

# Religion, Culture, and Interpretations of Democracy: Implications for Peacebuilding

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**Speakers:**

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The final meeting of the three-part series on democracy and conflict reflected on the influence of religion and culture on interpretations of democracy around the world and the implications for peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Political parties, civil society actors, church leaders, as well as western governments and donors are all participating in the process of building and maintaining democracies in post-conflict settings. Religious and cultural factors play a specific role in the perception and development of democratic institutions in different parts of the world as well as their relationship with sustainable peace.

## **Religion and Culture's relationship to Democracy**

How does religion look at democracy and where is the cross-over between the two? Democracy, the panel noted, involves agency and empowering individuals. Religion, on the other hand, does not entirely embody individualistic notions. There is even a history of the Catholic Church supporting non-democratic institutions and excluding certain groups. The cross over between religion and democratic institutions lies more in the space of community wellbeing. Common ground can be found where religious heritage, human rights, and democratic self-realization exist in the community, which then can present an opportunity for programmatic intervention.

In Latin America, the Catholic Church has been a strong actor in helping the poor. Evangelicals and Mormons are also gaining space in Latin America. One example is by the growing amount these actors are engaging the needs of communities.

In Southeast Asia, Buddhism is self-excluded from politics. As a course of their religious beliefs, Buddhist try not to engage in the self-interest, power relations of national and local politics. Buddhism is about being present in moment and the right actions in the now. Thus, working toward longer-term issues can be difficult for Buddhist. Nevertheless, Buddhist in Southeast Asia are involved in engagement with the community and giving guidance, but not in the way that political actors typically operate.

It was noted that there is a need to engage with non-Abrahamic faiths, such as indigenous practices. There is a great deal of focus on the healing aspects within these practices, both with individual and community relations. A growing connection between indigenous and Catholics is developing in Latin America. These connections not only bring faiths closer together, but helping resolve conflicts within the community.

### **Challenges with Religion and Democratic values**

The history of behavior, both past and present, on behalf of religion has not displayed a positive trend. In this debate, however, there indeed needs to be a distinction between organized religion and religious values. Religious values can be contradictory. For instance, human rights values are often based on religious text, however conversely some religious text also violate the rights of women. As a common ground with many modern democracies, the Bible sets out separations of power and presents mistrust in too much power in one person.

One concern involves how religion has become a tool for highly secular government institutions for fighting for land and other tensions, for example the Israeli-Palestine conflict. As a way forward, one panelist insisted that religious and governmental institutions be self-critical and reflective on their role and influence in conflict settings.

With respect to the role of religion and culture in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, local religious and cultural actors must be consulted in order to best understand both the multifaceted aspects of the conflict situation and the religious and cultural environment on the ground that will help shape an intervention best suited to resolve conflicts. Peacebuilders and interventionist often frame the conflict before asking the locals their perspectives.

Finally, in conflict analysis, practitioners must take into account motives and specifically the variety of religious motives at stake in each conflict situation. Thus, planning an intervention can be different when engaging with community leaders, institutions or members of the faithful.

### **Religion, Democracy, and Building Peace**

The limitations of peacebuilding are it's deepen belief in democratic values. This, the panelist pointed out, creates self-serving civil-society groups and does not help the community and worse

yet, the community rejects the work of peacebuilders. Tensions often grow from these limitations and exportation of democratic values. Cultural and religious values can be contradictory to democratic values and when peacebuilders tell a local community to change 1,000 year old traditions, the intervention can experience push-back.

As one example of positive practices, peacebuilding can start its training with a prayer. Peacebuilders cannot simply brush religion aside, because it is already present in the situation and must be addressed in whatever context. Peacebuilding can also commit to better training; empower capacity building of local communities and leaders. Peacebuilding can be attached to government secularist or local partners.

When designing democracy interventions, we need to keep in mind that religious institutions and actors have a variety of motives. The system of democracy involves a multitude of areas involving religious and cultural actors to work in, including elections, rule of law, free market economies, security, governance, and civil participation.