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## **Religion and Conflict: The Myth of Inevitable Collision**

*By Paul Hedges*

### **Synopsis**

*The recent attacks on churches in Indonesia may spark renewed concern that religious differences are inevitably contentious if not leading outright to violence. However, history suggests that harmonious coexistence is the norm.*

### **Commentary**

LEAVING ASIDE the almost unimaginable spectacle of parents taking, even training, their children to die for their ideology, the recent attacks in Surabaya, Indonesia raise the issue of conflict between religious communities. While few Muslims identify with these terrorists, it may nevertheless leave the impression that it is simply the exacerbation of an essential enmity between Christians and Muslims.

Such a thesis would accord with Samuel Huntington's well-known "Clash of Civilisations" argument, which posited that civilisational boundaries, often marked by religious identities, would define the coming world order.

### **Conflict and Peace between Religions**

To exemplify this type of thesis, especially that conflict between religions is prevalent, one may look beyond events in Indonesia, which play into a wider militant neo-jihadi assault on Christianity, to clashes between: Jews and Muslims in Israel-Palestine; Buddhists and Muslims in Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka; Hindus and Christians and Muslims in India; or, many other examples including intra-religious violence, for instance between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

The list of events where we see violence across inter-religious lines in both contemporary and global history seems almost endless. However, history suggests

that this may not be the whole story, indeed peaceful and positive inter-religious relations may be the norm rather than the exception.

The well-known Constitution of Medina alongside the agreement from Prophet Muhammad with the monks of St Catherine's Monastery are signs that peaceful and harmonious inter-religious relations were endorsed by the founder of Islam. His battles were not fought against other religions, but against those who had attacked and oppressed the young Islamic community.

We could equally show other examples from history, which would include the Buddha going on missions to prevent war during his life, or Francis of Assisi setting out on a peacebuilding mission during the height of the crusades to speak with the Muslim leader Salahuddin Ayubi, better known in the West as Saladin.

### **Everyday Coexistence as Norm**

Critics may object, though, that despite high profile or even foundational initiatives for peace that the real history of religion is one of conflict and intolerance. The facts, they may say, speak more loudly than the ideals of peace and non-violence. Yet here, I suggest, we see in the lived experience of communities at the grassroots, the real evidence that inter-religious relations need not be one of conflict but can be about harmonious coexistence.

If one looks to places today where we see faultlines between the religions, we can also see evidence of a history of intercommunal harmony. For centuries, Christians and Muslims in parts of Indonesia have shared common shrines and pilgrimage sites, some of which still exist. While little known today, this is not an exception.

If one traverses South Eastern Europe, in places such as Macedonia, one will find shrines, mosques, and churches that form sacred loci again for both Christians and Muslims. In Northern India, meanwhile, there are also shrines and sites of pilgrimage as well as holy men who have been revered by Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims.

Again, in Sri Lanka, shrines that honour both Hindu deities and have Buddhist significance are not unknown. Indeed, across the globe where we find inter-religious communities which have lived together across the centuries we find similar things. A sharing and accommodation of religious sites in local communities.

Outside of this we also find patterns of reciprocation and lived cooperation. In traditional Indonesian society, Christians and Muslims would have exchanged gifts and also partaken in work alongside the other community: Christians would have helped build mosques, and Muslims would have helped build churches. In places such as Morocco, Muslims have been the traditional keepers of Jewish graves, while at the end of Ramadan Jews used to prepare the food for Eid-al-Fitr.

Such reciprocity and inter-religious harmony has been patterned in similar ways in many places. Indeed, we may even see it as typical. For the ordinary followers of religions living alongside those of other religions has, in most parts of the world, for most of history, simply been the norm.

## Religious Violence and Empire

Samuel Huntington suggested that “Islam has bloody borders”, while European Christians fought what are called the “wars of religion” and brought their religious traditions with colonial invasion and often at gunpoint to the rest of the world. However, what we speak of here are the expansion of empires and the machinations of rulers.

It is not surprising that the edges of imperial territories show the signs of war and conflict of religion as part of cultural, ethnic, economic, and expansionist policies. However, religion also spread at times through trade, books, and gentler flows of peoples across the globe.

Here, perhaps we see the real history of inter-religious relations. A history that is not conflictual and violent, but one marked by sharing, cooperation, reciprocity, and accommodation as people live out their religious identities in relation to people with other religious identities.

## Managing Religion’s Ambivalence

In such a context, finding areas of common space and agreement is more normal than conflict. Indeed, as noted, this has precedent in the foundational ideas and key leaders of many religious traditions who stressed cooperation and peace over war and conflict.

Certainly, this is not to say that left to themselves religions will live in peace. They contain traditions and trends to both conflict and coexistence. We have no reason, though, to see the former as more normal or defining than the latter. Indeed, this ambivalent nature of the sacred, as Professor Scott Appleby has termed it, means that religious leaders, devotees, and others concerned with social harmony and positive inter-religious relations have a duty to ensure that the elements favouring coexistence and harmony are promoted and extolled.

Peaceful coexistence is not a denial of one’s religion, nor downplaying its importance, but learning from its vital sources for life in the twenty-first century.

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