Religious Aspects of Conflict and its Resolution

By David A. Steele[1]

In our contemporary world, religion is increasingly used as one of the most important "identity markers" by which a people define themselves.[2] In many places in today's world, religious affiliation is what distinguishes a group from outsiders. This is especially true when beliefs and values profoundly affect people's motivation and when mythical, mystical, and cultic rituals evoke a sense of transcendent belonging. Sometimes religion retains this role in identity formation even after a society becomes largely secularized. Even in the absence of a strong doctrinal belief system, there are still certain values, perceptual mindsets, and customs that set a group apart from its neighbors (observance of religious holidays, self-perception as a "chosen/special people", or relative emphasis placed on the importance of differing ethical norms).

Consequently, it is very appropriate to examine the role that religion plays in both the precipitation and resolution of conflict. In this paper I intend to raise questions for both the religious communities and international negotiators working in contexts where religion is a significant factor. In order to provide illustration of both the dangers and the opportunities, I will highlight the roles played by religious groups in two contexts: the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo and Shi'ite Muslims in south central Iraq.[3]

Serbian Orthodox Religious Mythology in Kosovo

The Battle of Kosovo, where according to tradition the Muslim Turks defeated the Orthodox Christian Serbs in June of 1389, has become one of the primary markers of Serbian identity. In the nineteenth century, the ancient Kosovo folk tradition was collected and woven together into a cohesive Kosovo myth in order to support a Serbian nationalist quest for liberation from centuries of Ottoman rule. The resulting legacy was more than historical rendition since, like other myths, it sanctioned and enacted rites which marked the boundaries of the group, established links between the people's past, present and future, formulated certain values and oppositions that ratified and endorsed a particular ideology or philosophy, and came to represent a transcendental importance within the culture. Furthermore, this Kosovo myth took on clear theological dimensions, identifying the death of the fourteenth century Prince Lazar with the crucifixion of Christ and equating

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[2] At a negotiation workshop I led for Shi'ite Iraqis in March 2006, every participant listed religion as the foremost aspect of their identity, even more important than their names which reflected family heritage for generations.

[3] I draw, here, upon my experience in working in both these contexts. I have provided conflict resolution training and facilitated dialogue in Kosovo for the past nine years and in Iraq for the past six months.

the vanquished Serb nation with the suffering of the chosen people of God. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the myth was used to justify territorial expansion in the pursuit of liberation and to define all perceived Serbian enemies, demonizing not only the Turks, but all Muslim people, identifying them with the anti-Christ.

The "Kosovo pledge" to work toward the institution of a "Heavenly Serbia" later motivated many Serbs to revolt against a variety of foreign dominations, including the Bosnian Peasant Insurrection of 1875, the Balkan wars of 1912-13, World war I, where the Kosovo Pledge motivated Gavrilo Princep's assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and World War II, where the "spirit of Kosovo" ideologically shaped the coup that overthrew a pro-Axis government in Belgrade. During the two decades leading up to the Balkan wars of the 1990s, some figures in the Serbian Orthodox Church took a leading role in, again, nurturing remembrance of the victimization of the Serbian people by focusing on the situation in Kosovo and appealing to this Kosovo mythology. In 1969, the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church declared that Albanian oppressors were waging "genocide against the Serbian people in Kosovo." In 1982, Serbian Orthodox priests and bishops asked their hierarchy to raise its voice "to protect the spiritual and biological existence of the Serb people in Kosovo and Metohija..." Key political leaders in Serbia used this victimization theme to advance their political careers in the late 1980s. Most notable among these was Slobodan Milosevic who appeared with Serbian Orthodox Patriarch German to celebrate Serbian history and nationhood at the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo in 1989. At this event, Milosovic ominously referred to the need for Serbs to, again, be engaged in battle. Building on the Serbian Orthodox revival of the Kosovo myth, he presented himself in the leading role of national savior. During all of the violence that erupted within the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, non-Serbs have frequently pointed to this Kosovo myth as one example of the ways in which religion has been used to enflame ethnic hatred.

Shi'ite Muslim Religious Mythology in Iraq

The Battle of Karbala, fought in 680 A.D. on territory that is part of contemporary Iraq, gave birth to Shi'ite Islam. Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, had been cheated out of a promised succession to the caliphate. During the battle, Husayn, his family and small band of followers were all massacred. The tragedy of Karbala is commemorated each year on the anniversary of Husayn's death, with groups of men performing ritual flagellation. Husayn's noble bearing and calm demeanor in the midst of this tragedy have been forever stored in the collective psyche of Shi'ites. After the death of Husayn, his followers were excluded from major leadership within the Muslim community. As a persecuted minority, they developed a very hierarchical structure which gave their leadership an unchallenged level of authority. The imam was regarded not only as the spiritual and political leader of the community, but as a direct descendent of Mohammed, was seen as sinless. The lineage of the Prophet Mohammed became extinct, however, in 873 when the 12th and last Shi'ite imam, Mohammed al-Mahdi, disappeared within days of inheriting the title at the age of four. Shi'ites refuse to believe that he died; instead believing he will come "out of hiding" and return at the end of time.

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Present day Shi'ites have survived more than a millennium of persecution. This has led to an emphasis on martyrdom and suffering, combined with an opposition to any perceived threat to their tradition, including western secularization. Though their leaders no longer carry the title imam, the ayatollahs have authority to give definitive interpretation on all religious matters and are capable of wielding enormous social and political influence. Those who become martyrs continue to have great influence, as is the case with Ayatollah Mohamed Al-Sadr who was assassinated in 1999 for criticizing Saddam's regime. His son, Shi'ite cleric Moqtadr Al-Sadr, has now, through his family name, ascended into prominence. He has called for an Islamic state in which Shi'ites play the dominant role and has formed a militia, named the Mahdi Army, a messianic name associated with the return of Islam's promised redeemer who is to inaugurate a perfect Islamic society. Al-Sadr has wielded his power militarily by attacking coalition forces, then after the destruction of the Askariya mosque in February 2006, turning his militias against Sunni Iraqis. He has also wielded his power politically by using his party's elected parliamentarians to cast the decisive votes in the election of former Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari.

Common Characteristics of Politicized Fundamentalist Religious Communities

In the case of both the Serbian Orthodox and Iraqi Shi'ites, we are witnessing a phenomenon that is increasingly common in twenty-first century social conflicts. A traditional, centuries old, faith community has emerged from relative obscurity to play an influential role in its society, claiming authority in relationship to its own people and impacting the lives of other peoples and societies. In order to deal constructively with many of today's conflicts, it is important to understand this phenomenon and to find creative ways to engage, and/or mitigate the negative impact of, the various religious adherents.

There are a number of characteristics that Serbian Orthodox, Iraqi Shi'ite, and other contemporary conservative religious traditions have in common. It is important to examine these characteristics and, at the same time, to ask serious questions about the reaction of "non-believers," i.e. anyone outside the particular confines of a particular belief system.

1. Aversion to secularization.

Fundamentalist religion rejects the secular humanist separation between sacred and secular. Faith must explain and embrace all of life. The socio-political realm, because it is intricately connected with issues of justice, cannot be excluded from this domain of faith. The reaction of the fundamentalist to a culture which cannot accommodate the spiritual goes beyond disillusionment. Their desire to define doctrines, erect barriers, establish borders, and control behavior springs from a basic fear that secular humanism is destroying the value system that they perceive to be foundational.[4] The modern world, which seems so liberating to a liberal, appears Godless, drained of meaning, and even Satanic to a religious fundamentalist. In fact, the conflict of values is so fundamental that many of

[4] Every religious community with which I worked in the former Yugoslavia blamed, not themselves, but secular communism, and its desecration of traditional values, for the social disintegration that led to the wars of the 1990s.

the ideals that one camp cherishes appear deranged to the other. Conflict over the Danish cartoons is a prime example of the depth of this ideological divide.

So, what can the liberal establishment do to confront this challenge? Suppression and coercion are clearly not the answer. They invariably feed fears of a conspiracy and lead to a backlash. The Shah's crackdowns inspired the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Yet, attempting to exploit fundamentalism for secular pragmatic ends is also counterproductive. During the Cold War in the 1980s, American efforts to co-opt Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan helped build the Al-Qaeda movement of today. Blaming religious fundamentalist for instigating all the violence and hatred is also not the answer. Much of the rest of the world, including Muslim and Eastern Orthodox peoples, have experienced both the religious and secular West as aggressive, invasive and imperialistic. How, then, can the Western secularist engage religious fundamentalists in any meaningful way? First, one cannot initiate any dialogue with an attitude of superiority that implies "I am tolerant/open and you are not." One must find a way to engage as equals in order to discover some areas of common concern despite the vastly differing worldviews. But the question remains: how can one welcome religious fundamentalists as equal partners in the dialogue? The only way to build consensual social norms is to start by recognizing that they, like secular humanists, hold their truths "to be self-evident."

2. Belief in absolute truth embodied in one's own religious tradition.

Conservative, traditional religious communities see themselves as the custodians of divinely inspired beliefs and values. They view themselves as entrusted with fundamental truths that are beneficial for all people and that must be defended and frequently propagated. They see themselves as emissaries of truth battling against falsehood. It is a clash between good and evil, between God and the Adversary. Sometimes the battles are waged through prayer and devotion, sometimes through teaching and preaching, sometimes through action – even violence if the perceived threat to their values warrants this response.

No society, in fact, can exist without a common understanding of shared values and normative patterns of behavior that have been codified into law which will, if implemented, often require coercion for the sake of conformity to agreed norms of justice. Most belief systems, religious or secular, have strong devotees with well thought out rationales for their own perspective. Like the religious fundamentalist, the secular humanist views the implementation of his/her "Enlightenment" values as beneficial to all. For the modern secularist, these constitute a set of unchallengeable, if not "sacred," norms. The Western liberal is apt to be equally as adamant in support of his/her prized causes as the religious fundamentalist will be in advocating a particular faith perspective or the values and ethical norms that derive form it. Frequently, in such cases, the religious fundamentalists will view the secular humanist as advocating pervasive "Godless" ideology, secular dogmatic certainties, and coercive strategies for enforcing these values.

Is it possible for adamant proponents of such divergent worldviews to engage meaningfully? Only if all parties, religious and secular, realize that "the [full] truth" is much larger than "our truth," can each gain a measure of real tolerance that enables them to listen more attentively to the "other" and to put a check on one's own "enemy imaging." This mindset requires perceiving one's own truth as partial, limited, or even distorted and then opening oneself to the corrective truth (also partial, limited or distorted) that comes from the "other." One must take the time to learn how others view the world, understand what is important to them, and seek ways to help them realize their legitimate aspirations. Even diplomats schooled in realpolitik cannot afford to ignore factors that shape attitudinal and

behavioral patterns of whole cultures.[5] Even if power dynamics constitute the bottom line, any negotiation still requires the ability to understand and communicate with the other. Furthermore, in the world of the 21st century, power is no longer exclusively in the hands of state actors. It has devolved. To borrow an image from Thomas Friedman, "the world is flat." In such a global village, cultural sensitivity and religious understanding are key factors in the resolution of conflicts centered around values.

3. Present suffering and victimization, but ultimate redemption.

Both Serbian Orthodoxy and Shi'ite Islam have a deeply ingrained theology of victimhood. Suffering and self-sacrifice of the whole people is viewed as a form of atonement, a process of purification. Yet fundamentalist religion also relies on the messianic vision of a better future, even a perfect "end time." The promise of ultimate peace and justice gives the believer the strength to endure any present misery. The way to this future, though, is usually seen as a form of struggle. People who have lived for centuries under foreign domination often develop a culture of humiliation and a strong sense of cultural unity in the face of threat. There is a tremendous pride in one's people, a need to affirm their strengths and either hide or redeem their failures.

Most Westerners come from a culture that believes anything is possible for one with adequate initiative and motivation. One does not need to hope for "pie in the sky." This deeply ingrained individualistic culture of the West, with its emphasis on personal choice, freedom and opportunity, is fundamentally different from the communal cultures of much of the rest of the world where the focus is on loyalty to one's family, clan or tribe. Western ideals of emancipation have frequently been perceived in other cultures as undermining indigenous people's authority within their social structures. In order to bridge this chasm of experience and expectation, the Westerner, or indeed anyone whose basic needs have been met adequately, needs to develop a sensitivity to suffering – growing in understanding of the sense of victimhood in each context, empathizing with those who experience the

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5 The distinction between "the truth" and "our truth" comes from Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the 20th century's leading theological and political realists. Furthermore, Niebuhr's recognition of the critical role of power dynamics did not prevent him from espousing tolerance. For Niebuhr, there was a tension between never knowing anything with absolute certainty and still having to maintain the necessary conviction which leads to action. If one has only limited understanding, then tolerance toward those who disagree was essential for this advocate of realpolitik. See *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II: *Human Destiny* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1943), pp. 221-28.

6 When I conduct training seminars in conflict resolution for religious people in the Balkans, I frequently lead them through a cyclical process designed to utilize their faith in order to escape from a cycle of victimization and revenge. I often begin by exploring the lament motif, a grief process encapsulated in many Old Testament Psalms, as a way of sharing one's suffering in the context of faith and hope. When working with Serbian Orthodox priests from both sides of the Serbian/Bosnian border immediately after the Bosnian war, I heard and acknowledged the pain of losing family members during the war, including loss of life due to NATO bombing. I then traced the development of the lament motif into the time of the Old Testament prophets, demonstrating how Jeremiah and Isaiah added a call for confession of sin to their accounts of the suffering of their people. When challenged to apply this model of compassion coupled with self-examination, a deputy to the bishop recounted how a Serbian soldier who had given orders to massacre Muslim civilians had come to him in confession, a ritual performed in the front of the church during Orthodox liturgy. The deputy bishop then challenged all Serbian Orthodox priests to acknowledge the terribly destructive role their soldiers, their government and their church had played in the Bosnian War. This acknowledgment was then shared with Muslims from the region, an act that led to the development of an interfaith group that later performed many joint activities and established an inter-religious center in Belgrade. Among other inter-faith projects, the center later sponsored workshops for religious leaders and public educators to discuss how best to handle the teaching of religion in the schools. Presenting a call to confession as an integral part of Serbian Orthodox faith, and in the context of identifying with Serbian suffering, had enabled a faithful and courageous church leader to take very important steps on the path to reconciliation with other religious communities.

pain. How can one communicate to the other that one is seeking to understand? This must precede any attempt to accomplish anything else. The only approach that can succeed is one that, first, builds solidarity. In the case of religious fundamentalists, this means meeting them on their own terms and utilizing wisdom from their own traditions to engender hope. Within all religious traditions, there are elements of the tradition that can be used to stretch believer's perceptions. The challenge is to use their own frame of reference, then, to raise questions, pose alternative viewpoints, and help them to see a creative way to move beyond their sense of victimization.[6]

4. Identity as a chosen people with a mission

Religious fundamentalists see themselves as a chosen people, called to carry out a divine mission. In most cases, this mission includes support for conservative social stances that will preserve the values of the family/clan/tribe/faith tradition. Typically, the focus is on issues like sexuality, the role of women, and observance of religious customs. In the case of both the Serbian Orthodox and Shi'ite Muslims, this mission can be interpreted as justifying any action that is required in order to protect one's people or further promulgate the faith. The theology of Saint-Savaism in Serbian Orthodoxy permits the annihilation of anything that stands in the way of achieving "Heavenly Serbia." In Shi'ite Islam, the lesser Jihad can be used to legitimize war against the enemies of Islam. In each case violence can be legitimized only when injustice has been done. Given the sense of victimhood and humiliation that these societies experience, it is very easy for their people to justify the resort to violence. Typically, the loss, grief and anger experienced by one side leads to the creation of a mythology of heroes, villains, and the right interpretation of events. This is used, then to justify aggression against the other group. The cycle goes around again, each time involving more and more people in each group. Each group sees itself as the victim who is pursuing justice. To the other group, however, they are perceived as aggressors. To outsiders, it often looks like revenge, not justice, has become the predominant paradigm, fueled by a messiah complex. Again, any attempt by an outsider to address these issues must begin with understanding, empathy, a sense of solidarity with each group, and an ability to utilize the fundamentalist's own tradition to raise questions and pose alternative behaviors.

Effective Engagement with the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo

Despite the significant role played by the Kosovo myth to enflame ethnic hatred, there were those within the Serbian Orthodox Church leadership that warned against the rise of nationalist fanaticism. The most vigorous critique came from Hieromonk Sava Janjic, from the Monastery of Visoki Decani, and from Bishop Artemije of Raska-Prizren. According to Father Sava, nationalists talked about the Kosovo Covenant but failed to understand that the true believer would affirm the heavenly kingdom and heavenly virtues, but would not be deluded into believing that these can be achieved by means of violence or earthly power. In the end, Father Sava claimed that both Serbs and Albanians needed an "historical catharsis in which the ideas and the myths of the past would finally be left behind." Both Artemije and Sava took a clear stand against repression of Albanians by Milosevic's police, ethnic cleansing of any people by any armed group, and the destruction of any property, including mosques. Sava specifically accused Milosevic of exacerbating the crisis in Kosovo by refusing to introduce democratic reforms and by depriving Albanians of their political rights. Monks from the Decani Monastery also offered aid and refuge to displaced people of all ethnic groups. After the war, Sava advocated recognition of the atrocities committed by Serbian troops against the Albanian population.

A political advisor to Bishop Artemije, Aleksandar Vidojevic, also played a significant back channel role in the negotiation process before and during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999.

Vidojevic, a Belgrade based lawyer[7], worked with Landrum Bolling, an American Quaker, and with me, a United Church of Christ minister, on a brainstorming process that fed ideas into the very top levels of both Yugoslav and American governments. On the American side, we worked closely with the official at the State Department in charge of Kosovo, while Bishop Artemije's advisor worked closely with a Kosovo Serb who was part of Milosevic's inner circle. We spent much time exploring various forms of potential NATO troop deployment in Kosovo, looking for a framing that might be acceptable to Milosevic. These ideas were checked with the Yugoslav desk at the State department and with former U.S. Ambassador to NATO, Robert Hunter. With a clear indication that the emerging suggestions were negotiable, the proposals were then sent directly to Milosevic and to an American under secretary of state. Six weeks before the end of the war, during a weekend series of brainstorming sessions in Belgrade that included the official from Milosevic's government, we finally received word that Milosevic was willing to talk about allowing NATO troops into Kosovo. This back channel communication process never replaced the official negotiation process which was successfully completed by diplomats Viktor Chernomyrdin and Martti Ahtisarri. However, both American and Yugoslav Governments indicated that our efforts help to shorten the war.

Since the war, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo has continued to play both positive and negative roles. Bishop Artemije, after cooperating initially with the international community, soon began to resist cooperation with either the international community or the emerging Kosovo structures. During the war, his fear that the policies of the Milosevic regime would ultimately bring suffering to the Serbs, as had been the case in Bosnia and Croatia, led him to oppose those policies. However, when suffering did come to the Serbs following the war, his strong sense of Serbian victimization prohibited him from entering constructively into the process of creating a new multi-ethnic Kosovo. The Patriarchate in Belgrade, however, has removed Artemije from responsibility for any political activity and has appointed a new Bishop Teodosije from Decani to undertake this responsibility. During the past few months, Bishop Teodosije, together with Father Sava, has been in dialogue with the Kosovo Albanian politicians responsible for writing the Kosovo Albanian position on issues of cultural heritage during the Final Status Talks.

Effective Engagement with Shi'ite Muslims in Iraq

As with the Serbian Orthodox leadership in Kosovo, Iraqi Shi'ite leadership has also demonstrated a commitment to the de-escalation of conflict within that society. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has consistently called upon Shi'ites to reframe from violence and has been quietly attempting to aid communication between various political factions in the forming of an Iraqi Government. After the destruction of the Askariya mosque, Sistani sent instructions to his followers forbidding attacks on Sunni mosques. In response to his statement, even the Moqtada al-Sadr called upon the Mahdi Army to cease its attacks on Sunnis.

In addition to such efforts on the part of Shi'ite hierarchy, a number of devout provincial government leaders and other prominent community leaders from south central Iraq, including a few Sadrites, have been involved in negotiating the settlement of disputes within their regions. Since the beginning of January 2006, these local leaders have successfully negotiated a number of conflicts, including two ceasefires between armed groups, as well as various land disputes, disputes over petrol prices, conflict over the teaching of religion in schools, and disputes within various professional and work

7 Mr. Vidojevic had previously attended conflict resolution training seminars that I led for religious people in Serbia

contexts. The approach used has been a combination of local traditions, informed by Shi'ite and tribal customs, as well as techniques in relationship building and interest-based negotiation learned during two five-week training sessions which I led.[8] These local leaders are now requesting assistance in facilitating dialogue between them and counterparts within the Sunni community. According to these people, such efforts, supported by the best aspects of both their religious traditions and professional dispute resolution techniques, could help to de-escalate the spiraling violence within their country. Their stated goal is to help their people avoid civil war.

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Concluding Questions and Challenges

The way in which religios people understand and practice their faith can have an immens effect on the precipitation or resolution of conflict wihtin their societies. It can e used either to create destructive mythologies that reinforce stereo types or it can be utilized to re-humanize the enemy, respect their values, and to treat them with compassion. The main question then becomes: How to assist/ empower religious communities to be peace builders instead of conflict escalators.

In the absence of straight forward answers to this crucial question that can be applied to any one case, the questions below shall provide a starting point for reflection:

Primarily for international track I conflict mediators

1. Do the religious elements of conflict affect their amenability to mediation? If so, how?

2. If the world is flat, as stated by Thomas Friedman, how does it effect the way you would relate to religious groups in a society in which you are conducting a negotiation? Should religious beliefs and values be allowed to influence the particular structures of government that develop in very religious societies? Or should separation of religion and state be strictly observed? Is the relationship of the West to all religious groups the same? Or is there a unique kind of tension with certain parts of political Islam?

3. How can the Western secularist meaningfully engage religious fundamentalists as equals? How to avoid an attitude of superiority when engaging them? What common concerns might there be? How would you attempt to build solidarity with those coming from a religious culture of victimization? or one dominated by a sense of humiliation? or one driving a very conservative social agenda that denies rights to freedoms that are typically guaranteed in Western democracies? What parts of your own belief system will be hardest for a religious fundamentalist to accept? How can you present yourself in a way that will help the other to relate to you?

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8 The advisor for tribal affairs to the Governor of Maysan Province was sent to negotiate a ceasefire between two families from the tribe of Nawafil in Al Uzair. The pitched battle occurred due to a conflict over a contract given to a family from another village to build a new police station. The non-resident family came to begin construction and a resident family attacked them. The governor's advisor, who had attended negotiation training that I led, took with him the leader of the Abomuhammed tribe, one of the largest in the province. During the negotiations, the interveners informed the parties that Islam did not allow for such disputes to be resolved by violence. They also utilized skills that the governor's advisor learned at the negotiation training. They assisted the parties to examine the interests behind the positions on each side and to explore various options for settling the dispute. They helped the parties to communicate better by demonstrating skills in listening and inquiry. Finally, the ceasefire was agreed and the conflict was settled by use of a traditional tribal custom of monetary reparation. As part of the agreement, the non-resident family agreed to leave on condition that they will be paid 20% of the original contract and the resident family agreed to pay an obligation to the other family.

4. What does the practice of track 1, third-party mediation have to offer contemporary conflicts in which fundamentalist religion plays a significant role? What does track 1 need to learn in order to play a constructive role in this kind of conflict? What do religiously motivated mediators have to offer that is attractive? Can track 1 and track 2 (when performed by religious communities) work effectively together? If so, how? What are the benefits? the pitfalls? What would an effective mixed, or sequential, approach look like?

5. What is the relationship between religiously inspired conflicts and the war on terror? What are the implications for the practice of conflict resolution?

Primarily for religious leaders and organizations

1. How would you assist/empower religious communities to be peace-builders instead of conflict escalators? How would you help a faith community to navigate this tension between the call to "truth" and the call to "love?"

2. What approach would you use to help a society, divided by religious/secular differences to build cohesive values or consensual norms?