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Introduction: religion as a peacebuilding capital

Religious peacebuilding as praxis has relied on (neo)liberal and secularist rationalities, even if over the past decades since 11 September 2001 (9/11), the “discovery” of religion as relevant and its inclusion in development and peacebuilding policies and praxis is often presented as a paradigm shift (e.g., Johnson and Sampson, 1994), disrupting an otherwise secularist myopia. Often this disruption presents itself as a critique of modernist assumptions concerning the public role of religion. However, we show that both in its utilitarian and reactionary modes, the praxis of religious peacebuilding is highly consistent with modernist ideologies and power structures.

In what follows, we offer a brief genealogy of the field of religion and peace by focusing on religious peacebuilding as a mechanism designed to securitize “bad” religion and, inversely, to mobilize and engage with “good” religion. While knowledge production about religious peacebuilding presents itself with a characteristic “value-free” pretense, the subject of the adjectives good/bad is not scrutinized, and thus the question good/bad for whom is not interrogated. This overview explains how neither “religion” nor “peace” have self-evident meanings and how they need to be understood within their interlacing modern genealogies. Further, the same way in which the statement “religion causes violence” is not only unintelligible, but also normative and situated in a particular intellectual tradition, there is no relationship of simple and unmediated causality between religion and peace. Positioning religious leaders and actors as somehow having special access to morality is likewise problematic, especially considering how many religious actors have been complicit in atrocities, from systematic sex abuse to genocide.

Still, it is hardly deniable that certain religious actors, institutions, and networks are well-positioned to offer humanitarian, health, and other life-sustaining services, as they have done for centuries. Such capacities, most associated with “development” praxis, have increasingly become correlated with peacebuilding, as is clear from the UN Agenda 2030, which was touted by its authors as a framework for world transformation and sustainable development. Ratified in 2015, Agenda 2030 built on decades of partnering with religious networks, institutions, and other actors (Marshall, 2021) and identified them as necessary for the promotion and implementation of development agendas, the success of which means people will be less likely to introduce instability and violence (United Nations, n.d.). Sometimes such a capacity and institutional infrastructure directly connect to histories of missions in colonized lands (which
also involved a brutal level of violence and cultural erasures through “services” such as residential schools), revealing the intimate symbiosis between colonial and ecclesiastical forces in modernity.

Claims to authenticity (“real religion is about peace”) make themselves useful in formal declarations where religious leaders with authoritative access to traditions counter perversion of such traditions by other actors. One such example is the Marrakesh Declaration of 2016 issued by over 300 Muslim scholars and politicians in an effort to combat the deployment of Islam to persecute minorities in Muslim-majority countries. The Marrakesh Declaration draws on the seventh century’s Charter of Medina to demonstrate consistency between Islam and the principle of equal citizenship. A report published by the US Institute of Peace and the Cambridge Institute on Religion and International Studies interprets the Declaration as “a powerful response to a pressing global human rights concern and a model for how religious tradition and international human rights law can be mutually reinforcing”. As a resource, this declaration’s “true test”, the report reads, revolves around “its implementation” or “the extent to which the ideals, principles, and actions envisioned in [it] can spread beyond its purview as an elite enterprise to ignite and mobilize a broad-based movement for social, legal, and political change” (United States Institute of Peace, 2016). Such declarations tend to reduce the vastness of traditions, along with their hermeneutically open horizons, to scripts about “authentic” essences and prescriptions.

The “authentic” transhistorical exportable message of the Medina Charter and its apparent consistency with liberal norms renders this hermeneutical/textual move as a peacebuilding resource. Likewise, religious actors as service providers became increasingly pivotal partners for peacebuilding (intersecting with development praxis). From our perspective, it is interesting to note how the field of religion and peacebuilding/development at best brackets the deep histories that underpin the conditions of violence, global structural injustice, and the racialization of communities as well as their physical and epistemic erasures. Religion had a lot to do with all these processes, and it is telling that such legacies are often rendered irrelevant (or something assigned to a closed and resolved historical chapter) to the utilitarian discussion of religion’s role in peacebuilding. Both authentic authoritative claims and infrastructures become sites for religion and peace praxis. Both demonstrate the functionalist and utilitarian underpinnings of this conversation. We contend that only an intersectional approach can help us assess, with clarity, the religious dimensions of conflict and peacebuilding. Before we turn to this task, however, we provide a sketch of the religious peacebuilding field.

**Peace, religion, and the neoliberal turn**

The UN 2030 Agenda reveals a recognition that indices of underdevelopment correlate with instability and war. It is within this framework that the question of religious peacebuilding is examined and researched where its “effectiveness” or “success” is more often than not feeding back in a loop into the neoliberal logic that sets the terms of the conversation. By “neoliberalism”, we refer, together with philosopher Wendy Brown (2015, 2019), to governing rationality according to which all facets of human life are economized, rendering humans themselves as “capital” to be leveraged, moved, cultivated, and harnessed toward certain desirable outcomes. The forces of neoliberalism shift communities away from concerns with democratic virtues. For Brown, neoliberalism is profoundly anti-democratic. Indeed, “interfaith”, “intercommunal”, and “interreligious” peacebuilding practices often operate with a thin conception of the “common good” as a space for lower common denominator types of cooperation, often framed as “economic” and intended to maintain the “peace” rather than a robust locus for a critical democratic political imagination.
Religious peacebuilding

A prime example of this thin construction of peace is in Bosnia and Herzegovina where a superficial peacebuilding process has entailed, since 1995, communal separation where religious affiliations constituted the thresholds of belonging. This peace formula reflected a continuation of the logic of the war that violently disentangled the interwoven social fabrics of centuries of inter-communality. The segregationist logic informed ongoing peacebuilding work such as by way of the United Religious Initiative (URI) operative in the country. The URI is a self-organizing franchise called “circle”, consisting of at least three “faith traditions” associated with a global network of such “circles” established in 2000 and connected to a charter initiated by Bishop Swing who, upon an invitation to lead an interfaith service to mark the 50th anniversary of the UN in 1993, thought “if the nations of the world are working together for peace through the UN, then where are the world’s religions?” (URI, n.d.). An inclusive charter then offers a “set of principles for action on behalf of the common good, connecting people across religions and cultures in the service of peace and justice”. The URI’s Cooperation Circle of Bosnia and Herzegovina has performed interfaith for over two decades, but the lack of substantial change that indeed would disrupt the segregationist principle of the war has rendered the performativity of the URI “comical and superficial”, in the words of one anonymous observer one of the authors interviewed. Likewise, the resurfacing of violent outbursts in the second decades of the twenty-first century reveals the ultimate thinness of this interfaith peace paradigm in Bosnia and Herzegovina. What was a well-intentioned deployment of interfaith and inter-religious mechanisms as well as the gradual incorporation of analyses and expertise around the religious dimensions of various issues of concern, from diplomacy to development theory, resulted in the establishment of various official governmental and intergovernmental networks. They include, for example, the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy, which facilitate notes-sharing among North American and European diplomats on religion-related policy issues as well as supranational bodies and research centers and initiatives dedicated to religion. This proliferation of expert religion (Shakman-Hurd, 2015) is embedded within a neoliberal frame that interprets religion as a form of capital to mobilize or demobilize in the service of peace/development/security, depending on which, what, and when.

The field of religion and peace praxis has been preoccupied, especially since the violent events of 9/11, with obvious manifestations of violence associated with religious claims. This means that the scholarship and research informing policy have paid attention primarily to direct forms of violence at the expense of operating with a more capacious view of violence that will bring in a critical lens to illuminate cultural, structural, and other forms of violence and their contextual interactions in producing harm (Moore, 2017; Springs, 2015). A narrow approach to violence (including religion’s relevance to ideological, cultural, structural, and epistemic forms of violence) also entails narrow operative interpretations of peace and security. A leaf can be borrowed from the discourse of human security, which has gone beyond state-centric or hard military concerns. In traditional security studies, the state acted as the referent object mandated to preserve territorial integrity, domestic order, international affairs, and citizens from armed threats. The primary threat is the use of force by other states (Owen, 2004).

Upon realizing that security means different things to different people in different contexts, the concept of human security emerged. Human security focuses on people’s lived and existential questions; hence, its distinguishing characteristic is its people-centeredness. This means that human security needs to be recognized at the micro-level in terms of people’s everyday experiences (Tadjbakhsh, 2005). Hence, Tarusarira (2020) introduced the concept of “lived security” to capture the subjectivity of security. The Pakistani economist Mahbub Ul Haq, in 1994, described human security as “a child that did not die, a disease that did not spread, an ethnic violence that did not explode, a woman who was not raped,
a poor person who did not starve, a dissident who was not silenced, a human spirit that was not crushed. Human security is not a concern with weapons. It is a concern with human dignity” (Tadjbakhsh, 2014). Even with interventions in peace research as early as Galtung (1969) and with the embodied experiences in broad-based social and political mobilization, such as in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the field of religion, violence, and peacebuilding praxis obscures the relevance of symbolic, epistemic, structural, and cultural forms of violence, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia to direct and acute modes of insecurity (but see Uvin, 2004; Omer, 2019). The anti-apartheid mobilization was religious (Muslim, Christian, Jewish) to the degree that it was also humanist and against an evil ideology and injustice. It is from this place that it was also an interfaith mobilization. Furthermore, the deployment of “interfaith” praxis often obscures epistemic violence, making it difficult to address underlying narratives, ideas, and ideologies that justified the wrongdoing in the first place and thus form its bedrock (Tarusarira, 2019). For instance, how religion is defined and applied in policy reflects the assumptions and interests of those who define it. This means religion can be defined in a way that makes it susceptible to mobilization for violence or peace. Clearly, the questions we ask unsettle the basic assumptions of the field. We ask: Whose peace? Whose security? And what does it mean to “do” religious peacebuilding, if this form of doing or practice is utilitarian rather than prophetic or reductive rather than intersectional?

The field of religious peacebuilding praxis, as we show later, can be characterized over the past 20 years as fixated on instrumentalizing “good” or helpful religion and harnessing religion as capital, which also includes, of course, “correct” and codified interpretations of the sources of tradition. At the same time, “bad” religion became a target for policies of containment and securitization and often literally was bombed out of existence. This framework thus presents violence and peace as inherent in “religion”, which explains calls for reforming religious traditions that are perceived as violent rather than changing policies that entrenched structural, ideological, and economic forms of violence globally. Beyond the utilitarian frame, the praxis of religious engagement also converges with theo-ideological forces seeking to retrieve, reclaim, and deprovincialize religious traditions as the organizing principle of society. We return to this point at the end of the chapter. For now, we further historicize and interrogate the modernist genealogies of religion and peacebuilding praxis.

Whose peace? Whose security?

Indeed, peace (specifically the Peace of Westphalia of 1648) and subsequent political arrangements entailed the containment of religious forces or a particular arrangement whereby the “secular” itself constitutes a politico-theological configuration in the very anatomy of the international system. Demystifying this hidden theological grammar of the modern/secular has been the target of much of the critical scholarship on secularism and the presumption of “neutrality” vis-à-vis religion that the modern political construct of the nation-state holds. Such scholarship, which intersects also with a renewed interest in political theology, uncovers the power underlying the construction and policing of boundaries between the “political” or “social” and “religious” spheres (Asad, 1993, 2003; Shakman-Hurd, 2009; Mahmood, 2015). The presumption of secular neutrality as a site of rationality, enlightenment, peace, and tolerance constitutes normative mythology of modern secularity (Casanova, 1994) and has informed liberal secularist analyses of religion’s supposed complicity with violence. Such analyses are reductive either by assigning religion as epiphenomenal to violence (where the true causality of violence that appears “religious” is something material, such as poverty, with the “religious” constituting a
mystifying form of false consciousness) or value reductionism, such as the one infamously popularized by Samuel Huntington.

A reductive association of religion with violence obscures contextual, historical, sociological, and geopolitical analyses of the conditions of such violence. For example, one is misguided if one analyzes the emergence of al-Qaeda and the events of 9/11 as caused by Islam, as if what Islam is constitutes an uncontested proposition. In the same way, Islam does not cause young Palestinian people to perform acts of suicide attacks. Rather, with an understanding that monicausal explanations are reductive and thus flawed, the question of causality cannot be even examined without considering the brutal Israeli occupation over decades. Besides, the co-occurrence of the Islamic identity and the suicide attack does not necessarily establish a causal relationship. When two variables co-occur, we cannot just infer that there is a relationship between them. They could both be caused by a third unidentified thing. Furthermore, a shift to culturalist arguments, therefore, conceals responsibility, history, and material conditions. In “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim” (Mamdani, 2004), Mamdani scrutinizes how “culture talk” obscures a robust analysis of geopolitics, in this case, specifically, the US investment in the mujahidin as allies in the Cold War. The obfuscating “culture talk” that Mamdani identified has, however, shaped policies known collectively as the “global war on terrorism”. Therefore, as the story usually goes, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 began to dispel secularist myopia, generating a cottage industry on “religious resurgence” that increased exponentially after the 9/11 attacks. The proliferation of interest in religion in global affairs reflects a policy concern with identifying mechanisms to securitize “bad” religion, but also, and here religious peacebuilding illuminates how the inverse works within the same reductive and orientalist logic, to mobilize “good” (i.e., helpful) religion. The global war on terrorism, therefore, reflects the familiar orientalism that has shaped the conversation about religion and secular modernity, singling out Muslims and other racialized communities that appear Muslims (Sayyid, 2013).

The mythology of the modern secular is deeply entrenched in what Deepa Kumar refers to as “anti-Muslim racism”, which began to take shape during the erosion of the Muslim empires (2021). Reducing the “Muslim question” to a religious misunderstanding, intolerance, or “culture talk” is therefore opaque and amnesic of racism as well as colonial legacies. Other theorists (e.g., Puar, 2007; Farris, 2017; Scott, 2018) also illuminate the sexual orientalist politics underlying the global war on terrorism in securitizing Muslims at home and abroad, processes that directly relate also to the eventual consolidation of right-wing exclusionary forms of (Christian) populisms in euro-America (Brubaker, 2016). The study of terrorism (here with the presumption that a particular religion is closely associated with violence as a matter of culture), in anthropologist Darryl Li’s reflexive approach to violence, should “refuse to take for granted the globalized order of racial violence that the national security state aims to protect” (2019). This is, however, where the critical academic study of religion is in tension with knowledge production about harnessing “useful” and containing “harmful” religion through a feedback loop from data collections designed to provide evidence of the effectiveness of policies and programs to ensure the sustainability of these same programs and leave the ideological formations intact (Wilson, 2021). The knowledge production process is thus self-referential, a perpetuating self-fulfilling prophecy.

Theoretical accounts of the consolidation of religion as a comparative category of analysis trace the racialized, antisemitic, and orientalist dimensions of philological classificatory schemes (Masuzawa, 2005). Others further locate religion as a racialized category complicit in colonialism and neocolonialism (Chidester, 2014; Maldonado Torres, 2014; Tarusarira, 2020). Grappling with this genealogy helps identify the ideological and normative underpinnings of reductive accounts of the relation between religion and violence as constitutive of European
Christian modernity (Cavanaugh, 2009). A genealogical analysis also traces its inverse that “authentic” and “good” religion is a cause of peace. The critical scholarship has fixated, however, on Islam and the logic of the securitizing of Muslims and Islam’s foundation in modernity. But often the analysis omits a full interrogation of the relationship between the so-called Jewish and Muslim Questions of Europe and their respective imbricated roles in the construction of European (Christian) modernity and conceptions of the secular/political.

While there is scholarship that confronts this point centrally (Anidjar, 2014; Norton, 2020; Topolski, 2020; Jansen and Meer, 2020), most critics of religion in global affairs focus on Islam and Muslims, recognizing and tracing the orientalist motifs in the production of Europe as an intellectual and political project, and presume that the “Jewish Question” has been solved (ironically by Europe’s genocidal acts and ideological frames, such as nationalism, settler colonialism, orientalism, and antisemitism). This involves not only a tacit Zionist logic, but also a presumption of a construct of the “Judeo-Christian” as a stable and self-evident mode of secularity or a statement of normative and civilizational belonging (even if the “Judeo” is superseded and consumed by the “Christian”). It is astounding, indeed, that the “Judeo” became assimilated into the Christian and into a civilizational discourse that posits it as the cultural scaffolding of the West, as Huntington had done, relying on this “Judeo-Christian” construct (along with appeals to the tradition leading back to ancient Greece) to explain the cultural “essence” or “nature” of the “West” vis-à-vis the production of its ideal “other” in the orient. However, the Jews used to be Europe’s “barbarians” (Slabodsky, 2014). Likewise, both Jews and Muslims were targets of proto-racialized expulsions from Spain at the genesis of the western colonial era. Further, without centuries of antisemitism and theological supercessionism, the Nazi genocide against the Jews cannot be explained (though it also cannot only be explained through classical antisemitism). Indeed, the case of Nazi Germany’s “final solution” does offer an argument about the complex relation of causality between theological and genocidal violence and how this complex causality tells the story of modernity along with assimilation of the “Jewish barbarians” into European citizenship through emancipation and other developments associated with the Enlightenment. The assimilation of Jews into a civilizational discourse explains why Israel, while in the MENA region, is framed by the “international community” as a Western power and a part of Europe (Slabodsky, 2014).

Revisiting the relationship between the Muslim and Jewish Questions and their participation in the production of the modern/secular illuminates how much the “secular” conceals in terms of the religio-cultural, ideological, and geopolitical arrangements that it denotes on a case-by-case basis. The camouflage happens not only on the level of securitizing, but also in terms of the neoliberal discourse of “religious engagement”. As we noted in our opening case study of Bosnia and Herzegovina, reducing discord and, the inverse, reconciliation to an “interfaith” exercise not only disguises historical, geopolitical, ideological, sociocultural, and economic variables, but also paradoxically extends the logic of, at times, a genocidal war to the realm of peacebuilding. When the sole principle of belonging is “religious” (itself reduced to a set of hermeneutically closed prescriptions), “peace” becomes an obscuring thin process of cooperation, preventing democratic horizons from articulating alternative political belongings underpinned by principles of equality, equity, and legality, which are, indeed, normative goods associated with modernist aspirations.

Peace as religious engagement

As we anticipated in our earlier reference to the Marrakesh Declaration, in addition to works that sought to understand descriptively, historically, and theologically the violent potentials inherent in religious traditions and their scriptural, cultural, social, and historical texts (Juergensmeyer
et al., 2015), a complementary set of discussions emerged focusing on the peace potential and sometimes the so-called “essence” of religious traditions. Regardless of the myopia defining the very specialized arena of religious peacebuilding, some scholars and practitioners who have inhabited this field for decades, such as Mohammed Abu-Nimer (2003), called for a theological and hermeneutical excavation of peace-promoting motifs and resources within religious traditions, thereby becoming experts in religion and peace. This is a useful body of work, offering a hermeneutical arsenal of a sort with which to combat violent interpretations of religious traditions. The key line of critique for such a hermeneutical excavation is its embeddedness within secularist and utilitarian accounts of traditions that reduce them to mere beliefs, sets of practices, and dogmas, and a discourse of “authenticity” that forecloses hermeneutical horizons and decontextualizes the causes of fatalistic violence, such as suicide attacks, and attributes such violence to “bad” religion. A global network of programs of “deradicalization” relies on such extractive hermeneutics, demonstrating over and over the securitizing frame within which the business of “religious engagements” has unfolded. This securitizing and racializing praxis has become a site of a relentless critique (Fadil et al., 2019).

At the same time and within the field of religion and peace, the literature has mostly bracketed the critical study of religion (see Omer, 2011; Omer et al., 2015). Instead, it has focused on identifying exemplary religious actors who were promptly profiled as exemplars of religious peacebuilding (e.g., Tanenbaum and Little, 2007). However, in most instances, the “religious partners” utilized in the field of religion and peace praxis are professionals (sometimes even bureaucrats), leveraging their relative legitimacy within the community and the charisma/authority of their offices for diplomatic outcomes, and mobilizing their networks, platforms, and institutions. Let us rotate briefly to highlight key motifs in the field.

The religion and peacebuilding scholarship gained momentum with R. Scott Appleby’s book, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* (2000). Influenced by the German Protestant theologian, Rudolf Otto, who characterized the sacred as simultaneously dreadful and fascinating to the subject, Appleby “defended” religion from outright attack by arguing that the “sacred” as cause could produce a variety of responses ranging from violent to non-violent forms of militancy. Appleby foregrounded “experience” of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* as a key cause for violent or non-violent militancy, which he termed “religious”. Desmond Tutu has argued along similar lines, saying that religion is like fire that you can use to prepare tasty food but that can also be used to burn someone, or like a knife that can be used to put butter on bread but that can also be used to stab someone in the back (Duke, 2006). Not only is the “religious experience”, as a special kind of experience, foregrounded, but also the individual (exceptional, prophetic, charismatic) constitutes the engine of change (see also Omer, 2021).

Critics who come from a genealogical study of religion as a modern construct born out of European Christian history, theology, philosophy, and political projects specifically demystify such construction of religion as deeply biased and ahistorical (even if recognizing the historical morphologies of religious traditions and their internal plurality and contestability as Appleby does). The problem with the “ambivalence” that Appleby describes is not its recognition that religion cannot be theorized away as merely epiphenomenal, but that its account of religion’s causality in the world, especially pertaining to violence and peace, presumes an unmediated experience of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* at the expense of a structural and systemic analysis of ideology.

In addition, the focus of religious peacebuilding on individual (charismatic or not) change-makers is problematic and itself reveals how the routinization of religion and the practice of peace have diverged from the initial account of prophetic disruption associated with Tutu, King, and Gandhi, all of whom were part of broader social movement mobilizations and contentious
politics. In all of those cases, an experience of the sacred, in fact, was not and cannot be understood as a \textit{sui generis} causality of peace or the prophetic act of speaking truth to power. Instead, religiosity becomes a currency for resistance to oppressive structures and ideologies where hermeneutical facility also exposes how religious traditions have participated in authorizing such violent ideologies as slavery, racism, and settler colonialism. These charismatic individuals were so effective because their grounding in religion also entailed a rootedness in history, a critique of racism and colonialism, as well as other sources and traditions such as, in the case of King, the US Constitution, Sigmund Freud, and Gandhi, among other sources. The field of religion and peace fixes on individual actors (prophets or social influencers) and brackets the social movements and critical theory that inform them. This, once again, exposes the field as myopic of its own discursive violence.

Extracting the “religious” and articulating it as a separate and distinct site of praxis overlooks religion’s complicity and the violent structures shaping people’s lives. The process of racialization so central to modernity shares a genealogy with the construction of religion as a comparative anthropological category in the context of Western (Christian) colonial expansion. While the “ambivalence” thesis came at a good time to counter its inverse in the Huntington “clash” narrative and shows how religion can be both negative and positive, it nonetheless persisted with a \textit{sui generis} account of religious experience that allows for bypassing the analysis of global structural, epistemic, cultural, and discursive forms of violence. The basic insight that Appleby articulated became the normative assumption of the industry of religion and the practice of peace, which asks at every turn how we can identify and support partners who will be helpful and good and contain those who will be disruptive and bad (see also Omer, 2021). This bad/good axis echoes the orientalist underpinning of the securitizing religion discourse Mamdani dissects for its orientalism.

The extraction of the “religious” as a distinct sector and a series of investments in religious and interfaith engagements facilitated some apparently positive symbolic and concrete outcomes, such as in brokering ceasefires as in Sant’ Egidio’s work (Haynes, 2009) or the consolidation and strengthening of a global “United Nations of Religions” body called Religions for Peace (RfP) as an international player (Bender, 2021). RfP does localized work on reconciliation and interfaith relationship building to ensure strong channels of communication and infrastructures for conflict management and redressing people’s needs. It is also undeniable that an institution such as the Catholic Church and the office of the pope can act symbolically yet causally in the world to effect peacebuilding outcomes, as in the case of the pope’s involvement with establishing US-Cuban diplomatic relationships and the \textit{Laudato Si’} encyclical that has generated many actions to respond to the global climate catastrophe. Occupying the papacy is, of course, no guarantee for constructive diplomatic or peacebuilding influence, as in Benedict XVI’s anti-Muslim speech in 2006 and in Pius’s XII rapid (first in line!) endorsement of Hitler, earning him the nickname “Hitler’s Pope” (Cornwell, 2008).

But religious institutions and authorities have certainly also played constructive roles in processes of reconciliation and healing in the aftermath of mass atrocities. This, of course, depends on the degree of credibility and complicity such authorities and institutions inhabit in relation to such atrocities. Catholic peacebuilding emerged as a distinct site of peacebuilding (Hawksley, 2020), drawing on its wide and deep networks and institutional power and usually without accounting for the long legacies of Catholic violence vis-à-vis indigenous people, women, LGBTQI+ people, and other marginalized groups (Cooper, 2020). Even when grappling with its atrocities, the consolidation of a peacebuilding approach conveys an air of triumphalism grounded in the celebration of the unique positionality of Catholic institutions and foregrounding of social teachings as offering distinct ethical access to the burden and task of peacebuilding.
This triumphalist celebration of the presumption of holding a “special key” to peacebuilding conveys a concern with the sustainability of the church’s ethical authority and influence as well as its functionalist dependency on human suffering and the abstract poor.

So far, we have shown that much of the literature on religious peacebuilding has concerned itself with how religion can help put out an obvious fire or participate in peacebuilding as diplomacy, negotiations, symbolic performativity of unity, and a “counter-message” for bad religion in efforts toward “deradicalization”. In addition, some works have illuminated gendered and women’s perspectives in religious peacebuilding, a critical point considering how male and heteropatriarchal religious authorities and spaces tend to be and how gendered violence constitutes many of their articulations (Hayward and Marshall, 2015; Omer, 2021). Others have focused on reconciliation and forgiveness, a subfield that often reflects strong Christian biases and triumphalism (Philpott, 2015). Yet others also examined indigenous and traditional practices of reconciliation, cross-referenced with scholarship in peace studies that prioritize those most affected by violence and conflict (Lederach and Appleby, 2010). At the same time, religiosity comes into the peacebuilding and negotiation spaces through rituals and meanings-producing actions (Schirch, 2005).

An overview of the field and its definitional texts point to how even figures whose religious agency can only be understood within a broader social movement mobilization against racism and oppression are then extracted from these matrices and presented as actors with special access to a *sui generis* experience of the sacred, which then works on them as a cause to act transformatively in the world and/or to become an identifiable representative of closed communities who then are invited into various programs and initiatives funded by interested centers of power (including Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other non-US loci of geopolitical aspirations). What this bureaucratization and cooptation ultimately does is to extract the analysis of religion and peace praxis from an interrogation of how “religion” is also racialized and gendered and how people’s appeals to traditions have authorized the marginalization and pain of those affiliated with such traditions. Such concerns are often bracketed as irrelevant to the urgent matters of war and peace. Yet a simplistic deployment of religious resources might overlook the “dysfunctional relationships” that characterize violent conflicts between groups (Tarusarira and Ganiel, 2012). Such dysfunctional relationships might be heightened by deeper social and economic imbalances between groups and by structural political imbalances. This dysfunctionality also coheres with an undue presumption concerning religion’s special access to morality and celebration of religious values such as love, which may and often does obscure justice and truth (Steen-Johnsen, 2020).

Further, the aforementioned literature can mostly be characterized as utilitarian, driven by a question about how religion can be used for peace (but not always or necessarily socio-economic and epistemic justice), development, and security. The main lines of critique of the consolidation of religious peacebuilding in routinized, institutional, and official spaces revolve around how religiocratic spaces reconstitute hegemony (Shakman-Hurd, 2015), reflect underlying orientalist securitizing agenda even under the pretenses of “engagement” (Wolf, 2021; Wilson, 2021), and prioritize useful rather than justice-oriented “religious actors” (Omer, 2021). These lines of critique point also to the consolidation of praxis around religion and “soft” (Nye, 2005; Haynes, 2008) or “sharp” power (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). According to Mandaville (2022), “Sharp power – as distinct from either the positive allure of soft power or the use of military force often associated with hard power – refers to the use of information, communication and technology tools to disseminate ideas and messages likely to sow discord and tension in target societies”. Sharp/soft power is available to a broad spectrum of actors, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, Russia, and the US, where investment in interfaith dialogue, for example,
by Saudi Arabia, proceeds without questioning Saudi’s violations of human rights, the ongoing war on Yemen, or the public executions of presumed or real dissidents. Indeed, “sharp power” is not just the softer side of hegemony; it is used to orchestrate violence, confrontations, conspiracy theories, apocalyptic imaginations, polarization, and the resulting opportune moments for expanding spheres of influence.

Religion as soft/sharp power counts on the presumed innocence of intra- and interfaith engagement. What damage can getting together and getting to know one another or one’s tradition better do? The King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural dialogue or KAICIID (established in 2007) is an intergovernmental body underwritten by the Republic of Austria, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Holy See (in observant status). It bills itself as an interfaith framework dedicated to bringing together religious leaders and policy-makers, focusing on cultivating resources to combat “radicalization” and enhancing the peace potentials of communities. This intergovernmental initiative exemplifies the ways in which religious engagement and interfaith dialoguing can be deployed as a weapon or used to conceal, soften, and otherwise entrench autocratic regimes and violent geopolitical agendas.

Another example where appearances of inter-religious dialogue and peace conceal multiple layers of violence is the Abraham Accords orchestrated by the US during the Trump administration. Even though there was no war between Israel, Morocco, and Bahrain or the Emirates, they have now signed “peace” agreements (that are widely interpreted as a series of economic and military deals), which have normalized Israel in the region in that it can now benefit from tourism and trade with these countries and persistently ensconce the system of the occupation not only with impunity but with dividends.

This weaponization of interfaith peace among members of Abrahamic traditions in the MENA region unfolded under the cover of a simplistic and orientalist account of the “Middle East conflict” as one about religions, ancient hatreds, or a clash of civilizations between generic “Arabs” and “Muslims” and “Jews”. The Abraham Accords show how the deployment of vague and uninterrogated appeals to interfaith can violently erase and marginalize the Palestinians and their fight for political freedom and human dignity. The case of Palestine/Israel has especially generated a cottage industry on interfaith dialogue and religious peacebuilding, functioning more often than not to obscure the realities of settler colonialism and apartheid (Rouhana and Shlahoub-Kevorkian, 2021).

We do not argue that religion does not matter for understanding Palestine/Israel or that it is not important to gain fluency in how conceptions of return to the land feature in the religious imaginations of various religious communities. Instead, we contend that interfaith as a peacebuilding praxis has functioned to decontextualize, dehistoricize, and depoliticize the ongoing realities of Palestinian depopulation, oppression, and control. Notably, while the securitizing of religion reflects the operationalizing of Appleby’s basic thesis, it departs from the best reading of this thesis that focused on the figure of the prophet as disruptive of the status quo rather than as an instrument for entrenching hegemonic scripts (see also Omer, 2021). The very construct of “deradicalization” presumes that “good” religion is not radical, which is certainly a departure from an account of the prophetic as a radical intervention. Jesus was a radical. Muhammad was a radical. At the same time, much of the business of “religious engagement” that consolidated in the wake of 9/11 sought to identify and enlist so-called “moderate Muslims” (Mandaville, 2017). Not only that, programs around “inter-civilizational dialogue” and Preventing Violent Extremism triangulated securitizing “bad” religion with mobilizing “good” religion, which also led to securitizing of aid, humanitarianism, and development policies (Lynch, 2015; Wolff, 2021).
Religious peacebuilding, therefore, helps to gloss over the root causes of oppression. It glosses over how religion has participated non-reductively in consolidating and authorizing ideological violence. Still, religious language does play a part in articulating resistance, emancipatory visions for alternative futures, and solidarity, as it has done in South Africa, Palestine, and elsewhere. Recognizing the complex and differentiated role of religion in violence and resistance sheds light on how, more often than not, one needs to interrogate the political power and situatedness of those engaged in “religious peacebuilding” or sponsoring such programs that foreground “religion” in order to assess the degree to which the “peace” in question is not simply violence by a different name. We next go deeper into the modernist and co-constitutive genealogies of the two terms “religion” and “peace”.

Religion, liberal peace, and modernity

Neither religion nor peace is easy to define. In fact, both terms are entangled with one another in that “peace” often denotes the assignment of something called “religion” to its proper place in the socio-political mapping of modernity. The very act of defining “religion” has been rendered inherently problematic in the academic study of religion, a field that has now for decades grappled with its complicity with Western (Christian) colonial legacies. In his genealogies of the secular, Talal Asad classically articulates the co-constitutive relations of the “secular” and “religious” to one another and to the project of modernity. His critique exposes that any attempt to define “religion” as an ahistorical, transcultural, and disembodied essence constitutes a form of epistemic violence implicated in Europe’s political and colonial projects. Asad demonstrates how provincial intellectual, theological, and political dynamics and contestations specific to Europe were projected as universal.

One of the problems with such a static, ahistorical, and anthropological comparative religion revolves around the political projects that it has authorized. The sequestering of the “religious” at the level of the individual (autonomous) and cognitive spheres depoliticizes the “religious” and extracts it from the “secular” where peace and order depend on policing potentially disruptive transgressions. Indeed, peace in modernity is necessarily secular, though the secular does not mean the absence of religious meanings and thresholds. Indeed, this makes “peace” a specific mechanism to protect Western modernity. The “secular” itself emerges as a security discourse designed to produce, reproduce, and protect political spaces, modern conceptions of sovereignty and belonging, and individual freedoms and liberties from the intrusions of anti-democratic forces. The exclusionary axes of modernity, as noted, entailed forming a complex nexus between the two “others” of Europe, the Jew and the Muslim (Norton, 2020; Anidjar, 2014), the expansionist colonial project, and its reliance on dehumanizing and control of the natives. These axes constitute modernity’s scaffolding and clarify the twin questions posed at the outset: Whose peace? Whose religion?

Indeed, the analysis of religion’s relation to peace presumes a secular ontology and normativity in which the containment of religion and “comprehensive worldviews”, as in John Rawls, captures the meaning of the liberal peace, with Rawls persistently working within the Kantian tradition, albeit with some modifications reflecting Rawls’ distinctive historical location. The liberal peace tradition connotes certain assumptions regarding the economy, the operation of society, and the political structures as well as the meaning of citizenship and the autonomous individual as a choosing consumer of goods and politics. It also intimates certain assumptions concerning the proper location of religion and religious worldviews and prescriptions. The notion of secular ontology and normativity is constitutive of the construct of Europe as an ongoing ideological, intellectual, and theo-political project (Wolff, 2021). This is why “peace”
is not necessarily the imposition of a “secular” antidote, which is itself not detached from religiocultural, linguistic, and historical specificities.

The meanings of the two terms “peace” and “religion” are therefore inextricably interlaced with one another and with normative accounts of modernity. Historicizing the terms and their relations to one another foregrounds the constitutive processes that link the consolidation of the Westphalian settlement of 1648, the focus of the critical study of religion and international relations, to 1492 and the “doctrine of discovery” (Lynch, 2020), the focus of studies of modernity/coloniality. The latter is an intellectual tradition that insists that the lofty ideals associated with modernity – individual liberties, freedoms, toleration, democracy, pluralism – are constitutive with the bloody realities of Western Christian colonialism (Wynter, 2003; Maldonado-Torres, 2014). Religion, as noted, was deeply implicated in such processes of dehumanization, exploitation, and genocide deemed “necessary” for the sake of development, progress, and civilization. Ramon Grosfouguel (2011) traces how initial universalizing claims shifted over time from appeals to conversion into Christian (Catholic) cosmology to other forms of “good news”, such as progress, civilization, democracy, and development. This points to the ongoing operation of epistemic violence and its packaging as peace messages always designed to placate, domesticate, and ensure stability/security for the modern West as a constellation of historical, political, cultural, and economic forces.

The coloniality/modernity interventions clarify what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007, p. 51) meant famously by his notion of the “abyssal line”, a hallmark of modernity, which differentiates between the colonial and normative zones, or what Frantz Fanon influentially termed the “zones of being/nonbeing” (Fanon, 2008, xii; see also Gordon, 2005). In the post-colonial moment, however, “a neat divide between the Old and New World, between the metropolitan and the colonial is over” (Santos, 2007, p. 56). Nevertheless, abyssal lines still operate and dehumanize, echoing the old amity lines drawn in the mid-sixteenth century, which had permitted lawlessness, dispossession, liquidation, and slavery in the colonial zone. A much more “messy cartography” (Santos, 2007, p. 57), characterized by “social apartheid” (Santos, 2007, p. 59) within the metropolitan centers, results in “pluralistic fascism”, by which Santos means a condition in which “societies are politically democratic and socially fascistic” (Santos, 2007, p. 61). Indeed, scholarship in the study of religion (e.g., Masuzawa, 2005) has demonstrated how the consolidation of what Tomoko Masuzawa interprets as an ideology of religious pluralism in the late nineteenth century, looking specifically at the case study of the first convening of the World Parliament of Religion in 1893 in Chicago, coinciding with the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which marked 400 years since the “discovery” of America, putting on display a newly formed category called “world religions” and a celebration of pluralism at the seat of empire. Observers of this monumental event reflected: “The word ‘universalism’ tolled like a bell through the halls of the Parliament. The world stood on the technological brink of global civilization, and the hope for the universal in matters of the spirit was just beginning to be voiced” (Pluralism Project, n.d.). This quote conveys the triumphalism at the scaffolding of the ideology of pluralism. It also shows the depoliticization of inter-religious engagement through appeals to sameness. Of course, the very logic of depoliticization is itself political and requires us to ask whose agenda it promotes and how, as well as who does it marginalize and confine.

The ideology of pluralism, as reflected in the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago, reveals the consolidation of the imperial dimensions underlying universalizing constructions of religion. The politics of pluralism have persistently helped to maintain Christian Western hegemonies and the ontological and epistemological security of the project of the modern West was often conveyed through a civilizational discourse. The Parliament further offers an early glimpse of the performativity of religious peacebuilding. Pluralism “at home” became,
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However, a mechanism for navigating and subduing conflicts by policing the correct loci and forms of religious expressions and, relatedly, the thresholds of belonging and non-belonging to the “secular” political spaces and to normative accounts of citizenship. Indeed, “multiculturalism” as a discourse of citizenship and belonging in Euro-America has continued to camouflage (or not as gleaned from public declarations by notable European leaders such as Angela Merkel declaring, in 2015, that it had failed) orientalist motifs, singling out the supposed religiocultural incompatibility of Muslims with Western values of freedom of expression and women’s rights (Norton, 2020). The global war on terrorism, not surprisingly, unleashed exclusionary ethnoreligious nationalist forces that claimed a supposed lost white and Christian golden age. This is why Kumar is adamant to call the surveillance of Muslims in the US anti-Muslim racism. This is not about inter-religious intolerance or misunderstanding, she underscores; it is about racism, and thus “peace” will entail anti-racist policies rather than only inter-religious dialogue. This points once again to how “interreligious dialogue”, among other similar practices, offers a depoliticized praxis of cosmetic or symbolic peace at its best.

That 1648 and 1492 are two dates in the same chronology also exposes the colonial dimensions of a multifaceted tradition of “liberal peace”, which has been under scrutiny in recent years within the scholarly and practitioner spaces known as “peace research” (Little, 2015; Sabaratnam, 2013). If the liberal peace tradition uncritically imposed liberal norms, the failure of such liberal peacebuilding operations in the 1990s led theorists to reassess the top-down logic and implementation of the liberal peace formulas (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013; Autesserre, 2014). This revision of peacebuilding praxis also underpins a trend called the “local turn”, that is, the recognition that “local” actors, rather than external experts, may have the right keys for implementing peace programs (Appleby, 2015). This “local turn”, which has been critiqued in the peace studies literature (e.g., Hughes et al., 2017; Paffenholz, 2017), has also denoted the “discovery” of a category of actors, namely, “religious” actors, as especially beneficial in unlocking the supposedly elusive and seemingly static “local”. We surround the word “local” with scare quotes because this category presumes an “international community” that inhabits normative liberal secularity. Within this frame, a turn to the “local” recognizes that top-down impositions are not effective nor desirable and thus emphasizes the need to turn to “local actors” for their “ownership” in peacebuilding and development projects. Our use of “ownership” to highlight the need to cultivate “buy-in” from local communities also telegraphs the transmutation of the “liberal peace” into a neoliberal peacebuilding formation, which thrives on a devolutionary logic of the kind that the “local turn” offers (Omer, 2021). Indeed, the “harnessing” of religious “capital” central to the “engagement with religion” frame reflects a persistent top-down logic, if one interrogates sources of funding and investment. The liberal peace tradition, therefore, coalesces with and shares common roots with democratic (and economic) theory. Both theoretical foci can be traced back to Christian European modernity. Understanding this genealogy of religion and peace as it relates to modernity, the praxis of religious peacebuilding therefore reinforces rather than disrupts the ontological security of this project of modernity.

At the same time, important distinctions exist between the instrumental approach to religion, seeking to promote peacebuilding/development outcomes that secure liberal and secular normativity, and what we have termed the “reactionary” register, which instrumentalizes the language of rights and liberties (especially the promotion of freedoms of religion and speech) to entrench ultimately anti-modernist and anti-democratic, civilizational, and theopolitical agendas. The weaponization of religious freedoms began to gain traction in the late 1980s and was institutionalized and mainstreamed especially into US foreign policy (Shakman-Hurd, 2015; Suh, 2016). Of course, religious freedom in itself is a desirable democratic good, but its weaponization reveals an anti-democratic and anti-humanistic agenda, as reflected by the
capturing of legislatures and courts to challenge people’s reproductive rights, along with the humanity of LGBTQI+ people in the name of religious freedom and expression. The promotion of religious freedoms and liberties also has a long colonial history (Mahmood, 2015). The freedom of speech and expression often cross-fertilizing with orientalist appeals to sexual freedoms is another site where civilizational and culturalist policing occurs under the façade of democracy. The upshot is further other-izing and marginalizing of Muslims in the West. This “culture war”, which also veers into and converges more broadly with the policing of women’s bodies and LGBTQI+ communities and other vulnerable populations, manifests repeatedly in controversies, such as burkini bans in France, the sexualized torture in Abu-Ghraib, and the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammed, as in the case of the Jyllands-Posen Danish cartoons of 2005.

Critics of modernity/secularity and the politics of “religious engagement” zoom in on the instrumentalization of religion to ensure political hegemony. At the same time, the theo-ideological actors instrumentalize the critique itself, as well as the language of individual liberties and freedoms, to insert – through investment in research and knowledge production designed to inform policy outcomes and agendas – anti-democratic religious and ideological objectives, often coalescing with conservative and neoconservative/neoliberal economic agendas. It is thus not surprising that Brown understands the relations between right-wing exclusionary populist nationalisms, autocracies, and neoliberal policies and commitments as comfortable. The critique of modernity, therefore, takes two turns, both of which present themselves as disruptive of secularist myopias, but both of which reconstitute the modernist logic, either through a utilitarian deployment of religion as an asset or by reclaiming a supposed lost pre-modern Christian coherence, the presumed binary of the “secular”. This harkening back to “coherence” shares ideological elective affinities with racialized accounts of European civilizational superiority, as it unfolds in the various “controversies” that erupt on a regular basis around the question of Muslim belonging or non-belonging to Europe.

This is why we conclude by gesturing toward an approach that interrogates the matrices of violence in all their forms. An intersectional approach clarifies why the anti-apartheid mobilization in South Africa constituted a moment of inter-religious peacebuilding because it was humanist and justice oriented. Operationally, this entailed unpacking how religion, peace, and conflict are defined, by whom, and in what context(s). Intersectionality resonates with decolonial thinking insofar as both engage in epistemologies from the margins (Mignolo and Walshe, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Grosfouguel, 2011; Tarusarira, 2020). Through this prism, we have shown why and how justice concerns are bracketed out of the analysis of religious peacebuilding. This is why our task here has been to bring a robust analysis of the terms under scrutiny – “religion” and “peace” – and to locate them normatively and historically.

References


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