

This article was originally published as “Religion and Genocide Studies” in *The Ecumenist: A Journal of Theology, Culture, and Society* volume 45, no. 1 (Winter 2008). It discusses the constructive role that religious leaders and organizations can play in different aspects of preventing genocide.

Shake Hands with God: Engaging Religion in the Prevention of Genocide
by Christopher Tuckwood

Introduction

The language of the discourse on genocide is often religious. Nowhere was this more apparent than at the opening ceremonies of the Global Conference on the Prevention of Genocide at McGill University from 11-13 October 2007. During his introductory remarks, Payam Akhavan, associate professor of law at McGill, constantly invoked the idea of “sacrifices” made to “evil,” as though it were an independent and active force in the world. Indeed, the conference sought to honour the millions of people who “became victims of genocide on the altar of political tyranny” in the last century. This happened, he said, because of humanity’s failure to uphold its “righteous declarations and pious aspirations to respect the fundamental principles of the UN Charter.”¹ Others echoed Akhavan’s sentiments using a similarly religious lexicon.

Although religious terminology might seem out-of-place in an academic environment, participants returned to it throughout the conference. Perhaps even the very secular-minded find religious vocabulary to be uniquely equipped for discussing the sort of transcendent evil that in former times was only attributed to supernatural influence. While genocide, considered the crime of crimes, only achieved its present form in the twentieth century, theologians, prophets, and philosophers have been discussing the notion of ultimate evil for millennia.

For all of the religious vocabulary, however, there was not a single religious leader or thinker present to speak on the role of religion in either the perpetration or prevention of genocide. Those who spoke throughout the two days of panels represented many of the top minds in the global genocide prevention community. They represented many different fields: scholars, soldiers, politicians, diplomats, United Nations officials and international lawyers. However, representatives of the world’s religious communities were not invited. This is all the more remarkable because of the various links between religion and genocide. Historically, genocide has often been encouraged in the name of religion; religious groups have been targeted for extermination; and a small minority of people has actively opposed mass atrocities because of their religious values. In light of this, it is surprising that a serious conference on genocide prevention such as that in Montreal would almost completely ignore religion outside of rhetorical clichés and a few passing references in formal discussion.

The idea of engaging religious leaders and organizations in order to resist the spread of genocide has been ignored by those working in the growing field of genocide prevention. This idea, however, has threefold potential. First, religious leaders in powerful countries that are capable of safe-guarding human rights on an international

¹ Akhavan, Payam. Opening address of the Global Conference on Genocide Prevention, McGill University, Montreal, 11 October 2007.

scale can draw international attention to human rights abuses and genocidal violence. They can also work through their congregations to mobilize domestic political pressure in favour of prevention and intervention initiatives. Second, religious leaders and groups can confront their own past roles in human rights abuses and then push for the same action from secular institutions in their societies. Third, religious leaders within states that are at risk of experiencing genocide can appeal directly to their followers as well as work through their often significant social institutions in order to resist and undermine the genocidal process.

The Role of Domestic Faith Groups

Despite their ambiguities, all religious traditions share common values of humanity and justice at their cores. This fact alone marks them out as natural and powerful allies in the international effort to end genocide. The very global nature of this issue means that all religions must be engaged. Historically, churches have frequently been a force for the advancement of social justice. The most notable cases are the anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth century and the African-American civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century. At the Montreal conference, I spoke with Dr. Gregory Stanton, president of the International Association of Genocide Scholars and a veteran of the civil rights movement; he said that each of these efforts harnessed a “spiritual resource that is present in every society but is often forgotten by secular organizations.” Stanton believes that the anti-genocide movement is, at heart, a spiritual one that concerns all humanity and shares many characteristics in common with its predecessors.² Such groups from all faiths can and must be engaged in the anti-genocide movement. They are important not only because of their spiritual interest in doing good, but also because each one is a “ready-made organization” that can provide an effective network and infrastructure for holding meetings, fundraising, distributing information, and mobilizing human resources – a role played by Christian churches in the U.S. Civil Rights movement.³

Let us examine the current movement to end the genocide in Darfur as an example, focusing on the few North American faith-based groups that help to organize and mobilize international attention to this crisis. Darfur’s genocide began after a number of tribes that identify as “black” Africans rebelled in the Darfur region of western Sudan and provoked a vicious counterinsurgency campaign by the country’s Arab-dominated government. Since then, the Sudanese military and its irregular militias have attacked Darfur’s civilian population with the objective of wiping it out.⁴ They have caused up to 450 000 deaths with almost 2.5 million people forced from their homes (from a total pre-genocide population of six million).⁵ To date, the international community has failed to intervene militarily in Darfur, largely due to a lack of political, economic, and strategic interests in the region as well as typical bickering at the United Nations.

The initiative to intervene in Darfur has come from a civil movement in North America and Europe that is largely based on university campuses and in some religious

² Stanton, Gregory. In private conversation, 13 October 2007.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lemarchand, René. “Unsimplifying Darfur.” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 1.1 (July 2006): 1-12.

⁵ These estimates are commonly accepted as of the writing of this article and are significantly higher than those found in the Lemarchand article, which was written in mid-2006.

congregations. Considering the potential role that they could play, it is striking that only a small portion of all the existing North American faith-based groups today have been involved in trying to solve the crisis in Darfur. They also comprise a small minority within the overall movement itself. Aside from several American Jewish leaders and organizations who were central in the formation of the Save Darfur Coalition in early 2004 as well as Christian groups such as the National Council of Churches (USA) that remain active at the centre of the movement to this day, few other religious groups involved themselves in working to prevent the genocide from continuing. This is ironic since many religious leaders, particularly in the United States, show no hesitation to wade into other political debates and some have the ear of elected officials. Their power is drawn largely from their ability to influence public opinion on moral issues. Were they to use this influence to call on politicians for greater efforts at preventing genocide and ultimately intervening in cases where killing has already begun, the anti-genocide campaign would gain a powerful ally.⁶

Religious leaders and their congregations are unlikely to join secular anti-genocide movements, such as “Save Darfur,” because they feel unwelcome. Whatever the presence of religious people in such organizations, the movements themselves are defined by secular humanism. According to Stanton, the majority of activists and human rights advocates working in the movement are best described as “secular humanists”⁷ for the most part and are unlikely to extend such an invitation. This is not because they are actively hostile to religion, but rather because they do not “fully understand [its] power” for moving social change.⁸ The Montreal conference was a sign and symptom of this prevailing secular ethos. This ethos explains not only the absence of religious experts from the roster of panelists, but also the speechless surprise that greeted any suggestion of using religion as a tool for genocide prevention. This reaction was the same whether the topic was raised in an official discussion or casual conversation.

Facing the Past and Moving Forward

Of course, if religious groups are to apply political pressure for the condemnation of other states’ crimes against humanity, then they must also push for the recognition of their own and their governments’ roles in past abuses. The need for countries with histories of genocide or other crimes against humanity to face and acknowledge them is imperative if they are to have any credibility when condemning foreign human rights abuses today. At the conference, the Kingdom of Jordan’s ambassador to the United States, Prince Zeid Ra’ad Zeid al-Husseini, stressed this point. He has broad experience in both the UN and a variety of non-governmental organizations. During his career the ambassador has been continually shocked by the hypocrisy of countries that are quick to condemn, but slow to reconcile. As an example, he cited European countries that were “complicit in the Holocaust” but have not yet acknowledged this fact before criticizing the current actions of the Sudanese government.⁹

⁶ Such efforts, however, would have to be coordinated. As it stands right now, the worldwide “Save Darfur” movement is already quite decentralized and at times disjointed in its efforts. Were a number of religious groups to start joining in without an overarching plan of action, the movement could grow chaotic.

⁷ Stanton, Gregory. In private conversation, 13 October 2007.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Prince Zeid Ra’ad Zeid al-Husseini. Panel discussion “Early Warning: Triggering the UN into Action”,

Just as a state can only preserve its credibility by facing its own past, religious organizations must do the same. For example, in the only public reference to religious action at the conference, Gregory Stanton said that the US National Council of Churches (NCC) had selected 9 November 2007 for the formation of an interdenominational “alliance to abolish genocide”¹⁰ and also to serve as a “Day of Reflection and Responsibility.” The aim of this reflection was to publicly confront Christian complicity in genocide so that the churches can collectively move forward in genocide prevention efforts with a clear conscience. The day’s organizers plan ultimately to spread this initiative internationally and to include all religions.¹¹ Once religious leaders and their congregations have undertaken this process, they can then more credibly confront governments and secular institutions that have not yet reconciled with their own pasts.

Religion and Genocide Prevention

The only point on which there was consensus in Montreal was that the genocidal process absolutely must be stopped before the killing begins. Gay McDougall, former UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues and the executive director of Global Rights, articulated the reality that “by the time the killing starts... the options that are left and are viable to the international community are extremely limited.”¹² In spite of this agreement on the need to predict and prevent genocide, almost nobody seems to have any idea how to do so.

Without a doubt, religions worldwide have a role to play not only in raising international awareness of atrocities but also directly on the ground under harsh regimes where they can do practical work to stop genocide before it begins. Their potential to do so is even greater than that of domestic faith groups, for religious groups with a presence on the ground in at-risk states can directly engage the people at the grass-roots level.¹³ Such groups, if mobilized, can undermine pernicious ideologies of hatred directly at their source when they are promoted by political leaders. Religious leaders provide moral leadership to their congregations and so can work in partnership with secular organizations to defuse ethnic tensions, disseminate counter-propaganda, and rehumanize target group members in order to subvert secular calls-to-arms in the name of hatred.

Although most of the “secular humanists” of the anti-genocide movement may not recognize the power of organized religion, historical examples demonstrate its potential. First, the case of the Rwandan Genocide shows the ability of the Roman Catholic Church in that country to promote the genocidal policies of the government and other extremists. The Church had been close to the Hutu regime for years and when the genocide began many churches throughout the country became killing centers as Hutu parishioners slaughtered their Tutsi co-religionists. This usually happened with the consent of clergymen at all levels. The Church leadership was so influential and tied into

Global Conference on the Prevention of Genocide, 12 October 2007.

¹⁰ National Council of Churches. “Abolish genocide alliance forms” from <http://www.nccusa.org/news/071109abolishgenocide.html>; Internet, accessed 2 December 2007.

¹¹ Stanton, Gregory. Panel discussion “Is Genocide Preventable? The Foreseeability of Mass Violence”, Global Conference on the Prevention of Genocide, 12 October 2007.

¹² McDougall, Gay. Panel discussion “Early Warning: Triggering the UN into Action”, Global Conference on the Prevention of Genocide, 12 October 2007.

¹³ Stanton, Gregory. Panel discussion “Is Genocide Preventable? The Foreseeability of Mass Violence”, Global Conference on the Prevention of Genocide, 12 October 2007.

the genocidal effort that some of its leaders, such as Monsignor Vincent Nsengiyumva, became targets for assassination following liberation.¹⁴ Since Church leaders in Rwanda were able to play leading roles in the mobilization of *génocidaires*, the hypothetical question arises of what would have happened if they had opposed the massacres in Africa's most Catholic country.

A second example demonstrates that religious leaders can even influence the policy of brutal regimes which are openly hostile to organized religion. In August 1941, Cardinal August Count von Galen, bishop of Münster, publicly denounced the T-4 euthanasia program in Nazi Germany. Later that month Hitler ordered an end to the killings. Although the program continued in secret, Galen inspired protests that appear to have at least partially influenced government policy. Moreover, he retained his post in spite of the regime's fury, for Nazi leaders feared the negative public opinion that would result from attacking him.¹⁵ This episode demonstrates the power of religion to both influence public opinion and oppose tyranny in the most oppressive of societies. Holocaust historians often speculate (with considerable controversy) on what would have happened if Pope Pius XII had spoken out publicly and forcefully in defence of Europe's Jews. Some people at the time did recognize the Vatican's unique potential power to resist the Nazi killings and save Jews on a large scale. The Palestinian Jewish community actually attempted – with limited success – to reach out to the Holy See for help in attempts to rescue their European brethren from slaughter.¹⁶

Together, the above examples demonstrate the potential power of religious leaders and also their obligation to use that power ethically. Although the examples given are based on Christian experiences, their lessons can be applied – with appropriate adjustments – just as effectively to Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or indeed all religions. It must, however, be remembered that religious action is not a panacea that will prevent all genocides. Indeed, simply engaging religious leaders and groups alone in an at-risk state is not likely to accomplish much. There could even be cases in which religion has no role to play at all. Genocide is a complex phenomenon requiring a multifaceted response. Therefore, religious action must be among the many political, diplomatic, military, social and humanitarian responses to genocide that will mark a successful prevention or intervention strategy.

Nonetheless, religious organizations do offer an excellent basis for constructing an ad hoc global genocide prediction and prevention network. There are several advantages to this strategy. As Gregory Stanton explained, religious groups are a “ready-made network” that can carry out a number of roles.¹⁷ With them, there is no need to set up new organizations before putting genocide prevention initiatives into action when existing religious networks can be used for various purposes. One such purpose is the collection of intelligence at the grassroots level in order to feed international monitoring and prediction efforts. The transnational status and supposed neutrality of many religious organizations around the world would, theoretically, allow them to carry out such work with some degree of immunity.

¹⁴ Prunier, Gerard. *The Rwanda Crisis*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 270-72.

¹⁵ Bergen, Doris L. *War and Genocide*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), p. 129.

¹⁶ Friling, Tuvia. *Arrows in the Dark: David Ben-Gurion, the Yishuv Leadership, and Rescue Attempts During the Holocaust - Volume 1*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), pp. 146, 218-19.

¹⁷ Stanton, Gregory. In private conversation, 13 October 2007.

Conclusion

The notion of using religion as a tool in the struggle to abolish genocide seems to be a new one. It is an alien concept to many people working in the field and is largely unexamined by current scholarship. Currently, a lot of history has been written on the Roman Catholic Church during the Holocaust and only a bit about the Church in Rwanda. Aside from these two cases, there is almost nothing noteworthy in print about the role of religion in genocide. Historians need to start examining this relationship in cases when religion has either contributed to or discouraged genocide.

A lot of theoretical work based on historical examples is also needed in order to determine how religion can best be used for genocide prevention. Historians, sociologists and social-psychologists, as well as theologians and religious leaders need to be brought into the discussion. However, before any other steps can be taken forward either domestically or internationally, secular leaders, activists, and advocates working to prevent genocide must learn to embrace the powerful potential ally that they have in religion.

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