The Vital Role of Religion in Civil-Military Interaction

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Thomas Matyók

Introduction

The facts are well known. It is about religion.

The role of religion in peace operations is *under*studied and *under*theorized. Needed by peace and stability operations leadership is a well-developed and nuanced understanding of the many roles religion plays in society and peoples' individual lives. Political, strategic, operational, and tactical peace operations that ignore the moral and ethical foundations of society and persons' political lives suggest a faulty human security calculus.

A cottage industry has developed with the focus of better organizing civil-military actions in a complex space. Terms such as Civil-Military Interaction (CMI), Civil Military Coordination (CMCoord), and Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) are bandied about. Policies and procedures are written regarding how civil society and military activities can better work together. This is the Comprehensive Approach to Peace Operations (PO). Religion, however, is often left out of discussions regarding all-inclusive responses to military and humanitarian crises. Can any approach be characterized as truly comprehensive when religion is disregarded as a peacebuilding activity?

This paper is about religion in its broadest sense. It is not a binary discussion about religious groups anchoring opposing poles, and as a result engaging in conflict. Nor is it a rehash of the separation of church and state debate. Rather, it is about religion as a potential peacebuilding partner, and recognition that comprehensive approaches to peace and stability require all-hands.

What is uniquely absent from the comprehensive approach to PO is an understanding of the peacebuilding potential of religion and religious actors; specifically, how both can be PO partners. Peace Operations is used here to include the widest range of activities; peacemaking, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, peace development, etc. The absence of religion from the PO narrative is troubling in light of the facts.

Is the Comprehensive Approach comprehensive when religion is left out? For successful peace operations, can so great a portion of social life as religion be ignored? Should religion be considered a characteristic of Whole-of-Society approaches to peace and stability? When discussing civil-military cooperation and integration, what is the proper consideration of religion and religious actors? What is the potential for religion to contribute to the overall success of peace operations? These are some of the

questions that need to be addressed in building a truly comprehensive approach to peace and stability.

It Is a Religiously Informed World

Hostilities worldwide involving religion are at a six year high.[1] Arguably, the 21st century will be known as *God's Century*.[2] Today, the world is more religious than ever before[3] with over 84% of the global population reporting some sort of religious affiliation, and of the 1.1% reporting 'unaffiliated', many profess belief in a 'higher power'.[4] Religious people make up the majority of all education levels, and individuals "younger than 34 tend to be more religious than older respondents."[5] And, "With the trend of an increasingly religious youth globally, we can assume that the numbers of people who consider themselves religious will only continue to increase."[6]

Irrespective of these facts, many military professionals, civilian and uniformed, continue to advocate for approaches to peace operations that ignore the presence of religion in the world and its influence on peacebuilding and non-violent conflict transformation. The absence of religion as a core subject in military professional schools speaks to the disregard with which religion is treated by military leaders.[7] When discussion of religion does come up, knowledge of faith-based activities as peacebuilding activity is often outsourced to Chaplain Corps. Classes on religion within Professional Military Education are often taught by chaplains exclusively. Though chaplains can be considered subject matter experts regarding their denominations and serving the spiritual needs of soldiers, religion classes taught solely by them suggest a marginalization of religion as something not appropriate for mainstream strategic, operational, and tactical thinking.

When religion is discussed, the conversation very often focuses on its potential contentious nature.[8] This undoubtedly contributes to religion's absence from any meaningful discussion regarding its potential partnership in peace operations. Leaders often suggest the divisive description of religion as a state of nature failing to recognize the human dimension. Recognition of the human dimension of religion is often nowhere to be found in the peacebuilding literature. The *sacred is ambivalent*, and it is human beings that animate it for good or evil.[9] No complete understanding of conflict and responses to it are possible without a recognition of how the sacred and secular interact. Unfortunately, religion remains the missing aspect of statecraft.[10]

Denying the facts does not make them go away. Disregard for the role of religion and faith in peace operations continues. Irrespective of a collective denial of the facts, religion continues to advance in the world and has been on a growth ascent since 1968.[11] Not to engage religion and religious actors in peace operations leaves a gap in our understanding of conflict, its management, and how we might engage combatants in reconciliation.

With the rise of religion around the world, how does it remain absent from foreign policy and military considerations? Why is there a near universal focus by the military on the divisive aspects of religion? Why is the study of religion as a peacebuilding partner absent from the professional education of military leaders? Is religion an important feature of Civil-Military Interaction (CMI)? And, if it is, how do military professionals engage with religious actors and organizations? These are some of the questions that must be addressed in confronting today's hybrid conflicts, and humanitarian crises.

Why do many political and military leaders in the West resist engaging religion as a peacebuilding and stability partner? There is no mention of religion in the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and U.S. Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute (PKSOI) *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction.[12]* A review of military field manuals suggests a shallow understanding of the

significance of religion in providing individuals with a totalizing worldview. Religion is primarily addressed as an aspect of culture co-equal with language, dress, and celebrations. ADP 3-07 (31 August 2012) Stability and FM 3-07 (June 2014) Stability do not speak in any meaningful way to religion as a partner in stability operations. These are but two examples of religion's absence from the peace operations literature. This apparent trivialization of religion cannot be helpful in the execution of peace operations, and speaks to what some have characterized as the U.S.'s open hostility to religion in its foreign and military policies.

Madeline Albright, former U.S. Secretary of State, notes; "In order to effectively conduct foreign policy today, you have to understand the role of God and religion. My sense is that we don't fully understand, because one, it's pretty complicated, and two, everyone in the U.S. believes in the separation of church and state, so you think, 'Well, if we don't believe in the convergence of church and state, then perhaps we shouldn't worry about the role of religion.' I think we do that now at our own peril." Secretary Albright also notes there are few spaces within the academic discipline of International Relations where diplomats can develop a "sophisticated understanding" of religion and its influence on world affairs.[13] The study of religion is nearly nonexistent in international relations theory, and as a result international actors are sent forward into the world unable to understand and operate in increasingly informed religious spaces.[14] A *secular bias* appears to guide U.S. policy.[15] Arguably this bias is mirrored in the military domain as well.

Within the U.S. military, religion has been near exclusively dismissed as a condition of analysis. Why are Western military leaders so conflicted regarding the role of religion in peace operations? Both the 2015 National Security Strategy and The National Military Strategy of the United States of America (2015) omit issues of faith, religion, and god. This appears a default position of U.S. foreign policy, ignore the role of religion in PO.

Proposed is the need to understand that religion is a vital aspect of CMI, and military peace leaders are obliged to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to successfully engage with religious actors in an often chaotic, contradictory, and complex area of operation. Though religion has been identified as a "missing aspect of statecraft"[16] this paper focuses primarily on its absence in military thinking and practice within the context of CMI.

Certainly, there is still no reason to "romanticize religion."[17]

Library shelves and journals are filled with books and articles that speak to the potential divisive and destructive potential of religion. Irrespective of claims that religion's influence is declining around the world, clearly it continues on. The ongoing collapse of Westphalia suggests that religion will continue to play an increasingly larger role in the world. Discussions that focus on whether-or-not religion is part of the political discourse are irrelevant. Two major world events place religion squarely in the public square; Solidarity in Poland, 1981 and September 11, 2001.The separation of church and state is ending and we are moving to an recognition of the *twin tolerations*.[18]

Failure on the part of military leaders to recognize the immediate impact of the collapse of Westphalia and the rise of religion on peace operations can be disastrous. Military leaders are entrusted with the security of the state. Failure is not an option.

Important for CMI actors to understand is the West makes up less than one-fifth of the global population. Very simply, not everyone believes in the separation of religion from political, economic, and social life. It seems a Procrustean effort to fit the other four-fifths of the global population into a Western secular

mold.

Three assumptions ground my examination of the role of religion in peace and stability operations:

1. Religion is present in the world and will continue,
2. U.S. foreign policy and military doctrine does not strategically and operationally engage religious organizations and actors as peacebuilding partners, and
3. Military professionals are inadequately prepared, and lack the capacity, to advance peace and stability operations in religiously informed environments.[19]

Recognizing these assumptions, CMI provides an opportunity for religion to be introduced into the peace operations narrative, and broader peacekeeping and stability operations activities.

Civil Military Interaction

Civil-Military Interaction is an emerging response to the need for Whole-of-Society responses to conflict and humanitarian disasters. As CMI evolves and matures so will its doctrines. Presently, there is little consensus regarding the utility of CMI. Proposed is the necessity for CMI to fully integrate civil and military actors in unity-of-aim approaches to crisis response. Integration should be premised on three principles; unobstructed communication, a shared operational lexicon, and enduring cross-functional relationships.[20]

So, how is CMI different from other forms of civil-military collaboration and cooperation? "CMI is a group of activities, founded on communication, planning and coordination, that all NATO military bodies share and conduct with international and local non-military actors, both during NATO operations and in preparation for them, which mutually increases the effectiveness and efficiency of their respective actions in response to crises."[21] Simply put, CMI moves beyond military-centric responses to conflict and humanitarian crises.

Civil-Military Interaction recognizes that though many conflicts and humanitarian crises have military concerns, military-centric responses alone are inadequate for the success of long-term peace and stability operations. Unity-of-aim responses by the whole-of-society are necessary to confront today's *wicked problems*. CMI recognizes a shifting global landscape that necessitates new responses to conflict; responses that acknowledge the rise of "transnational organizations, non-state actor networks, and multi-national corporations."[22] CMI is the approach that fills the gap that can exist between military capability and the need for comprehensive responses to humanitarian crises. Combined is short-term crisis response with long-term assistance and reconstruction.[23]

Through CMI doctrine, military leaders are called to rethink how they operate in the field. The *battle-space* is increasingly complex. Frequently, military actors are late to the action. In many conflicts, Track I formal state bodies, Track II Non-Governmental Organizations as well as informal groups, and Track III grassroots organizations[24] are present and embedded in the space before military organizations show up. As a result, militaries may find they are no longer the dominant players in PO and humanitarian responses to crises.

Certainly, CMI responds to a recognition that the military is one of many actors, albeit an important one, in addressing today's hybrid conflicts and humanitarian disasters, including Responsibility-to-Protect. However, integration, collaboration, and cooperation and other horizontal approaches among various actors are now the key terms and arrangements for future complex peace operations. A need to work outside of closed, hierarchical structures obliges military leaders to relook how they operate with civil society actors. Matrix responses are the new norm.

For future success, collective responses within the comprehensive approach paradigm necessities the inclusion of all of civil society. And, religion is an essential aspect of civil society for many. It is about meeting people where they are, not necessarily where we wish they would be. The absence of religion from PO and CA thinking is extraordinary. Religion cannot be wished away. It is recognized that *religion isn't everything, nor is it nothing*. Religion is what keeps the moral alive, and suggests possible peace-centered futures. CMI planners and operators are obliged to develop a religious literacy and view religion as a potential partner in peace operations and responses to humanitarian crises.

Religious Illiteracy

Where is religion in CMI? Surprisingly, there is little to no discussion of religion as a contributing factor in a *comprehensive approach* to peace operations. Some in the CMI community are so uncomfortable with simply the word *religion* that some CMI actors have been advised to use the term *Grand Narrative* in its place. Does this avoidance of religion as an element of CMI suggest a religious illiteracy, and a desire to marginalize religion and religious actors? Can a disrespect for the moral and normative foundations of societies and cultures be helpful in advancing the liberal paradigm?

Those engaged in PO require an understanding of religion that can be characterized as a form of literacy; the ability to speak with religiously informed actors in their own language. Religion becomes a a *foreign language* that is learned in order to facilitate communication. This literacy, or competency, is not something that can be outsourced. Military peace leaders are needed who are sensitive to the necessity of knowing and understanding what grounds groups' political actions.

Religious components of modern, hybrid conflicts are not the domain of chaplains alone. Religious literacy cannot be outsourced, nor is it a condition of social life that can be trivialized and marginalized. Relegating the domain of religion to the chaplain through programs such a Religious Leader Engagement speak to an immature understanding of the sacred, treating religions as interchangeable.[25]

Successful responses to modern hybrid conflicts in the Two-Thirds World needs military leaders who are capable of developing the needed religious literacy. This literacy goes beyond shallow recognitions of religion as a condition of culture. Religions are totalizing worldview systems. Arguably, the political flows out of the moral and ethical which are domains of religion. To gain an understanding of society's political dimension it is necessary to know its religious world.

Religion Endures

Why religion? Very simply, religion has demonstrated an ability to endure over the long-haul outlasting kings, queens, and empires. Religion is older than our idea of the state.[26] People's focus on the transcendent may be embedded in human DNA.[27] Open hostility to religion and disregard for its importance in people's lives cannot be helpful in complex peace operations. Rarely is it useful to alienate potential peace building partners.

A review of religious doctrines suggests religious organizations value peace, reconciliation, and service. These three conditions are vital aspects of peacebuilding. It is incumbent upon military and political actors to engage with religious leaders in maximizing the potential peacebuilding opportunities of these three focus areas.

Peace

Religions maintain a trajectory toward peace.[28] Irrespective of the potential divisive nature of religion, all value peace. This is a starting point for CMI actors and the development of interreligious dialogue. Reconciliation become possible, and it is suggested there can be no conflict resolution without

reconciliation. Interfaith dialogue can provide the means through which the reconciliation process can proceed.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is not a political activity, nor can it be negotiated. Reconciliation is anchored to the spiritual and calls on human beings to move forward leaving punishment to higher authority. Recognition of the power of reconciliation is trust in the ineffable. Political responses anchored to the neo-liberal paradigm focus on greed and greed aspects of conflict ignoring the need for deep social change.[29] Reconciliation is a key aspect of peacebuilding among divided societies.[30]

The Abrahamic tradition of reconciliation moves past political accommodation and makes enduring peace possible. Faith-based reconciliation offers a means by which to keep competing ideologies in check.[31]

Interfaith dialogue can bring people together in order to gain a deeper understanding of others' faith as well as provide an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of ones' own.[32] Sacred texts provide a starting point. Interfaith dialogues can create the conditions for a broader human security narrative to develop. Dialogue becomes peacebuilding activity,[33] and creates the condition for an introduction of faith-based diplomacy.

Faith-based diplomacy brings reconciliation forward. The centerpiece of the Abrahamic traditions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – is reconciliation; reconciliation with God, the broader faith community, and oneself. Through reconciliation peace is achieved.[34]

For CMI a critical aspect of faith-based diplomacy is the ability of religious actors to go where state actors cannot. Faith-based diplomacy can occur at all multi-track levels of diplomacy. State actors can lose authority the further they move away from official power centers. Religious leaders are more credible among the global poor than any other agent; government, IO, or NGO.

Service

Religious social structures often remain present even in conflict affected and failed states. When discussing state capacity rarely is religion and existing social networks considered. Though state structures may have collapsed, and states are unable to provide services to their citizens, religious structures often remain intact. Reaching out to religious actors can provide CMI actors with access to functioning social systems. The capacity of religious networks to meet human security needs are highlighted in one religious organizations response to medical services delivery in Rwanda. Clinics were established in existing, intact churches and missions. Religious agents were trained on first-aid following a train-the-trainer model where they returned to to their communities to teach others. Groups of churches and missions came together to form larger hospitals. Rather than start from nothing, peace leaders leveraged existing religious structures.[35]

Grassroots, Track III, peace work is often conducted by religious organizations. The United States Institute of Peace's work in Nigeria documented in the film *The Imam and the Pastor* is an example of how faith-based actors can be engaged in peacebuilding. The work of the Catholic Community of Sant'Egidio in brokering peace in Mozambique is another example of peacebuilding inspired by faith.[36] The Kuron peace village in South Sudan is an attempt by faith-based actors to bring reconciliation to that part of the world,[37] as is the Committee for National Healing, Peace, and Reconciliation. The Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam Oasis of Peace in Israel demonstrates a multi-faith response to peacebuilding.[38] Faith informed citizenship education in Northern Ireland points to the power of reconciliation carried out by ex-combatants,[39] and the need to include NGO reconciliation projects in broader efforts to establish

sustainable and enduring peace.**[40]**

In many parts of the world, religious leaders are among the most trusted.**[41]** In numerous conflicts, CMI participants are outsiders needing to build credibility among indigenous populations. Religious leaders can provide reliable and trustworthy communication pathways for CMI heads.

Arguably, there can be no conflict transformation without reconciliation. For the success of long-term peacekeeping and stability operations, for those in conflict it is essential to reconcile and join in a joint problem-solving process to rebuild civil society. Reconciliation is the business of faith-based organizations. CMI should engage religion as the structure through which the reconciliation process can be conducted.

Conclusion

Civil-Military Interaction presents the future in responding to hybrid conflicts and humanitarian crises. Changing global antagonisms and conflicts without conclusion have moved us beyond military-centric reactions. The Comprehensive Approach that engages the Whole-of-Society through Unity-of-Aim is the way forward.

Religion and religious actors cannot be left out of CMI, nor can they be absent from comprehensive approaches to peace and stability. CMI leaders will do well to develop a religious literacy that will allow them to engage with religious actors. Often, in conflict affected areas, religious organizations have human security structures in place that can be used to deliver humanitarian aid to impacted populations.

Important to note is that in much of the world the military is seen as part of the problem, and having local legitimacy is crucial for successful PO. Religious leaders can provide legitimacy to CMI activities.

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