peace commissions
- Insider-partial teams

- Local peace commissions
- Grassroots training
- Prejudice reduction
- Psycho-social works in post-war trauma

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inal diagram, religious leaders have direct access both to the grassroots level and to the top leadership level. Their access to the grassroots is through their own religious communities, or ‘constituencies’ in sociological terminology. Their access to the top leadership is through their representative mandate from smaller or larger constituencies within the larger community. Their strategic potential to make a difference in conflicts is considerable, and transcends different levels in national and international contexts. It is, however, necessary to explore further whether religious institutions are equipped to operationalise this potential.

3.6 Comparative advantages of religious institutions

The Carnegie Commission¹⁸ identified five clear comparative advantages of religious leaders and institutions in dealing with peace and reconciliation:

- a clear mission and message, which resound easily with those belonging to the religious community, and often far beyond their traditional constituencies
- a permanent historic and widely spread presence in society at large and in

¹⁸ Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, Prevention and Management of Deadly Conflicts. Carnegie Corporation, New York, 1997

local communities in particular

- well-developed infrastructure, often including sophisticated communications networks that link local, national and international offices
- the legitimacy enabling them to make clear and courageous statements during crises
- a traditional orientation towards peace and the promotion of respectful human relations

Religious symbols and ceremonies should be added to the list as a crucial dimension. Religions have symbols and ceremonies for confession, repentance, forgiveness, grief and communion. The symbols and ceremonies have emerged from age-old experiences with perpetrators and victims as members of the religious communities. The ceremonies are recognisable and predictable both for perpetrator and victim, and they create an atmosphere of trust.¹⁹

With the potential role for involvement and comparative institutional advantages, multifaith organisations are well positioned to be:

- a forum for contact, facilitation and dialogue
- an awareness-building and advocacy actor
- an actor in specific conflict situations.

A rather new phenomenon that is suitable for interfaith involvement is the arena created through truth and reconciliation commissions. Governments or the UN may run such commissions, but civil society institutions may also be in a position to create these spaces for post-conflict transition:

“Non-governmental-based truth and reconciliation commissions can have a profound impact on both political transition and sustained societal and state transformation by ensuring that past human rights violations are not forgotten ... identify and restore dignity to victims and promote socio-psychological healing.”²⁰

¹⁹ Sommerfeldt, op cit

²⁰ Centre for Development Research, Truth And Reconciliation, issue paper, Copenhagen, 2001

²¹ Norwegian Church Aid, Invitation to Consultation between religious leaders in Eritrea and Ethiopia in Oslo 26-28 October 1998

4. Interfaith processes in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sierra Leone and Kosovo revisited

Some reflections on the three cases narrated in the introductory part of this paper are presented here. A tentative application is made of the frameworks and general observations offered in the previous sections in the cases of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sierra Leone and Kosovo.

4.1 Religion not at the heart of conflict: Objectives of dialogue

Religion is not at the heart of any of the conflicts in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sierra Leone or Kosovo. This is not to say that there have not been tensions and conflicts within and between the religious communities. In all four countries, Islam and Christianity are the main religions, and the ones that were represented in all three cases. The numbers of followers and tensions between denominations and faiths vary in the four countries.

Sierra Leone is religiously comparatively harmonious. The number of intermarriages across religious divides is noteworthy.

Political forces have exploited the fact that there is a certain coincidence between ethnic communities and religious following in Kosovo to widen rifts. Symbolic actions of destroying houses of worship have been rampant, and the three main denominations can each list catalogues of destruction. The religious communities are relatively small compared to the total population, and religion as such has not been the contentious issue.

In Ethiopia, there has been an historic tension between the Orthodox church and the protestant Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. In certain areas, physical confrontations have occurred. In other areas, tensions between Muslim groups and the churches have arisen. Due to instabilities in neighbouring Sudan and Somalia, this tension seems to have increased over the last few years. The traditional moderate expressions of religions have been complemented with more radical groups. The same pattern is basically also true for Eritrea, although conflicts have come to the surface to lesser degree.

Particularly in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Kosovo, there has been a constant need to build relations between the faiths, and thereby strengthen the group coherence in order to face the joint challenges posed by conflicts. Religious theological dialogue, however, was not the focus of any of the three cases. The dialogue was aimed at joint religious action. The main purposes of the process between the Ethiopian and Eritrean religious leaders were expressed as follows in the initial invitation letter:²¹

“As religious leaders you are quite influential in your society. You have the possibility to encourage your followers and constituencies to work for peace as you yourselves have expressed. When you unite with your brothers in Ethiopia/Eritrea, you will gain even more moral weight and credibility.”

“You share your basic moral values with your brothers in Ethiopia/Eritrea. When sitting together you may be given a chance to consolidate and deepen your common commitment to these shared values.”

“Open and direct communication removes misunderstandings and misconceptions. Living apart in atmospheres of fear and uncertainties unintentionally creates walls of suspicion.”

The invitation letter assumes that they shared “basic moral values”, and these would help form the platform for the search for joint action.

In the case of Sierra Leone, the formation of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone was an expression of the conducive relationship between the different religious groups.

Tension between religious groups in Kosovo seemed to be more along the lines of how groups had been politically aligned with the contending forces. Destruction of houses of worship was physical expression of tension. Theological or basic value-oriented contradictions are, however, not prominent in the process.

As indicated in the invitation letter above, these religious mandates can be found at the heart of attempts to deal with social and political conflicts, and are not meant to mend relations between religious groups.

4.2 Need for common platform: Religious values and human rights

The common understanding among religious leaders of the nature of basic human relationships, and the framework for peacebuilding in line with Assefa’s paradigm point to the potential for genuine involvement and influence. In all three cases, similar statements confirm their roles as religious leaders in a wider civil society context. In the talks in 1998 between religious leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, this was expressed as follows:

“We as religious leaders have a mandate, given to us by God and the believers, to speak up against all destructive acts that may threaten the lives and the wellbeing of our communities ...

We as religious leaders ... accept the call to be peace-makers and the duty to encourage and support our governments in

peace-making and reconciliation ...

We ourselves continue to lift up the call for peace in our prayers and that we call upon our two peoples to pray to God for a lasting peace ...

We encourage our peoples to stand together and to express their desire for the conflict to be resolved through dialogue.”²²

The Inter-religious Council of Sierra Leone declared:

“As a coalition of religious communities ... [we] will never be neutral in relationship to the profound moral teachings of its represented religious traditions. Each religious tradition ... calls its believers in its own way to be radically committed to the inherent dignity of all persons and to the establishment of a just society based on respect for truth and a commitment to the common good ... authentic Peace is both a gift from God and a divine mandate that summons men and women of good will.”²³

In 2000, Ethiopian and Eritrean leaders reiterated:

“We jointly, in recognition of our religious differences, condemn all violence against fundamental human rights ... including the legitimate right to live in communities.”²⁴

In a joint meeting in Amman, Jordan in 1999 the religious leaders of South Eastern Europe stated:

“As religious people, we must affirm that in each of our traditions human life is sacred. Any violation of the rights of any person is not acceptable and must be condemned. Our religious traditions all seek to promote fullness of life through peace, justice, mercy and love”...

“As we look to the future, religious communities can and must play a central role in building strong civil society throughout the region”²⁵

22 From the initial ‘platform’ agreed to by the religious leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea in Oslo, 8 November 1998

23 The role of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone during the negotiations [between the government of Sierra Leone and Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone], Lomé, May 1999

24 From Statement of Shared Moral Commitment for Common Living of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Religious Leaders, Oslo, 21 July 2000

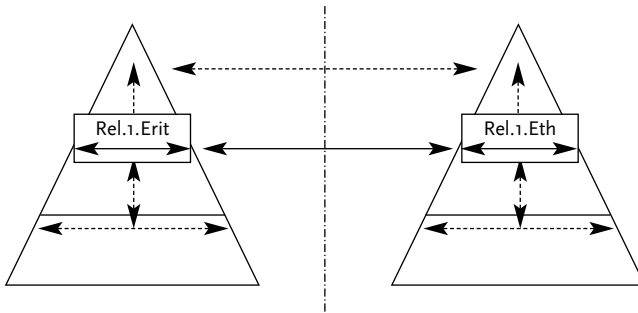
25 From Statement of Religious Leaders on Reconstruction and Development in South Eastern Europe. Amman Jordan, 27 November 1999

It is important to observe that the statements do not intend to introduce a theological debate, but rather a shared platform which the religious leaders may use to move towards joint action.

4.3 Levels and nature of linkages

One key strategic advantage of working with religious leaders in peacebuilding is rather obvious when referring to Lederach's pyramid. Religious leaders have significant interaction with grassroots levels through their own local religious communities. At the same time, they have direct access to their governments on different levels.

The case of Ethiopia and Eritrea is different from the other cases, as two different interfaith groups tried to work across international conflicting lines. In the other cases, one group tried to deal with an internal conflict.



The figure above is adopted from Lederach and tries to indicate the different levels and the nature of the linkages and relationships in the Ethiopia/Eritrea case. The complexity represents both potential and challenge. Each of the arrows indicates linkages, and each linkage represents a possible channel of conflict or dialogue. The figure illustrates the strategic centrality of the religious leaders and institutions, in line with the observations made by the Carnegie Commission. They are found throughout society, and link local, national and international levels.

One experience evident in the three case studies is the crucial relationship, indicated with solid arrows in the figure, found within groups of religious leaders. Two issues stand out as critical in this relationship.

The first crucial issue is the principle of equality as discussed by Eidsvåg. The historical positions and numbers of the different religious communities are in some contexts not significant obstacles, while these are a challenge in other instances. It has been critical to create an atmosphere of equality, despite the institutions represented by the religious leaders. They are coming from

quite different traditions of relationships with the government, and of internal hierarchies and structures. There are significant examples of individuals who function as gatekeepers, and as such distort the equality of the dialogue. Observations indicate that the gatekeeper role, and thus the need to control the dialogue, emerges when the discussions move towards the political realm. The relationship between the agenda of the dialogue and the equality in participation seems quite obvious. A further elaboration of the 'space/zone' for the dialogue follows below.

The second issue is the ability and willingness to identify a common platform of values and principles. The quotes from key working documents referred to above indicate that this has not been the main constraint. When facing specific situations and conflicts, the interpretation of values and principles may have been nuanced. None of the three processes have been delayed or put in jeopardy by a lack of common understanding of purpose and values.

The main challenge related to the critical issues above has arisen in the case of Ethiopia/Eritrea. Lumsden's three zones may be helpful to illustrate this point. While the two groups easily agree upon basic values, belonging to the 'inner psychological world' (including the individual religious commitment), the difficulties arise when trying to demarcate the outer limit of their core mandate. Under normal circumstances the distinction between religious and political mandates would not cause serious problems. The dialogue between the two groups of religious leaders, however, was conducted in an atmosphere of trauma in their respective countries and within their respective groups. Hundreds of thousands of people had been killed, deported, displaced and directly affected, while harsh propaganda had spread fear and hatred between the two countries.

4.4 Specific potential and limitations of religious leaders

The initial prioritised objective of the Ethiopian and Eritrean religious leaders was to stop the war between the two countries. This implied an assumption that the religious leaders had sufficient influence over the political actors. The dialogue between the two groups grinded to a halt when they were not able to agree upon a joint approach in working aggressively towards this objective. Their ability or willingness to separate their nationalistic agendas, reflected through their respective political leaders, from their religious mandate was not sufficiently strong. They got stuck in their own political mindsets, while probably realising at the same time that they lacked the necessary influence and power to move their respective political leaders. The two groups eventually had to adjust their objective towards post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction to move the dialogue forward.

As Lumsden argues, the outer zone is too closely linked to political structures to provide room for changes that may have social impact. Although the religious mandate most certainly includes social change, the tendency to align with political arguments and structures bring the religious leaders outside their primary sphere of influence. Whenever national *realpolitik* has taken centre stage in the consultations, they have more or less grinded to a halt. The contentious political problems are impacting the groups emotionally, but their solutions are outside of the ‘therapeutic’ zone of the religious leaders. Frustration arises when there is a serious discrepancy between the problem to be confronted and the means available to solve it.

A further exploration of how the concept of the transitional zone may be operationalised in religious institutional terms may be quite useful. Lumsden uses the key word ‘culture’ for this zone. This concept could be expanded to areas of symbols, forums for cultural expressions, rituals and symbolic humanitarian actions. This could be true for all of the linkages indicated in the figure: on the one hand, with governments and, on the other, with their own religious communities.

The relationships with the respective governments and parties in the conflict have been different in the three cases. As facilitator, NCA has been physically present in encounters between the religious leaders and their respective governments to a very limited degree, and thus the observations are not based on ‘hard evidence’. Two elements in the relationship, however, seem to be sufficiently exposed to justify some comments.

4.4.1 Sierra Leone

The historic relationship between religious institutions and the government differs in the four countries in question. In Sierra Leone, there are close ties between the government and civil society in general. Civil society organisations, partly due to endemic political instability, have carved out a significant role in the public discourse. Pulpits, media and public events are arenas for civil society groups to address and link up with the government. These arenas are used at times for highly politicised debates.²⁶ The religious leaders were therefore well placed from the outset to influence the peace process. In spite of this culture of civil society ‘politics’, the religious leaders were conscious of their core mandate and primary ‘zone’ of operation. This consciousness earned them respect, and prevented them from being politically compromised.

26 As part of the peace process there was, for example, a comprehensive civil society consultation, involving a great number of civil society organisations. The process culminated in a report with a number of recommendations that varied between basic human rights concerns to more specific constitutional and political solutions.

4.4.2 Ethiopia and Eritrea

The historic traditions of Ethiopia and Eritrea are quite different. There is no historic tradition of the churches or mosques involving themselves in the public discourse or speaking out against the government. The many centuries of feudalism and imperial rule have created a culture of submission and obedience. The 'prophetic' voice of the churches, for example, in South Africa and Kenya, is far removed from the Abyssinian culture. The Orthodox church has historically been the church of the Emperor, and the ties between the state and the church have traditionally been quite close.

Since the conflict between the two countries was basically of a political nature, there was a much deeper need to carve out the zones of operation for the religious leaders. In relating to their governments, they have promoted general values, concerns and suggestions. The potential role of facilitating contacts between the two governments has not been possible. Therefore their initial objective 'to stop the war' was over-ambitious, not only due to internal tensions in the dialogue, but also due to the feeling of some religious leaders that their real influence over their respective governments was limited. The establishment of the overlapping 'zone' between the religious leaders and the governments has so far been limited, since the understanding and acceptance of their primary 'zones of comparative advantage' are still to be fully explored.

4.4.3 Kosovo

Eighty years of communism and a secular state heavily influenced by atheism in the former Yugoslavia placed the religious communities and institutions in Kosovo in a vulnerable position. Civil society institutions outside 'the Party' had no official room within which to operate. There was no tradition of religious leaders and communities influencing the public debate. The Orthodox church was traditionally close to the Russian and Serbian political establishment, and has restored part of its position in many countries in Eastern Europe.

The situation in Kosovo is different. Large groups see the Orthodox church as the representative of 'the Serbian oppressors'. The other religious communities or institutions are therefore not seen as having high stakes with the government. There is, on the other hand, no tradition of dialogue between religious leaders and the government.

During the peak of the armed conflict in the Balkans, religions were in danger of being abused by external actors with religious motivations for their direct military involvement. This forms part of the backdrop of the relationship between religious groups and the authorities.

The newly re-obtained religious freedom has increased the religious influence in the Kosovo society. One should therefore not downplay the positive effect of the role the religious leaders could play. There are indications that local politicians are consulting their respective religious leaders. Since the Orthodox mostly represent Serbs, while Albanians are Muslims or are members of the Catholic minority, the linkages between politics and religious communities seem evident. As the religious institutions are re-developed, their advantages, referred to in the Carnegie Commission²⁷, are clearly emerging. The possible role for religious leaders in influencing the government in the context of Kosovo therefore needs to be explored and developed.²⁸

The main challenge for religious leaders with respect to their own religious communities has been to communicate with them and empower them to carry on the interfaith dialogue within their immediate organisational environments and on local levels.

4.5 From words to action:

Potential and limitations in the implementation of action plans

4.5.1 Three examples

The religious leaders of **Ethiopia and Eritrea** agreed upon a plan of action with the following headlines: “Ensure the implementation of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (the plan of action was agreed to before the final peace accord was signed): Rebuilding the communities in co-operation, reconciliation and commitments to a common future”.²⁹ This plan elaborated their intentions to be jointly involved in human rights work, in advocacy for assistance from the international community, in humanitarian assistance and rehabilitation, in initiating plans for joint rebuilding projects, in conducting seminars and workshops throughout their countries to build understanding and support of the agreement of their two governments (later the peace accord), and in convening a number of reconciliation programmes. As a high-profile step, they later agreed to meet across the border of the two countries.³⁰ They had multiple purposes for these meetings, including confidence-building and a first step in the reconciliation process.

27 See p. 14, section on Comparative advantages of religious institutions.

28 E-mail communication, Reverend Leif Magne Helgesen, NCA coordinator in the Balkans, March 2002

29 From Joint Plan of Action for Peace Building, Fifth joint meeting of the religious leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, New York, 1-2 September 2000

30 From Joint plan for meetings across the border of Ethiopia and Eritrea, Nairobi, 4-5 May 2001

The religious leaders of **Kosovo** similarly agreed upon a plan of action to:³¹

“Organize forums and seminars on dialogue and the process of reconciliation among the peoples of Kosovo.

Together, communicate effectively and share information and insights with United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) officials that can enable them to deal with problems and issues in the interest of dialogue and the process of reconciliation in Kosovo.

Make effective use of media so as to widely increase public awareness and the capacity for addressing issues of dialogue and the process of reconciliation in a positive and constructive way.”

The Inter-Religious Council of **Sierra Leone** had established its common platform for action through the establishment of the council. All its plans and actions emerged from this institutionalised co-operation. A brief narrative of its actions appears in the introductory part of this paper, among others:

- approaching the government and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to convince them that negotiations were the only path towards peace
- meeting with the RUF in the bush, bringing symbolic and essential medical assistance
- ‘strategic’ humanitarian assistance on two occasions to demobilised soldiers not properly catered for by the government or the UN
- an education and awareness-raising programme on the peace accord and its implications for the rebuilding of Sierra Leone
- a comprehensive plan for the respective member communities to be involved in the reintegration of demobilised soldiers, with emphasis on child soldiers³²

The types of actions mentioned by Sampson³³ are mostly evident in all three cases, although ‘observation’ is hard to distinguish as a systematic intervention by any of the groups.

31 From Statement of our common plan of action for dialogue and process towards reconciliation among the peoples of Kosovo, Oslo, 1 September 2001

32 See pp. 4-5, section on Sierra Leone.

33 See p. 10, section on Dialogue for what? Interfaith action.

4.5.2 Ceremonies and symbols

In the action plans for all three dialogue processes, religious prayers and ceremonies were included. In the rehabilitation plan for Sierra Leone, ceremonies for the integration of demobilised soldiers were highlighted. Prayers and special religious occasions were initiated in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Kosovo. There is, however, obviously room for innovative suggestions to widen the menu of ceremonies and symbolic actions, which may be used for different purposes.

In Lumsden's framework, religious ceremonies and symbolic actions will fit into the 'cultural space'. According to his arguments, this space should be explored further. It might be an important space, or zone, to process traumas and negative emotions. Religious ceremonies have the ability to bridge the divide between individuals and the community, and as such may be an instrument for collective healing processes. To follow Assefa's paradigm, the same ceremonies and symbolic actions will link the dimension of God of the individual, as well as the interpersonal dimension. The challenge in all three cases has been to translate these initiatives of religious ceremonies and symbolic actions to the local communities and local houses of prayer.

The joint visits of the religious leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea to respective capitals in February 2002 were the most significant actions in their process. It went beyond being symbolic and ceremonial. A well-publicised open letter to the religious leaders from the main opposition parties in Ethiopia illustrates this point:

"In the past many years, you religious fathers have chosen to be silent while you saw with your own eyes and heard with your own ears when one, using one's political and gun power, killed and imprisoned the other ... It is our ardent hope that, in the future, your eyes that have been opened to take note of the current matter would do the same with the issue of national reconciliation."³⁴

Keeping in mind the level of conflict and instability within the Ethiopian political and ethnic environment, the following observations after the visits from an Ethiopian perspective are worth noting:³⁵

- The religious leaders raised their voices on national issues for the first time.

34 Goh, Ethiopian newspaper, 16 February 2002

35 Dr Mulletta Hurissa, Research Center for Civics and Human Rights Education, Ethiopia, personal communication, 24 February 2002

- A religious platform was created for public discourse, which historically has been fully dominated by one religious institution.
- Their high-profile action raised great expectations for deeper involvement in the peace and reconciliation processes in Ethiopian society.

In the cases of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sierra Leone, symbolic humanitarian assistance has played an important part in the translation of dialogue into action. Major humanitarian actions are undertaken by the UN agencies, or by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including faith-based NGOs. The role of humanitarian actions undertaken by religious leaders has been of a symbolic and strategic nature. Selected assistance to demobilised soldiers and fighters, assistance to restore houses of prayers in war-torn communities and to provide shelter for deported families are examples of these processes. Even this category of actions may be approached from the cultural or symbolic space.

The active use of media in the case of the religious leaders of Kosovo is worth mentioning. Their systematic spreading of the Oslo action plan and messages of peace through radio, television and the Internet has made an impact. The close cooperation with the UN peace keeping operation has been instrumental in this respect. There are clear indications that their campaign has raised awareness and hope among the Kosovo people.³⁶

4.5.3 Ownership of the process

In all three cases, there might be questions about evidence that the wider national and local leadership of the religious communities have true ownership of the dialogues and joint actions. In Sierra Leone, there was clear evidence that awareness-building workshops about the peace accord were conducted in many parts of the country. These sparked off some more substantial joint local actions related to the reintegration of child soldiers and refugees. In the cases of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Kosovo, it is unclear whether there are substantial contacts across denominations and religious groups beyond leaders. Few, but nevertheless significant, local committees or processes are functional so far as a result of the three cases.

One interesting incidence in Ethiopia is worth mentioning. In a town in the eastern part of Ethiopia, with a majority Muslim population, a conflict involving Muslims and Orthodox Christians flared up in early 2001. A number of people were killed in clashes between the two communities. The Orthodox Patriarch and the Muslim Sheik agreed to go on a joint mission to the town to explore what the problems were, and to diffuse this interfaith conflict. Both re-

³⁶ Helgesen, op.cit.

ligious leaders have confirmed that this initiative was a direct result of the ongoing dialogue process that has been described in this paper.

The discussion of actions has so far occurred in the interface between middle-range leaders and grassroots leaders in Lederach's hierarchy. The theoretical expectations on the levels and the nature of linkages referred to earlier in this paper were not all fulfilled, but traces of contacts and actions can be found along most of the arrows in the diagram.

According to the same theory, illustrated in the diagram inspired by Lederach, religious leaders would have influence on the top leadership. As described in different sections, this was certainly the case in Sierra Leone. The role of the religious council prior to, during and after the peace talks was significant in the eyes of the two parties to the negotiations. Its role was regularly highlighted in newspapers, and on television and radio. The Ethiopian and Eritrean religious leaders have had access to the national media in their respective countries, they have been recognised by the UN – including specific mention in the Security Council – and they have had access to their respective governments.

According to local and international observers in the two countries, the appeal by the religious leaders to abstain from hate-filled propaganda, had positive effects – at least for a period of time. Direct influence on the official negotiations is hard to judge. It is, however, significant to note that the two groups of religious leaders were conducting the only organised encounters between influential leaders in the two countries. This has been confirmed and emphasised by both heads of governments.³⁷ The prime minister of Kosovo has come with mixed signals. On the one hand, he welcomes the dialogue between the religious communities while, on the other, marginalising their significance in the rebuilding of Kosovo.

4.6 Tentative and preliminary observations from the three examples

There are striking similarities and differences in the three cases. Although a much broader body of experience would be necessary to draw any conclusions, it is tempting to make some observations that might be useful in similar processes.

If religion is not at the heart of the conflict, tensions between the religious communities may be overcome in a common search for the greater good.

A common platform of deeply held and widely shared values may serve as a strong instrument for joint action in situations of conflict.

37 The latest examples are statements by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to the author, 10 October 2001, and to the religious leaders, 18 December 2001.

Religious communities in search for peace should not engage in a philosophical or theological dialogue, but use dialogue as a platform for joint action.

Religious leaders seem to have best possibilities to influence the political and military conflicts by staying within their primary religious mandate. Their credibility and legitimacy seem to be bolstered by coherent words and deeds within this mandate. Individual religious leaders may be respected politicians, but as a group of religious leaders, they seem not to have strong political credibility. Their ability to mobilise their respective faith communities for peace count more than their ability to act as “diplomats” towards the parties to the conflict.

Governments may overlook individual religious leaders and communities, but when they unite in search for peace, governments are encouraged and pushed to take their initiatives seriously.

Symbolic actions seem to be powerful entry-points to gain influence for religious leaders in their search for peace. These actions need, however, to be followed up by tangible efforts to alleviate sufferings of the victims of conflict.

The above tentative observations support elements of the different theories and models, which have been referred to earlier. More cases should be explored to see if the observations represent more than bias interpretation of the three cases described in this document.

4.7 The role of facilitators

The role of facilitation is best described and assessed by external observers. This section will therefore be limited to a few brief observations

The partnership between the WCRP and NCA has been the formula utilised in the facilitation of all three cases. The combination of NCA history and partnership with local religious bodies, and the WCRP worldwide network and part in the interfaith organisational structure has played out quite interestingly. It highlighted the need for facilitators to have legitimacy.

NCA staff have identified five attributes that position the organisation for effective involvement in supporting peace activities within societies in conflict:³⁸

- a history of providing humanitarian and/or development assistance that gives NCA broad-based grassroots and senior governmental contacts

³⁸ Observations made over time by the author, and synthesised by Mary B. Anderson in *Extending the humanitarian mandate to peace and reconciliation: The case of Norwegian Church Aid. A case study for 'Reflecting on Peace Practice'*, 2000.

- a basis of trust, an important asset derived from NCA staff's long-term humanitarian and development work, which resulted in the high degree of mutual trust across a broad spectrum of society developed through their aid programmes
- the absence of any political 'solidarity agenda', with NCA staff having no vested interest in any particular political outcome of a conflict
- NCA's identification as a church organisation, motivated by its religious faith, which makes it easier to build relations with organisations based in other faiths
- the 'Norwegian Model', in which the Norwegian government (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) works in concert with and supports NGOs in such efforts, providing special funding for their peace-related efforts and engaging politically with them where such engagement is useful

Mary B. Anderson,³⁹ in a case study, has questioned whether these assumptions are relevant.

She claimed that, although valid, the NCA history of humanitarian and development assistance is not a prerequisite for peace-related work. She seems to think that personal relations, trust and individual personalities may be more important, and some institutional issues will have to be carefully dealt with to balance the personal and institutional credibility. She found that the other assumptions are probably relevant to various degrees.

However, NCA has rooted its involvement in peace and reconciliation in its basic policy documents:

"For Norwegian Church Aid, diaconia means serving the Triune God by giving unconditional assistance to the whole human being, catering to spiritual as well as physical needs. This diaconal service shall be given regardless of race, nationality, gender, political persuasion or religious beliefs⁴⁰ ... through involvement in peace processes, support to religious and popular institutions and movements in peace process."⁴¹

Involvement and roles should be justified from the very value system of NCA. It is significant to note that there have been certain debates in the ecumenical movement about NCA's role in such processes. The observations have been

³⁹ Mary B. Anderson, op.cit

⁴⁰ Norwegian Church Aid, Policy Document, 2000

⁴¹ Norwegian Church Aid, Global Strategic Plan 2000-2004

that global ecumenical organisations and networks should be the obvious partners. NCA has the comparative advantage of not being affiliated to the complicated international ecumenical, ecclesiastical intricacies. As shown above, NCA has no ecclesiastical agenda, and may therefore be quite transparent and impartial as a partner and facilitator with religious actors.

Three basic roles were played in the case studies discussed in this paper:

- *Advisor*: This was evident in the Sierra Leone case, when assisting a rather coherent group in its official role in the political negotiations. This has also been the role in some cases when individual religious communities in Ethiopia and Eritrea have discussed how to move the dialogue and plan of action forward within their own community.
- *Messenger and interpreter*: This role has been quite important in the case of Ethiopia/Eritrea, since direct contacts have been quite limited. The facilitator has been asked to bring messages, collect information and translate this into observations and possible proposals. Shuttle activity is a key role carried out by the facilitator. Without a continuous and assertive messenger role, this process would have stopped in its tracks a number of times. In the case of Sierra Leone, the messenger role was directed towards the primary parties to the conflict on behalf of the Inter-Religious Council. Although limited in scope, this role proved quite useful in particularly sensitive moments when even the neutrality of the religious leaders was questioned by the parties in the negotiations.
- *Negotiator and mediator*: In the Ethiopia/Eritrea case this role has been important on two levels: internally in the respective groups of religious leaders, and between the two groups. The most important role has been to assist the two groups to reach common platforms and plans for joint action.

Since all three cases are works-in-progress, it is hard to indicate timelines for facilitator roles. It seems obvious, however, that a longer time perspective is needed when entering into dialogues that should lead to interfaith actions. There are very few technical ‘quick fixes’. As religious life is an ongoing journey, interfaith dialogues are ongoing processes. Interfaith action, however, should yield results. For facilitators there are a number of hard questions to be asked. One key question is when to withdraw, if no results are emerging from the process. Is the process in and by itself important enough to maintain it, or should there be some yardsticks of results as preconditions for a continued effort?

4.7.1 Aspects of being facilitators

As indicated above, the NCA took on different roles in the three cases. There were obvious overlaps, of which the roles of messenger and mediator were the most critical. The following observations will therefore concentrate on these roles, and with particular reference to the Ethiopia – Eritrea case.

Summing up information from an extensive consultation process, the Reflecting on Peace Practice Project (RPP)⁴² tries to pull together some specific advice for dialogue conveners, suggesting that agencies must be⁴³:

- transparent about their motivations, processes, and funding sources
- diligent in documenting the process and results
- able to show a genuineness of interest, concern, and motivation (not to gain status off the process)
- culturally and linguistically competent
- able to give away credit for success to participants and politicians (and able to control their own egos)
- discrete
- highly informed about the conflict and the context
- consistent and reliable in enforcing any ground rules
- careful not to overstep their role

These points capture quite well different aspects and expectations facing facilitators of dialogue processes. Some observations relevant to the three case studies in this paper may be related to elements of the above points.

One particular observation may be made around ownership of a dialogue process. In many ways NCA had to be pro-active and “pushy” towards the partners to move processes forward. This pro-activeness could easily jeopardize the necessary process ownership by the parties. “Let us wait for initiatives from the facilitator” may be a perception, which could put the ownership on the facilitator, rather than the parties.

One should, however, not underestimate the internal complications in the delegations that necessitate a pro-active facilitator role. Diversities, internal

42 “Reflecting on Peace Practice Project”, 2000 – 2003, coordinated by Collaborative For Development Action

43 Mary B. Anderson & Lara Olson, *Confronting War: Critical Lessons for Peace Practitioners*, p. 87.

Reflecting on Peace Practice Project, The Collaborative for Development Action, Inc., Cambridge 2003.

tensions, power balances and inexperience in dialogue process could necessitate internal – external pressure and concrete suggestions for steps to be taken. By processing and adopting the suggestions made by the facilitator, the chances are that they will be carried and promoted by the participants. One indication is that the participants in all three cases have taken responsibility for their public statements, appeals and actions. At times the parties have not even mentioned the facilitators in the public sphere. From a process perspective, this is good news.

There are obvious benefits of being a humanitarian organization involved in peace building. Knowledge and insight in sociology, politics, economy and culture in the respective countries are obtained through long-term involvement with communities and partners. As humanitarian agency, NCA has built networks on both local and national levels that are important for collection of information and sharing of reflections. Another aspect of being holistically involved is the lesser need to gain specific credit from a particular process. Genuine interest (see RPP points above) derives from a comprehensive involvement with people and partners beyond the specific dialogue process.

As a humanitarian agency NCA has built up a wide network not only with local implementing partners. There are also close ties with respective governments, UN offices and agencies, and foreign diplomatic missions. Having this network for a multi-purpose agenda gives NCA enhanced possibilities to benefit from it. The multi-purpose relationship with the governments will, for example facilitate contacts on high level. Trust has been built through a transparent humanitarian agenda, and the government will build on this trust, when sensitive steps need to be taken to bring peace dialogues forward. The government knows that NCA has no interest in putting its presence and on-going deep humanitarian involvement in jeopardy.

In the case of NCA it is important to highlight the specific relationship with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The “Norwegian model” has been described as a model in which a multiple set of actors work closely together. The official Norway works with humanitarian NGOs, research institutions, trade unions and other civil society organisations as deemed appropriate in peace processes. NCA has greatly benefited from being part of this model. Funding is one, but certainly not the only advantage. Information flow, sharing of reflections and discussion of strategies, benefit of combined networks, access to expertise, and seamless relations between track one and track two peace efforts are some of the features of the “Norwegian model”.

Theoretically, different mandates may be conflicting if one actor tries to combine them. Questions may be asked if a humanitarian agenda will conflict with a peace building agenda. As stated above in this section, NCA has inte-

grated the two mandates in its strategy. During the involvement in the three cases mentioned in this paper NCA has not received any indication that the two mandates have been conflicting. On the opposite, the need to focus on root causes naturally draws the two mandates together.

As a facilitator, NCA will need to maintain impartiality. This demand might have been different if our involvement had only been in one of the countries/areas of conflict. This was less of an issue in Sierra Leone, since our role was to accompany one group of religious leaders in their efforts. In the Balkans and Ethiopia-Eritrea NCA has been able to maintain impartiality, since our humanitarian involvement has been equally genuine in the different countries/areas.

One last reflection on the role as facilitator may touch on the relationship between organizational credibility and individual relationships. In all three cases of this paper, opinions have been expressed by participants that the combination of credible organization and continuity of personalities has been crucial. The gist of this argument is probably that credible organizations do not necessarily qualify for involvement in peace building dialogues. The organization has to invest in people who may follow these processes over time and build the necessary relations and thereby intimate trust. Observations from the three case studies of this paper seem to support this argument.

4.8 Final observations: Lessons for the new world 'order'?

Has 11 September 2001 and other recent global events brought about a new paradigm for interfaith relations? It seems as if the relations between the Abrahamic religions are at the centre of this discourse. People are drawn into global conflicts, which invariably play out locally. Some final observations will be made, based on a consultation conducted by the World Council of Churches in November 2001.

Bishop Mano Rumalshah⁴⁴ claimed that it is impossible to dismiss the religious element of the present conflict, which is of global reach. Although there is a multitude of factors contributing to the conflict, religion will remain one of them. In the search for religious approaches, the bishop drew the attention to the following five common issues:

- *One common humanity:* Religions need to help people understand anew the nature of their common humanity and to take cognisance of where the political and economic systems of this shared humanity exploit and abuse

⁴⁴ Bishop of Peshawar and General Secretary of USPG, Manower Rumalshah, Challenge to Religions, paper presented to the World Council of Churches Consultation on Beyond 11th September, Assessing the global implications, Geneva, November 2001.

human situations. Religions need to be both the voice of the oppressed and the conscience of the oppressor.

- *One common God*: "We have One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."⁴⁵ There is an in-depth debate on whether there is 'one' God or not. God, if He is God, has to be bigger than human definitions. With respect to those who hold different views to this, the denial of the commonality of God is ultimately to deny God Himself.
- *Common values*: The issue is whether people, despite their differences, could still find a convergence point that could be used as a vehicle to meet common challenges. The values could be shared, which would enhance humanity and bring peace and justice into all situations. An appreciation is needed for the fact that people have a common goal and that by sharing their value systems, they might reach a 'Global Ethic'.⁴⁶
- *One common mission*: The challenge for such a common mission would be to face the issues that arise out of a common humanity and common values.
- *One common human charter*: Would it be possible to arrive at a common human charter, as part of the development of Global Ethic?

As Konrad Raiser⁴⁷ claimed, the symbolism of power is ultimately religious, due to the divine origin of power. When drawing religion into conflicts, the legitimacy and depth of positions become significantly increased. In the global search for ethics, both language and other symbols must be found that are inclusive and not exclusive. Power in the religious sphere should not be the power to divide, but the power to share. In the context of interfaith dialogue in conflict situations, this ultimately leads to interfaith action:

"Muslim and Christian leaders and peace activists refuse to be 'drawn' into others' conflicts on the basis of uncritical responses to calls for solidarity and instead help to apply common principles of peace, justice and reconciliation. They can thus help parties to local conflicts to release Islam and Christianity from the burden of sectional interests and self-serving interpretations of beliefs and convictions."⁴⁸

45 Ephesians 4:6

46 Hans Küng, Projekt Weltethos, R Piper Gmb & Co KG, München, 1990

47 Konrad Raiser, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches 1993-2003, in summing up the WCC's Consultation on Beyond 11th September, Assessing the global implications, Geneva, November 2001.

48 World Council of Churches, Interreligious Relations and Dialogue: Striving Together in Dialogue. A Muslim-Christian Call to Reflection and Action. Geneva, 2001

Global conflicts most often have local roots and elements. Muslim and Christian leaders should therefore 'de-globalise' Christian/Muslim tensions. The tendencies to frame local conflicts as global tensions between the two religions must be replaced by looking for the specific local causes and problems that need to be solved first and foremost locally. Interfaith action is therefore called for on local and national levels as a key contribution to conflict transformation and social rehabilitation.

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Frameworks for dialogue: Interfaith action in times of conflict

Stein Villumstad

In a number of conflicts throughout the world, whether international or domestic, religion is mentioned as one of the influencing factors. Even in wars without religious overtones, religious leaders involve themselves to various degrees. The legitimacy and credibility of religious leaders are significantly enhanced when they act jointly across denominational and faith divides.

This paper looks at dialogue for interfaith action in times of war, based on the involvement of Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), together with the World Conference on Religion and Peace, in three cases: Ethiopia and Eritrea, Sierra Leone, and Kosovo. They are introduced in narrative form in the first part. The second part discusses interfaith dialogue and action within some conceptual frameworks of dialogue and conflict transformation. In the final part, the three cases are revisited in order to apply some of the frameworks discussed in the second part.

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