

**WHAT IS THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN BUILDING PEACE?**  
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When I first saw the topic I had been given, I naturally assumed that I would be given 2-3 hours to cover the subject. However, I find that I only have 5-7 minutes, which means all I can do is to raise a few issues for your consideration.

The obvious answer to the title question is that all religions have common beliefs and common values which we can bring us together to help work for peace. One positive aspect of the cartoons (both of Muhammad and of the Virgin Mary) was the way different faiths supported each other. I know that the Muslim community very much appreciated the support from Catholics, the Jewish community, Sikhs, Quakers and others. We were also keen to support the Catholic community and to express our own disappointment at the broadcast of the South Park episode.

However, even though we have much in common, there is no doubt that almost every religion has some history of violence and conflict. The question we really need to ask then is: what is it about religion that causes people to commit acts of violence? Until we can understand this, we can not adequately determine the role of religion in building peace.

Those without faith often level the accusation at us that religion is the greatest cause of violence. I expect most of you will agree that the root cause of most conflicts is not religion, but rather underlying issues of wealth, land or resources. Yet religion has often been used as a tool to motivate the masses towards conflict. Therefore, we need to rephrase the question: what is it about religion that allows it to be used as a motivating factor for violence and war? What is it that would cause a person to go against the strong natural instinct of self-preservation, to kill and be killed?

Below are some of my thoughts on possible answers, as well how I see religion playing a role in overcoming these problems.

The first aspect is the need humans have to do good and to be good. Call me foolishly optimistic, but I believe that all people are intrinsically good. Even when they do things that are wrong or make mistakes, they still have the capacity to be good and have a strong inclination towards doing good. Religion is a way to appeal to the need for good.

Religion provides us with the notion of sacrifice – the need to give something up in order to help others. We sacrifice to protect or defend those values or persons who are precious to us. The ultimate sacrifice is to give one's life for a noble cause. Thus the act of violence becomes an act of nobility.

The role of religion in overcoming this tendency to violence is to emphasise that there is more to sacrifice than violence. The greater sacrifice is when one gives up the desire for revenge and retaliation. There is greater sacrifice in forgiveness and giving up your rights, even when

you know you have been wronged. This is a value that is common to all faiths – all creeds place a high value on forgiveness over revenge.

The second factor that allows religion to be used as a motivating factor towards violence is the certainty most religions give that only their way is right, that only their followers are on the truly guided path, and therefore truly good. The flip side to this, of course, is that the other is inherently wrong and therefore evil. This notion is exacerbated by fear, ignorance and deliberate misrepresentation drummed up by those with political agendas.

It seems silly to say that we should never fight evil with violence. Take, for example, the Nazi regime which was surely wrong and had to be stopped. Surely the only option was an armed conflict? The answer of course is that the fight should have begun long before, by stopping vilification not just of a faith group (the Jewish community) but other minorities as well.

The role of religion in this context is to bring out the value we all have for God's creations. I can only speak confidently from my own faith background, but I'm sure each faith has something similar. Muslims believe that the love God has for each of his creations is seventy times the love that a mother has for her child. Another tradition states that God gave one seventieth of his mercy to the world, and kept the rest for Himself. In other words, all the mercy that has been shown by any person from the beginning to the end of life on this planet amounts to one seventieth of God's mercy\*.

Therefore, if we profess to love God, then we must love each of his creations, animate and inanimate. I go back to what Jean Holm said last night: that we must show sympathy, understanding and respect when dealing with those of other faiths. While we may continue to disagree with them, while we may seek to change their views through missionary work, while we may keep the belief that only we are truly guided, yet still we should foster that love, respect and understanding that would never allow us to commit violence towards any group.

A final comment on the role of religions in building peace is the fact that religions have the ability to reach large numbers of people, due to the tendency of people of faith to congregate. We find that messages in mainstream media serve to publicise the views of and activities of extremists. The moderate voice tends not to be newsworthy, after all. It is an ordinary, every-day message that tends not to create headlines. Therefore, a role of religions is to use our ability to reach large numbers to provide an alternative message.

These were a few of my thoughts, and I believe that I really have not been able to do justice to the topic that I have been given. We know there is more that can be done, more that must be done. I would urge each and every one of you to continue to strive in your own way, to keep making an effort no matter how small. I believe that God does not allow even the smallest amount of effort to be wasted. So please continue to strive. Our future depends on it.

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\* In the Arabic language the number seventy is often a symbol for "a whole lot" or "more than can be counted".