Abstract
Conflicts involving religion create exceptional environments where both unique barriers and resolution strategies emerge. Regardless of whether religion exists as the source of conflict, ingrained cultural and religious beliefs have the ability to substantially affect both the process and outcome of dispute resolutions. Relying upon various case studies, this paper investigates the intersection of religion and mediation, focusing discussion on the challenges religious parties bring to mediations, how religion can be used as a strategy in mediation proceedings, and the impact a religious mediator has on the mediation process and outcome. While there is no definitive conclusion presented with regard to whether disputes involving religion create a more intractable conflict or whether a religious mediator increases the likelihood of reaching a peaceful settlement, this paper does succeed in identifying opportunities for including religion in the mediation process and explores various characteristics from which religious mediators are able to draw in order to affect the mediation process.

Ultimately this paper seeks to provide a starting point from which continued research into the diverse roles religion and religious actors can play in the dispute resolution process. It suggests that as religion’s role in both intra and inter-state conflict continues to persist, and in some cases even heighten, mediators are charged with reevaluating how religion can be used to countermand this trend in order to both address conflict and positively impact the overall dispute resolution process. Indeed because this paper argues that religion possesses a unique power to promote peace, it is necessary that the dispute resolution community dedicates substantial research resources toward understanding the extent to which religion can positively influence conflict resolution outcomes and strategies. In the end, this paper hopes to provide justification for continued research with the ultimate aim of creating a valid model of dispute resolution that can be replicated in conflicts across the world.

Keywords: Religion, conflict, dispute resolution, mediation, faith-based actors

Introduction
“Religion has a dual legacy in human history,” existing as both a catalyst for conflict, yet also as an advocate for its resolution (Gopin, 1997, p.1). Yet despite the prevalence of conflicts enacted or merely marked by religious elements, the last two decades have been critical in studying the effects of religion on the dispute resolution process. Attempting to understand how religion relates to conflict resolution and mediation, research has identified a number of characteristics that distinguish faith-based interventions from secular ones: a) explicit emphasis on spirituality and/or religious identity; b) use of religious texts; c) use of religious values and vocabulary; d) utilization of religious or spiritual rituals during the process; e) involvement of faith-based actors as third-parties” (Bercovitch & Kadaiyici-Orelhana, 2009, p. 185). This paper explores many of these characteristics as a means for determining how religion affects conflict resolution, paying special attention to the mediation process, and ultimately

Biography
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suggested continued exploration of the potential impacts of religion on mediation.

**Religion as a Barrier to Resolution**

Despite predictions that modernization “would inevitably lead to the demise in the role of religion in politics,” religious conflicts continue to make up a significant portion of all conflicts (Fox, 2004, p. 56). Even when religion is not the sole source of a dispute, religious elements associated with either the conflict or the parties have the powerful ability to influence the nature of the conflict (Fox, 2004). Indeed Toft (2007) argues that religion has played a central or peripheral role in the majority of civil wars from 1940-2000. Because religion is deeply seeded in parties’ identities and beliefs, religious conflicts tend to be more intense than nonreligious ones, and arguably create barriers that make resolution more difficult (Fox, 2004). As such, religion holds the ability to influence the intractability and indivisibility of conflicts.

Although Crocker, Hampson and Aall (2004) reveal that there is still discussion as to whether religious conflicts are inherently more problematic than non-religious ones, recent research suggests that religious conflicts are intractable because of the “non-bargainable nature of the motivations behind them” (Fox, 2004, p. 58). Indeed once religious elements are introduced to a conflict, any type of compromise made has the ability to imply a weakness or break in foundational beliefs (Svensson, 2007). This phenomenon of isolating religious beliefs and indefinitely defending them because they reflect one’s identity and understanding of meaning, contributes to the unwillingness of parties to negotiate boundaries (Fox, 2004).

Religious conflicts are also arguably more intractable because they are inherently viewed as indivisible. Leng and Regan (2003) suggest religious differences are not amendable to compromise due in large part to their characterization as immutable and exclusive. Conflicts with religious dynamics create a perception that the disputed issues cannot be divided (Svensson, 2007). In fact, once religion is inserted into a conflict, parties are more likely to perceive the dispute as indivisible because any concession appears as a substantial loss of value (Svensson, 2007). Because different religions conceptualize authority in different ways, any division on the issue suggests a weakness not otherwise present in non-religious conflicts (Eastwood & Prevalakis, 2010).

**Religion as a Strategy for Resolution**

While it is understood that religion is often responsible for the creation of conflict, conversely, religion also possesses unique characteristics that promote success as a resolution strategy. Specifically, religion has the ability to bring various resources to the peacemaking process. Abu-Nmer (2001) reveals that religion brings social, moral and spiritual resources to the peace-building process. Maregere (2011) believes “religion has the capacity to bring parties together, based on the increased trust that it can introduce in certain situations” (p. 21). Most notably, religion provides a spiritual dimension to conflict resolution that generates both engagement and commitment (Ruben, 2011; Abu-Nmer, 2001). By inserting religion into the resolution process, intermediaries are able to reframe conflict and create alternative models for contextualizing disputes (Matthews-Giba, 1999).

Three predominant strategies have emerged from literature suggesting how religion assists the peacemaking process. First, engaging in religious and interfaith dialogue can increase understanding and enhance sensitivity to others. Second, religious values can be introduced to help parties find unforeseen commonalities. And finally, religious texts can be leveraged to explore shared values and traditions. By introducing religion into the dispute resolution process, parties are afforded unique resources that encourage, promote and assist peacemaking efforts.

**A. Interfaith Dialogue**

As a tool that fosters greater understanding between religious parties, interfaith dialogue is reserved for situations in which parties emerge from conflicting religious backgrounds. By converting participants’ narrow, exclusionist, antagonistic or prejudiced perspectives into tolerance, interfaith dialogue has the goal of promoting peaceful coexistence (Takim, 2004; Abu-Nmer, 2001). It functions as a mechanism by which parties can enlighten others as to the beliefs, traditions and sacred values of their religion. Indeed its purpose is not to reach doctrinal agreement, but rather to increase sensitivity toward others’ beliefs (Takim, 2004). Interfaith dialogue accomplishes this feat by facilitating an opportunity for parties to reveal the meaningful aspects of their
religion and explain how they experience the sacred (Takim, 2004).

The effectiveness of interfaith dialogue within conflict resolution relies upon the presupposition of disinformation and/or misunderstanding. Too often religious conflicts misplace intensity “due to an ignorance or misunderstanding of spiritual traditions” of others (Sanchez, 2012, p. 756). Because its aim is not to convert the other party nor compromise personal beliefs, interfaith dialogue impacts the resolution process by creating context and an environment for understanding.

An essential component in dialogue is the willingness to reexamine one’s faith in the light of how others relate to their tradition and the ability to strengthen or adjust one’s own engagement and interaction with the sacred based on the experience of the other. Understanding the faith of others should strengthen rather than weaken a person’s commitment to his or her tradition (Takim, 2004, p. 346).

By engaging in productive communication, interfaith dialogue effectively relates the depth of parties’ faith while also encouraging elevated understanding and respect for others’ (Takim, 2004). For example, Gopin (1997) discussed how in the past decade, the Catholic Church successfully leveraged interfaith dialogue with Jews to create a theological shift that more fully respects the beliefs of Judaism. Indeed, it is through this honest exchange and the creation of a foundation of both differences and similarities that parties are afforded an opportunity to achieve a greater and more thorough mutual understanding (Sanchez, 2012).

Interfaith dialogue is a valuable asset for conflict resolution with the power to enhance mutual understanding, foster joint activities, and transform the type and quality of relationship enjoyed by parties. It even has the power to develop “lines of communication between hostile parties” (Bercovitch & Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009, p. 199). Ultimately, interfaith dialogue generates relationships with the ability to produce beneficial, mutual understanding between parties of different religions (Gopin, 2002). This phenomenon was observed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia when an interfaith prayer day revealed that listening and experiencing prayers of another’s faith showed more respect for various religious traditions than trying to bring them all together as though there were no differences among them (Little, 2007). By providing a platform for open and honest discourse, interfaith dialogue invites participants to explore the fundamental religious values of others in a contained environment where differences are highlighted and respected.

B. Religious Values
While interfaith dialogue focuses on the overt exploration of doctrinal differences, religion can also be inserted into the conflict resolution process through more subtle discussions. Specifically, motivation to settle a dispute can be derived from an appeal to transcendent, religious values (Matthews-Giba, 1999). Here, resolution strategies focus on identifying similarities between conflicting faiths, foregoing true doctrinal discourse. Therefore, effectiveness is increased when mediators reframe parties’ differences in terms of shared values.

Recent research has documented various accounts where the reframing of issues into religious contexts greatly amplifies resolution efforts: Matthews-Giba (1999) suggests that religious values allow participants to reframe disputes focusing on individual loss into teachings on compassion and forgiveness for another; Abu-Nmer (2001) reveals that reframing disputes from religious contexts allow interveners unrestricted access and the ability to increase potential impact; Dochery (2001) discusses how law enforcement agents involved with the Branch Davidian negotiations had to reframe the negotiation narrative to demonstrate their understanding that two systems of laws – God’s and man’s – needed to be involved; and Bercovitch (2009) holds that reframing resolutions within a religious context dramatically increases the potential impact that will be experienced by all parties. Taken collectively, these consistent results invite an opportunity for identifying a common ground upon which conflicting parties can be motivated to seek resolution (Matthews-Giba, 1999).

By transferring differences into shared transcendent values, a new lens from which a conflict can be viewed is created. In fact discussions generating shared values may even lead to creative and innovative conversations otherwise precluded. Typically such discussions focus on universally religious teachings such as generosity (Love & Singh, 2013), peace (Little, 2007), compassion and forgiveness...
In addition to generating common ground, resolution strategies that focus on religious values also provide a vehicle for mutual enrichment between parties with opposing interests (Sanchez, 2012). By cultivating interfaith conversations that discuss religious values, parties are able to understand the conflicting interests of others in light of their experienced religious convictions. This strategy charges both parties with the responsibility of viewing the others’ situation in light of their own religious values, and in doing so, initiates solutions that feature coexistence and the mixing of faiths (Sanchez, 2012). Therefore by identifying shared values, mediators construct a new narrative of the conflict in which disputes can be understood as meaningful parts of a divine project (Bercovitch, 2009).

**C. Religious Texts**

A third strategy for employing the use of religion within conflict resolution is the utilization of religious texts. Here, successful mediators serve as “translators” capable of negotiating differences and similarities across religious borders through the use of religious narratives. As such, in-depth understanding and the ability to redefine religious texts rest at the core of conflict transformation (Mason, 2011).

Religious texts generate their power in resolution scenarios from the trust religious parties place in them. There are two primary ways in which mediators can leverage this power. First, recognizing that religious parties use the text as a moral anchor, mediators can enter into dialogue that references main points shared by both the current conflict and the text. This strategy allows parties to draw parallels between traditional concepts and modern day needs. An example of this strategy would be using the Qu’ran as a resource to help Muslim women become empowered (Mason, 2011).

Additionally, religious texts can also be used to identify possible meeting points between conflicting parties. For example Christian, Muslim and Hindu religions all share a flood parable from which the lesson of divine retribution is derived. Because parties vest the power of the religious text, any similarities drawn between different texts automatically create a sense of legitimacy for the other party’s concerns.

**The Religious Mediator**

Religion can also enter the conflict resolution process through the role of the mediator. Here, religious leaders and faith-based actors are purposefully inserted into conflicts because they are uniquely positioned to build relationships that develop trust between parties. By encouraging dialogue and enabling joint collaboration, faith-based actors have a powerful potential to affect the peace-building process (Maregere, 2011).

The practice of using faith-based actors in the dispute resolution process is not novel, having long been harnessed by faith-based actors such as the Puritans, Quakers, the Pope, members of the Interfaith Mediation Center in Nigeria, and religious actors in Sierra Leone. Reychler (1997) suggests the historical effectiveness and strength of faith-based actors in the peacemaking process flows from six fundamental facts:

1) over [two-thirds] of people belong to a religion; 2) religious organizations have the capacity to mobilize people and cultivate attitudes of forgiveness and conciliation; 3) religious organizations can rely on soft power sources to influence the peace process: reward power, expert power, legitimate power, referent (relationship) power, and informational power; 4) non-governmental organizations fulfill tasks for which traditional diplomacy is not equipped; 5) most religious organizations can make use of their transnational organizations; and 6) religious organizations are in the field (p. 35-36).

These realities create viable portals through which faith-based actors can, more easily than their secular counterparts, enter the dispute resolution process. However once inside, evaluation of the effectiveness of faith-based actors cannot cease to continue; special attention must now be diverted to how these mediators more naturally reach success.

Sampson (1997) attributes the inherent susceptibility
of faith-based actors to find success in conflict resolution to their ability to play various roles throughout the process; religious actors can be advocates, intermediaries, observers, educators, and institutional actors. Bercovitch (2009) believes a mediator’s identity automatically affects the level of influence, trust and legitimacy brought to the proceeding. Relying upon this notion that specific aspects of the faith-based mediator directly affect the quest for resolution, it is significant to understand the attributes, resources and motivations of faith-based mediators that have the ability to impact the effectiveness of the mediation process.

A. Attributes

Faith-based mediators possess unique characteristics and strengths that support the mediation process (Bercovitch, 2009). For example, as faith-based mediators for the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, the Peacemakers identify both emotional intelligence and the desire to confront what they find painful as two inherent characteristics faith-based mediators should possess. Quakers have also enjoyed a storied history as successful faith-based mediators, citing the ability to sympathize with both sides in an international dispute among attributes that positively contribute to successful dispute resolution (Bailey, 985).

Reviewed collectively, research has identified a variety of attributes commonly observed in effective faith based actors. Influenced by Thomas Princen, Reychler (1997) consolidates effective peacemaking traits into six primary resources possessed by religious actors: 1) Moral legitimacy; 2) Neutrality; 3) Ability to advance other’s political standing; 4) Ability to reach the (world) public opinion 5) Network of information and contacts; and 6) Secrecy. Using the Pope as an example for the embodiment of all these traits, Reychler argues that these six attributes allow an otherwise powerless transnational actor to influence parties within a dispute in subtle, yet effective ways (1997).

While research has indeed identified various effective qualities of religious leaders and faith-based actors, a definitive list of attributes of effective faith-based mediators has yet to be determined. As such, it is generally accepted that much of faith-based actors’ success derives closely from their status as a religious actor (Bercovitch, 2009). Therefore qualities typically attributed to effective religious leaders, such as commitment to service, integrity, excellent communication, patience, inspiration, passionate, forgiving, sensitivity, etc..., can also be considered valuable attributes for faith-based mediators.

In addition to personal attributes, faith-based mediators also enjoy the flexibility to widen the scope of mediations to include non-traditional techniques and agenda items (Bailey, 1985). Because they are often non-official intermediaries, faith-based mediators have the freedom to disregard protocol, suggest unconventional remedies or procedures, and even introduce tangentially-related items otherwise not appropriate to suggest (Bailey, 1985). This ability to circumvent traditional mediator roles is an attribute unique to faith-based mediators.

B. Resources

Faith-based mediators are also afforded inherent leverage based on their role as religious leaders. According to Little (2007), religious Peacemakers are effective in light of their religious identity and their membership in the local community. Like Pope Gregory IX who was able to offer the Lombard League trust that was built by his moral authority, faith-based mediators enjoy a moral legitimacy that allows them to leverage both moral and spiritual resources to affect conflict resolution (Matthews-Giba, 1999). The Peacemakers refer to this phenomenon as the “Power of the Pulpit” and acknowledge it as a tool for those who claim its mandate (Little, 2007, p.11).

Religious leaders and faith-based actors...are highly respected and their opinions are generally held in high regard within their communities...Therefore they are better equipped to reach out to the people, mobilize them, to re-humanize the “enemy” by using religious values such as justice for all, forgiveness, harmony, human dignity, and ultimately to motivate them to work towards peace (Bercovitch, 2009, p.187).

This inherent moral authority allows parties to immediately trust faith-based mediators. In fact, research has shown that “religious leaders, faith-based actors are more likely to be perceived as evenhanded, trustworthy, and possessing a strong moral and spiritual commitment than their secular counterparts” (Bercovitch, 2009, p. 190).

Marefere (2011) also suggests religious leaders are uniquely positioned to leverage their moral authority and influence as a means to “encourage mutual understanding within and between protagonists” (2011, p. 22). Looking beyond the ability to affect the initial resolution labors, Marefere (2011) argues that
their inherent credibility allows religious leaders and faith-based actors to heavily influence the sustainability of settlement efforts. Specifically, he argues that the persuasion afforded to these leaders is often unrivaled at the grassroots level, and allows them to play a substantial role in ensuring the continued success of implemented settlements.

However, in order to sustain this relationship, all associated institutions, religious leaders, and discourse must continue to be viewed as legitimate; as legitimacy is closely related to both the identity and nature of the dispute. For example, it was crucial to the success of faith-based interveners of the Inter Religious Council of Sierra Leone that they were considered credible and respected mediators by the government, rebels and general population. For without this standard of legitimacy, coup leaders would never have agreed to pursue discussions (Bercovitch, 2009). Therefore while faith-based mediators may enjoy a default legitimate status, they must work diligently to continue to leverage this reputation.

C. Motivations
Finally, faith-based mediators are more motivated to reach resolution than non-religious interveners. This increased motivation is a result of the spiritual and religious motivations that drive the mediator to seek peace (Bercovitch, 2009). For example, “religious institutions have an untapped and under-used integrative power potential” fueled by the religious values of forgiveness and conciliation (Rychler, 1997, 37). These moral pillars, from which a strong commitment to seek peace is derived, create a legitimate motivation for resolution not otherwise afforded to non-faith based actors without an explicit history and proof.

While faith based actors possess vested spiritual and religious motivations that spur a desire to seek resolution, research suggests that motivations do not affect participants’ perceived impartiality. Whereas with non-religious mediators, motivation of any sort typically reflects poorly upon a mediator’s impartiality, faith-based actors generally enjoy a presumption of impartiality (Smith, 1994). And since effective mediation demands the appearance of impartiality, it is clear that faith-based actors enjoy the benefit of assumed impartiality derived from their position rather than their motivation.

Conclusion
Religion and conflict have coexisted throughout the span of human history. And although much information exists as to the catalyst-like properties of religion as a source of conflict, relatively little research explores the ways in which religion affects its resolution. As the climate of global conflicts continues to shift, there has never been a more critical time to reassess the power of religious dialogue and the influence of faith-based actors upon the peacemaking process. Understanding that these conversations and individuals possess unique characteristics with the ability to greatly influence how parties talk about, evaluate and solve conflict, now is the time to dedicate the resources necessary to explore the full potential of religion as a resource for peace and conflict resolution.

Because the possibilities for extended research at this time are arguably vast, perhaps researchers should begin by reframing how the conversation about religion’s coexistence with conflict occurs. Specifically, greater emphasis should be given to the peacemaking qualities of religion in everyday discourse. When opportunities present themselves, global leaders need to expose religious strategies or actors that propel resolution efforts forward. Prevalent attempts to remove religion from the conversation entirely must be replaced with productive conversation about the peacemaking opportunities religion uncovers. Ultimately, the general understanding of religion’s role in conflict must transition from conflict-inducing to conflict-resolving.

While much more work needs to be done to fully understand the potential impact religion has on the mediation and dispute resolution process, it is clear that the construction of shared religious values, use of religious texts, and identity of faith-based mediators hold the ability to redefine how global disputes are resolved. And although religion cannot exist as the sole solution from which resolution strategies are drawn, there is no denying the current, substantial need for religion to emerge as a viable option. As a result, dedicated research must persist in order to awaken the dormant power of religion as a leading peace-building agent. In the words of Cynthia Sampson,

the time has come to identify, encourage, develop, mobilize, and empower the special resources and potentials of religious actors for constructive conflict transformation – and to coordinate their contributions as integral to the larger [peace-building] enterprise (1997, p.307).
Bibliography


Website: http://www.icermediation.org / www.icermediation.com