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## Mediation and faith

### Not a sword, but peace

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#### In some cases, only the religious have the patience to be reconcilers

WHEN George Bush visited Rome last year, he wanted to see everybody who mattered in world affairs: Pope Benedict, the leaders of Italy—and members of the Sant'Egidio community.



**Tumbling barriers: George Carey and Yasser Arafat**

Started by a high-school student in 1968, this Roman Catholic fellowship now has 60,000 members in 70 countries. Its founding ideals were prayer, mission and solidarity with the poor. But it has also become the leading player in a crowded sector, that of faith-based peacemaking.

Helping warring parties (who may or may not profess a religion) to come together is not quite the same as inter-faith dialogue, though the two things can overlap. Faith-based mediation often involves putting to work in hard secular places the virtues that at least some religious people possess (discretion, modesty, empathy, a non-judgmental cast of mind, an ability to overcome cultural barriers).

Since the early 1990s, Sant'Egidio mediators have helped broker deals in places like Mozambique, Guatemala, Kosovo and, most recently, Côte d'Ivoire. Africa and Latin America are the main fields that Christian peacemakers plough. What many world leaders want to know is whether such groups bring anything unique to the business of reconciliation.

According to Mario Giro, Sant'Egidio's head of international affairs: "What really makes the difference is neutrality, impartiality...and the ability to bring in outside powers as guarantors of an eventual deal." He feels faith-based bodies know more about the grassroots reality of a situation because of their contacts with local religious figures, be they priests, imams or missionaries. "And all the more so if they are involved in inter-religious dialogue."

Sant'Egidio's mediators are not the only faith-based go-betweens to have done well. Vatican diplomats have mediated between governments and rebels in several African nations, notably Burundi, where the Holy See's man, Michael Courtney, was killed in 2003 at a time when he was deeply involved in peace work.

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations found 27 Christian, Muslim and multi-faith peace groups to look at for a study issued in 2005. Their strengths, it reported, included "long-term commitment, long-term presence on the ground, moral and spiritual authority, and a niche to mobilise others for peace". But there were weaknesses, such as "a lack of focus on results and a possible lack of professionalism". A further risk, the institute said, was that the impulse to proselytise would obstruct the search for peace.

Peacemaking by Christian evangelicals in south Sudan seems to have been mired at times by an unhappy mix of missionary work and mediation. That is a qualification to the view, set out in a 2001 report from the Congressionally-funded United States Institute of Peace, that "faith-based organisations have a special role to play in zones of religious conflict." In the Middle East, any progress has stemmed from secular initiatives. But that, says Sharon Rosen, could be a reason why progress is so scant.

The trick in all peacemaking is to find new commonalities, says Ms Rosen, an adviser to Search for Common Ground, a non-government body dedicated to conflict resolution and prevention. Its Jerusalem offices will soon host the secretariat of a Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, set up last year: members include the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, representatives of the *sharia* court of Palestine and the Christian patriarchates. One aim is to build mutual respect in a way that will assist more conventional peacemaking by diplomats and politicians. "I do not believe that inter-faith dialogue will bring about peace in the Middle East," says Ms Rosen. "But I do believe that it is essential if peace is to be brought about. To ignore religion is a very grave mistake and I think the Oslo accords made that mistake."

Her husband, Rabbi David Rosen, co-signed an ambitious effort to correct that error: the Alexandria declaration of January 2002, in which rabbis, muftis and top Christians, including George Carey, then Archbishop of Canterbury, agreed that the "holy land" was too sacred to be sullied by blood. Perhaps the best thing about such idealistic initiatives is that they create human networks of trust that come into play (often secretly) in crises—such as the siege of Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity in May 2002. The right sort of religious peace-broking is really vital if the dispute itself has to do with religion.

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