Conference Report and Final Statement of the Workshop on Religious Dimensions of Peacemaking

On 10-11 July 2025, the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, in partnership with the University of Notre Dame (Keough School of Global Affairs) and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), hosted a workshop on Religious Dimensions of Peacemaking in the Casina Pio IV, Vatican City. The conference sought to explore academic- and practitioner-based perspectives on religious aspects of peacemaking, bringing together professionals from around the world and from a variety of institutions and traditions, both secular and religious in nature. In the current moment where the global political landscape is ever more multipolar and conflicts continue to rage, it is vital to seriously explore the role of religion and religious actors in modern conflict dynamics, and most importantly, in peacemaking.

The gathering began with a discussion on the theoretical frameworks surrounding peace and peacemaking and then featured substantive sessions on peace diplomacy of the Holy See, secular mediation in conflicts with religious dimensions, religious dimensions of peacemaking, faith-based peace initiatives on the ground, interfaith peace initiatives and networks. Participants were careful to differentiate between religious peacemakers, namely actors who engage in peacemaking by virtue of their formal religious roles, and, by contrast, actors who have a secular identity while peacemaking (e.g., UN mediators) – although it was recognized that these categories sometimes overlap. Religious actors can occasionally assume secular roles while secular mediators will often have religious convictions that inform their peacemaking activity. In addition, the conference participants distinguished between *inter*- and *intra*religious conflicts; and similarly between conflicts informed by religious identities and conflicts over religious practices or

sites.

The key takeaways from the conference are as follows:

- Secular and religious peacemakers have much in common, not least their shared commitment to preventing and ending violent conflict. But there are also differences in their respective mandates, authority, strategies, resources, and relationships with the conflict parties. This highlights the need for religious and secular peacemakers to be in conversation with each other, both in specific conflicts and at a more general level. As demonstrated at our conference, these conversations enable mutual learning and enhance cooperation.
- More specifically, secular peacemakers would benefit from acquiring greater religious literacy so that they appreciate more deeply the ways in which the spiritual and theological convictions of conflict parties shape the conflict dynamics and the potential for conflict resolution. If secular peacemakers fail to understand these views and are deliberately or unintentionally dismissive of religion, they will often struggle to win the trust of the parties.
- For their part, religious mediators would often benefit from greater proficiency in the specialist skills and techniques that the United Nations and other secular mediating organizations have developed over the past two decades. Religious peacemakers would also benefit from emulating the international mediation community's emphasis on building institutional capacity through specialist training, expert knowledge, best practice research, dedicated resources and mediation support units. This institutional capacity equips peacemakers to undertake long-term, professional and sustainable engagements.
- The quality of peacemaking would be enriched if religious and secular peacemakers collaborate more closely in the field, combining their respective strengths and compensating for their respective limitations. Such collaboration, along with an appropriate division of labor, would be synergistic and increase the prospects for success

"Religious" dimensions of conflict and peacemaking are defined varyingly, as well as "secular" and "religious" identities of actors.

Conflicts that are deemed to be "religious" do not always center on theological ideas (doctrinal commitments) but can be equally concerned with ethnic and social identities, as well as historical narratives. Similarly, actors termed "religious" may not always act from their religious roles alone: they may also have political, military, ethnic, and/or other identities that are inextricable yet distinct from their religious identities. Certain actors may not be "representative" enough of the communities they are thought to represent, and in fact may be controversial for certain members of those communities. Likewise, secular peacemakers may also have personal religious commitments that can complicate negotiations, especially if there is an assumption that a secular peacemaker is "more neutral" than a religious one. The religious identities of each actor take on quite diverse characteristics - mediators would do well to reflect on their own commitments insofar as far as these may clash with the priorities of the institutions they represent. Despite these porous boundaries between the "secular" and "religious", the binary is still useful for organizing reflection

on how best to carry out activities of peacemaking.

The world of peacemaking is changing rapidly, and it is essential for the world to respond in new ways.

The international mediation landscape today has become far more transactional than it was ten or twenty years ago. This creates challenges for religiously-affiliated peacemakers. Today, their approach and language is not always valued as in the past when ethical norms had higher currency. Nonetheless, there is an opportunity in this moment to invert the modern western liberal approach to peacemaking by drawing upon religious traditions (east, west, and south) to create a more global, sustainable vision of peace. Religious leaders and communities can offer valuable resources for building momentum toward peace in a world beset by seemingly intractable conflicts.

There can be a fundamental difference in the way secular and religious actors understand and play the role of a mediator.

Secular and religious mediators may approach conflict contexts from entirely different backgrounds and play differing roles within the mediation process. Secular mediators, especially under the auspices of the United Nations, are expected to be impartial and professional. They are mostly outsiders to the context and there may be a great cultural distance between the mediator and the conflict they are mediating. Yet religion and culture are often inextricable, and secular mediators need greater education and literacy on both. By contrast, religious actors may not be professional mediators; they may simply enjoy the trust of the parties and thereby be called on to mediate. On some occasions, they are embedded in the conflict context and may not be impartial: they likely have deep interest towards the resolution of the conflict, which may make them perceived to be partial by certain actors. They may have been involved in the conflict long before it erupted into violence, while the secular mediator would have only been called upon to seek an end to violence. Consequently, also, secular mediators are usually tasked with ensuring negative peace, or an end to the physical violence. An embedded religious actor may be more equipped to continue to pursue positive peace, which entails social justice, and reconciliation of hearts. Additionally, the question of values needs to be addressed: secular values are often viewed as mutable, while sacred values as absolute: in reality, both may be negotiable, but this is context-specific and merits deep consideration within each mediation process and throughout the broader literature.

Institutionalized religions have a responsibility and opportunity to bolster peacemaking efforts internally and externally.

Religious institutions have great potential and responsibility to bolster their peacemaking efforts internal to their own traditions. Some religious actors indeed perpetuate harm and violence; often the responsibility to respond lies primarily with the other members of the same tradition. Intrafaith

peace engagements are therefore paramount and often much more difficult than interfaith action between likeminded groups. Internally, religious institutions must engage responsibly with theological positions that may promote extremism, and in response disseminate teachings that are apt to heal not exacerbate divisions. In this regard, the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* is exemplary. Similarly, religious leaders should also address concepts of international human rights law and the dignity of persons from within their own traditions. Religious adherents and believers of all kinds often make up the "4th party" in peacemaking negotiations. They may not be at the negotiation table yet can nonetheless exercise enormous influence on the results, for good and bad. Religiously motivated "spoilers" remain an ever- present danger: religious leaders need to engage with potential spoilers, using religious concepts to encourage action in the line of peace and justice.

Externally, religious traditions also have a great deal to offer to secular mediators and to the world at large. Religiously affiliated actors often enjoy the trust of belligerent parties and have access to parties that secular mediators, especially outsiders to the context, do not; this is a crucial position that can help to foster a successful mediation process between all parties. Religious actors, through their proximity to communities, can also highlight the effects of conflict on victims: bringing victims' voices to the fore can not only shine light on the truth of the crimes perpetrated, but can also create a vision for the way forward. Religious frameworks can provide sources of inspiration and moral imagination regarding how positive peace and healthy societies can be envisioned and created. The Catholic Church, especially, a long history of diplomacy and peacemaking, and is a impactful, trusted actor in many conflict contexts and at high diplomatic levels due to its moral authority. It has great potential to mediate high-level conflicts and engender trust and inclusivity in the negotiation process due to its presence within all levels of society, from local to global.

The role of emotions in peacemaking is often discounted; religion offers roads toward engaging more deeply.

One area in which religious and secular actors differ greatly in their approach to the role of emotions in peacemaking. Emotional reasoning drives conflict motivations often just as much as rational or political motivations. Mediators need to be equipped to address the strong emotional reactions – often arising from pain, sense of victimhood, anger at perceived injustice, etc. that parties to a conflict carry with them. There is a need, in other words, to speak to the heart and not only the head. Secular mediators can struggle with this emotional side of mediating, while their religious counterparts – who draw on practices of spirituality – are often better equipped confront this emotional dimension head on, and can in fact facilitate spaces for healing within the context of peacemaking. In this respect, the former can benefit from the example and guidance of the latter.

The role of women and youth in religious and secular peacemaking spaces merits greater advancement.

No conversation regarding the religious dimensions of peacemaking is complete without addressing youth, as well as the gendered aspects of conflict. Women suffer disproportionately in conflict contexts and are underrepresented at negotiation tables, even though research shows that when women are involved, peace agreements are much more likely to be implemented. On top of this, women are very effective leaders in negotiations, but they are not often asked to do so: in other words, there is a difference between women's involvement in peacemaking and their assumption of leadership roles. Additionally, women of faith are not often called upon in negotiations with religious dimensions, since in such settings there is a desire to involve religious leaders (i.e., people with formal roles within their faith communities), and these often turn out to be men. Nonetheless, women of faith, and women religious leaders, have strengths ought to be leveraged in peacemaking contexts. Youth are also greatly undervalued in their potential contribution to peacemaking and are often viewed as sources of conflict. Religious actors could be more effective in reaching out to youth, whether they are radicalized or peacebuilders, to gain their trust and engage them as partners. Finally, in contexts where religion does play a significant role in the history of the conflict, the gendered aspects of religious dynamics and how they affect people of all identities must be studied and considered more carefully in negotiations.

Interfaith, intrafaith, and multifaith actions are each different, difficult, and needed.

Intrafaith efforts are much more difficult to pursue than interfaith, since the gap between believers who support peace and those who do not can be far greater than peace-minded believers of differing faiths. Yet, when religious actors from the same faith, whether within a context or across regions and classes, can mount a coordinated campaign for peace, they can be very effective. Individual religions have a great responsibility to form and engage with their own members towards peace, similar to what is typically done vis-à-vis members of other religious traditions. By contrast, interfaith work is often the most common type of religious peacemaking action that is funded by external actors, and these spaces can be extremely vital to build consensus and momentum towards peace in an active process. Yet it is not always efficacious, and often programming is created with the goal of gaining more funding. Large institutional religions do not often participate in interfaith work initiated by other religious actors, as they lead their own interfaith action, which creates siloes. Multifaith work, where no one religion constitutes a majority, is not as common and could provide essential spaces where all religions are on equal footing. Multifaith work also has the potential to benefit intrafaith efforts.

Continued exchange between "secular" and "religious" actors is paramount.

Looking forward, enhanced exchanges between secular and religious actors in peacemaking would be highly beneficial. Secular mediators would gain increased understanding of and empathy with religious lived experience; this can enable them to see how religion is not just a driver of conflict but a potential ally in peacemaking. Similarly, from such interactions, religious actors could learn about the best practices that have emerged within the secular mediation community over the

last 20 years. Exchanges between the two groups could be mutually initiated, thereby supporting processes of mutual learning. Greater understanding of contrasting vocabularies used by all actors would be essential, as well as the methods by which to translate these vocabularies into action.

At the close of the conference, PASS announced an upcoming series of workshops drawing upon the themes discussed in the week's gathering, entitled "Pathways to Peace: Moral Dimensions and Institutional Expressions of the Social Virtues". Topics include trust, truth, and social bonds; religion, peace, and conflict; divisions within nations and social bonds; leadership, ethics, and statecraft; technological threats to peace (nuclear, AI, cyber, biological); peace and global governance. This series will take place over 2026-2027.

Melinda Davis, Notre Dame University
Laurie Nathan, Notre Dame University
Gregory M. Reichberg, Peace Research Institute Oslo
Sr. Helen Alford, PASS President

Final Statement

Much attention has been directed over the last years to the negative image of religious actors as fomenters and drivers of conflict. While this cannot be denied, it must also be recognized that faith leaders have exercised beneficial roles in diffusing conflict. Such engagements are imperative in today's world. The late Ayatollah Sistani of Iraq, for instance, deserves much credit for taking effective outreach to stem the religious and ethnic strife that had beset his country over many years. In Colombia, the Catholic Church has made a valuable contribution in leading and supporting peace negotiations between the government and rebels. Catholic mediators have similarly undertaken mediations in Mozambique and South Sudan.

Faith leaders bring unique credentials to peace mediations. They often enjoy the trust of the opposing sides and may have access to spoilers and other conflict parties that secular mediators, especially outsiders to conflicts with religious dynamics (over sacred sites, for instance), do not.

Through their proximity to local communities, religious peacemakers can impactfully articulate the effects of conflict on victims: bringing victims' voices to the fore will not only shine light on crimes perpetrated but can also create a vision for the way forward. Religious frameworks can provide sources of inspiration and moral imagination regarding how healthy societies can be envisioned and created. As 'doctors of the soul', religious leaders have fluency in the emotional side of peacemaking, enabling them to facilitate spaces for healing within peace processes.

Secular mediators, including the United Nations and state mediators (such as Switzerland and Norway) increasingly realize that they would benefit from greater religious literacy, enabling them

to appreciate more deeply the ways in which the spiritual and theological convictions of conflict parties shape the conflict dynamics and the potential for conflict resolution. If secular peacemakers fail to understand these views and are deliberately or unintentionally dismissive of religion, they will struggle to win the trust of the parties.

On the other hand, the UN and other secular mediators have benefited tremendously over the last twenty years from an investment in developing institutional capacities for mediation. This includes accrual of expert knowledge, research into best practices, dedicated resources and mediation support units, all of which ensure long-term, professional, and sustainable engagement in peace processes.

Religious leaders, by contrast, often find themselves drawn into mediation roles without being conversant in the body of expert knowledge that has developed in this domain. They would benefit from increased awareness of the specialist skills possessed by secular mediators, and ideally from acquiring these skills themselves. This would enable religious mediators to act with greater confidence and discernment in settings where the challenges are many and progress is a matter of life and death for communities in conflict.

In short, the two groups of mediators have much to gain from sustained interaction with each other.

Gregory M. Reichberg, Peace Research Institute Oslo
Laurie Nathan, Notre Dame University
Sr. Helen Alford, PASS President

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