Religion, Peace, and Conflict

Pathways to Peace Program

Throughout history and into the present, many of the world's major conflicts have engaged religion. The marshalling of religious conviction to motivate violence is the property of no single faith: it recurs across traditions and regions. In the West, the intertwining of religious conviction and violent mobilization has a long history, from the medieval Crusades to the European Wars of Religion and including twentieth-century conflicts such as the Spanish Civil War and the Cristero Rebellion. Beyond the West, religion has been entangled with conflict in many forms — in the Hindu–Muslim violence that accompanied the partition of South Asia, in Buddhist–Muslim violence in parts of South and Southeast Asia, and in the long rivalry between Sunni and Shia currents within Islam itself. It was to sideline the violent potential of religion that seminal authors in modernity (including Hobbes, Grotius, Locke, and Voltaire) sought in varying ways to insulate public political life from overt appeals to scripturally-grounded ("revealed") belief. In this way secularity was proposed as a pathway to peace.

Alongside these narratives of militancy stand contrasting — and equally ancient — narratives of religion as a source of peace. Peace is a theme of central importance in the scriptures of all the great traditions. In the Hebrew Bible the prophet Isaiah envisions the nations beating their swords into plowshares, and greets one another with *shalom*; in Christianity Jesus is called the "Prince of Peace" (following Isaiah 9:6); in Islam the very greeting is one of peace (*salaam*), and the Qur'an exalts reconciliation and mercy; the Buddha taught *ahimsa*, non-harming, a principle shared with the Hindu and Jain traditions from which Gandhi drew his philosophy of non-violence. Because the word "peace" has multiple meanings (inner/spiritual, inter-personal, eschatological, security from

harm, etc.), it can be difficult to discern what the social and political implications of these peace affirmations will be in each instance. Moreover, these traditions allow for the use of force in some settings, e.g., for policing, defense of the polity against external threats, or for other rationales such as protection of believers from forced conversion or blasphemy. Hence religious calls to peace should not be equated, purely and simply, with advocacy of non-violence, although admittedly some exponents present their traditions in this way.

While a constant within Christianity (Jesus has traditionally been called the "Prince of Peace" – following Isaiah 9:6), peace within and between polities has become a major theme for recent popes. Peace was a centerpiece of Pope Francis's encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, and Leo has placed peace at the heart of his papacy. While the personal dimensions of ("inner") peace receive mention, the accent is most frequently put on the social dimensions of peace, as in his recent address to the diplomatic corps represented at the Holy See. Referring to St. Augustine's *City of God*, Pope Leo emphasizes how achieving peace in this "temporal" world has, for precondition, an openness to spiritual values and the transcendent God:

While Saint Augustine highlights the coexistence of the heavenly and earthly cities until the end of time, our era seems somewhat inclined to deny the city of God its "right of citizenship." It seems that only the earthly city exists, enclosed exclusively within its borders. Seeking only immanent goods undermines that "tranquility of order," which, for Augustine, constitutes the very essence of peace, which concerns society and nations as much as the human soul itself, and is essential for any civil coexistence. …

This coming October will mark the eighth century of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi, a man of peace and dialogue, universally recognized even by those who do not belong to the Catholic Church. His life shines brightly, for it was inspired by the courage to live in truth, and the knowledge that a peaceful world is built starting with humble hearts turned towards the heavenly city.[1]

Thus, far from standing as an impediment to peace, religion (well understood) can be a sure foundation of peace in this our "earthly city." The whole tenor of Leo's comment is not one of pessimism but of a disciplined hope that, by our human efforts and with God's help, "peace remains a difficult yet realistic good." How this vision of a peaceful society, open to the Transcendent, can be implemented in today's pluralistic societies, which depend on multiple secular institutions, calls for sustained reflection.

Increasingly, these appeals to peace have been made in partnership across faiths. In 2019 Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, signed in Abu Dhabi the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, a landmark of Catholic–Muslim cooperation; Pope Leo has continued this path of fraternity in dialogue with Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious leaders. Such joint witness — by popes and grand imams, chief

rabbis, Orthodox patriarchs, and Buddhist and Hindu teachers — testifies that the world's faiths, for all their genuine differences, share a vocation to peace. The prophetic voices of Isaiah, Jesus, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Buddha have each, in their own idiom, summoned humanity away from violence.

Pope Leo has given this conviction powerful expression. In *Magnifica Humanitas* he writes:

In rejecting the mindset of violence, interreligious dialogue plays a decisive role, because at the heart of the great spiritual paths lies a message of peace. Whereas those who use the name of God to legitimize terrorism, violence or war betray his true nature, for to fight in the name of religion means attacking religion itself.[2]

Pope Benedict summed up one influential approach when he encouraged "nonbelievers… to live as though God existed:"

Even if they do not have the strength to believe, they should live on the basis of this hypothesis; otherwise, the world cannot work. There are so many problems that must be resolved, but that cannot ever happen if God is not at the center, if God does not become visible once again in the world and determining in our lives. Whoever opens himself to God does not alienate himself from the world and from mankind but finds brothers: in God our walls of separation fall, we are all brothers and sisters, we are part of one another.[3]

In sum, history shows that religion and politics can cooperate for the human good, but can also conflict with each other, depending on how this good is conceived. Following a tradition of political thought that goes back to the seventeenth century, politics is very often practiced "as if God did not exist" (Grotius), not so much because of actual unbelief, but to avoid conflict around religious beliefs. This thesis — that the privatization of belief serves to advance peaceful coexistence — should be critically examined. While modern Europe shared a sense that even in the absence of a common faith, basic moral truths contained in "natural moral law" could sustain political life, many today are skeptical in that regard. As a result, identifying a shared foundation to advance peace remains elusive, and societies East, West, and South tend to oscillate between the extremes of religious fundamentalism and moral relativism. In the absence of a moral compass, political action risks becoming little more than a strategy to preserve and increase power, even at the cost of peace.

Religion weaponized — and reclaimed

If faith can be a wellspring of peace, it is also vulnerable to weaponization. Every tradition — without exception — can be enlisted for violence when it is bent through and demagoguery : when a complex theology is flattened into a banner of identity, when grievance is sacralized, and when political entrepreneurs invoke the sacred to mobilize one community against another. Religions

are, moreover, internally plural — they contain diverse traditions, schools, and even theologies — and this internal diversity is itself sometimes the fault line of conflict, as in struggles among rival currents within any of the great faiths. Understanding how religion is weaponized, and how it can be reclaimed for reconciliation, is central to this workshop.

This workshop will explore the enormous complexities of religion and war, and of religion and peace, both historically and in the present. We, the organizers, welcome papers discussing the historical, sociological, legal, theological, and regional aspects of the religion–peace–conflict nexus, from within and across different traditions of thought.

[1] Pope Leo XIV, Address to the Diplomatic Corps (9 January 2026); emphasis added.

[2] Pope Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, no. 223.

[3] Benedict XVI, Message to participants in the “Court of the Gentiles” Meeting in Portugal [Guimarães, 16–17 November 2012] (13 November 2012).