From "Peaceful" to "Peaceable": A Proposed Conceptual Shift for Interreligious Peacemaking

John D. Barton

In the twenty-first century, religious people continue to be both the perpetrators and targeted victims of violence. Given such realities, there is an urgent need to think clearly about the relationship between religion, violence, and peace. This article does so by focusing on one theoretical component of peacebuilding. I propose a conceptual shift away from the language of religious "peacefulness" and toward that of "peaceableness." I contend that peacebuilding efforts are not well served by attempts to assess whether a religion is inherently *peaceful* or not, but by more modest acknowledgements that, despite mixed historical records, all major religions have *peace-able* resources that can be mobilized. In other words, beyond mere semantics, the shift from *peaceful* to *peaceable* is significant in the quest for theoretical coherence and effective practice of interreligious peacebuilding. I also use scripture to illustrate the specific compatibility of these ideas with the "risk and hope" of Christian peacemaking.

"Peace, right now, feels like a fantasy born of a narcotic smoked in a pipe." With that, Salman Rushdie (2023) captures an all-too-common sentiment in the current global environment. When it comes to pursuits of peace, optimism is in short supply. Moreover, given the steady stream of bad news and negative trends related to religion, things only seem worse when religion is involved. At the time of this writing, much attention is focused on the war in Gaza, in which religious narratives play a central role and feed fears of escalating conflicts across the Middle East and world. Other relevant scenarios include the historic schisms in Orthodox Christianity associated with the Russia-Ukraine War as well as the religious elements in conflicts in Sudan, the Sahel, Myanmar, and Armenia-Azerbaijan, among others.[1] More broadly, the twenty-first century is witness to alarming increases in religiously motivated and state-sponsored hostilities against religious minorities around the world. More than 90% of countries report harassment, intimidation, and violence against religious communities, which directly affects up to one-third of the world's population (Pew Research Center 2020). In short, religious peopleacross the planet continue to be both the victims and the perpetrators of hostility.

In light of such realities, how should we assess, understand, and approach the task of interreligious peacemaking? Does it offer realistic opportunities for positive change? Such questions need to be addressed from multiple angles, but in this brief article, I limit myself to proposing a conceptual and linguistic shift in the discourse away from the language of religious "peacefulness" and toward that of "peaceableness." More specifically, I contend that interreligious peacemaking efforts are not well served by attempts to assess whether religions are *peaceful* in the sense of being inherently peace-oriented. The efforts are better served by more modest acknowledgements that religions have a mixed record with regard to peace, but they nevertheless have distinct *peaceable* capacities and resources that, if mobilized, can make a major and positive impact on societies. In fact, while the shift from *peaceful* to *peaceable* may appear minor or merely semantic, I argue that it is a significant component in the quest for the theoretical coherence and effective practice of peacemaking in interreligious contexts.

[1] For more on these and other conflicts, see the International Crisis Group's commentary on "10 Conflicts to Watch in 2024" (Ero and Atwood 2024).

To make this case, I explore the general relationship between religion, peace, and violence in the section, "Poison or Gift?"; I address some of the relevant conceptual issues related to interreligious peacemaking in the section, "The Problem with Peacefulness"; and I elaborate on some key theoretical notions in the sections, "On Truth and Truthfulness" and "On the Meaning of Peace." I conclude by highlighting some implications for Christian peacemakers in the section, "The Risk and Hope of Christian Peacemaking."

Poison or Gift? On Religion, Violence and Peace

Behind all discussions of interreligious peacemaking are issues pertaining to the relationship between religion, peace, and violence. One way to frame these issues is with the following question: *Is the presence of religion in the world a poison or a gift?*

As one would expect, responses to such a question vary in both content and scope. Starting on the broader and more negative side, some critics deliver sweeping condemnations of human religion in general, as memorably captured in the late Christopher Hitchens' (2007) claim that "religion poisons everything." Such broad indictments typically reflect an idealized understanding of secularization that renders religious faith as little more than blind zeal. Accordingly, physicist Steven Weinberg opined that the "influence of religion has been awful" and that religion not only undermines rationality but also morally corrupts otherwise good people. In an address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (1999), Weinberg famously asserts that, in a world without religion, one could expect good people to do good things and evil people to do evil things. But, he adds, "for good people to do evil things, that takes religion." What is particularly relevant here is the characterization that the phenomenon of religion is inherently a barrier to anything positive, including, then, any prospects for constructive peace. In other words, the less religion, the more peaceful the world would be.

Other critics narrow the focus and identify religious poison not with religion in general, but with specific traditions or religious clusters. For example, theorists such as Regina Schwartz, Jann Assmann, Ulrick Beck, and Jonathan Kirsch claim, in different ways, that the monotheistic religions—primarily Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are inherently violent due to their exclusivism. Schwartz (1997, 63) is uncompromising: "Monotheism," she writes, "abhors, reviles, rejects, and ejects whatever it defines as outside its compass." Beck then contrasts monotheistic intolerance with what he sees as the more tolerant and inclusive characteristics of primal religions and polytheistic traditions (as cited in Meral 2018, 7–9). The clear implication is that the world would be better off with less monotheism and more polytheism.

Other critics draw even more targeted and sharp distinctions between religions within the same religious clusters. One example of intramural polemics between Abrahamic traditions is captured in the book title, *Religion of Peace? Why Christianity Is and Islam Isn't* (2007) by the Christian apologist and critic of Islam, Robert Spencer. In this case, the implication is that Christian/Muslim peacemaking is a non-starter because Islam is inherently intolerant and thus incompatible with peace.

This is just a sampling, but claims like these are made in many different directions and across different traditions. One problem with such claims is that they rely on selective evidence to make universal assumptions about what is inherent to religions or to religion in general. Consider, for example, Beck's claim that monotheistic religions are inherently violent while primal and polytheistic traditions are inherently tolerant. One of Beck's celebrated examples of a tolerant and accommodating tradition is indigenous Japanese polytheism. Ironically, in order to make his case, Beck ignores the historical fact that Christianity was virtually wiped out in Japan in the seventeenth century through massive campaigns of torture and murder perpetrated by indigenous polytheistic communities (Meral 2018, 7–9). The point here, of course, is neither to deny legitimate examples of primal tolerance nor claim that primal and polytheistic traditions are themselves inherently violent. Rather, the point is that characterizing any religious tradition—whether monotheistic, polytheistic, or non-theistic—as inevitably *either* violent *or* peaceful requires biased assumptions and selective evidence.

Or consider Spencer's indicting portrayal of Islam. In light of the challenges of modern Muslim extremism, it is common for commentators—whether Muslim apologists or critics of Islam—to debate whether Islam is inherently peaceful or violent. To make his case against Islam, Spencer selectively homes in on the most difficult and intolerant passages in the original Islamic sources (i.e., the Qur'an and early biographies of the prophet), links them to examples of hostility in Muslim societies as verifying evidence, and then universalizes the conclusion that Islam is an inherently violent faith. Interestingly, religion scholar Karen Armstrong uses the same original Islamic sources to make the opposite argument. While she does not ignore the difficult passages or histories, she focuses on passages that promote tolerance and peace as her lens through which to establish the inherent peacefulness of Islam (as cited

in Reynolds, 2012).[2] All things considered, Armstrong's approach is preferable to Spencer's. She provides a more balanced and compelling assessment of both the peaceful and violent aspects of Islam (and Christianity) than what Spencer offers in his one-sided polemics. Nevertheless, any attempt to universally characterize any tradition as inherently peaceful or violent is problematic and often devolves into circular debates and polemic impasse.

In addition to the assessments of presumed "neutral" scholars of religion, religious practitioners and "embedded" scholars also engage in critical discussions about religion, violence, and peace within their own traditions. Beyond the work of non-Muslims like Spencer and Armstrong, Islam has extensive traditions of discourse in which Muslim scholars critically engage the textual and historical challenges of their own religion. Many of these scholars seek to disrupt narratives of hostility and promote (or restore) Islam's teachings of peace and freedom, as in Mustafa Akyol's recent book, *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance* (2021).

Christians have also long wrestled with the dilemmas created by the juxtaposition of Christian teachings on universal love and peace with shameful legacies of violence and injustice perpetrated by Christians in history. Similar to their Muslim counterparts, Christians likewise have had to contend with the difficult and violent (even genocidal) passages in the Bible and how such passages are to be read in light of Jesus' call to love one's enemies and be peacemakers (Jenkins 2011; Boyd 2018).

The respective theological, hermeneutical, and historical debates are beyond the scope of this article, but it is relevant to note that parallel processes occur across all major religious traditions. For example, in the volume *Peacemaking and the Challenge of Violence in World Religions* (Omar and Duffey 2015), these issues are addressed by practitioners of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Native American spirituality. Not only do the authors dialogue with one another on the issues, each one also grapples with both the religious ideals and historical realities of their own tradition.

In sum, it is problematic to assume that human religion, or any specific religious tradition, can be universally characterized as *either* peaceful *or* poisonous. Such either/or assumptions fail to account for the complex historical and hermeneutical realities. Moreover, the research clearly demonstrates that the dynamics between religion, violence, and peace are multidimensional and multidirectional. The same religions used to inspire and justify violence have also inspired and motivated heroic peacemaking, a reality indicative of what Scott Appleby describes as the "ambivalence of the sacred" (1999). In addition, there are also many non-religious variables that contribute to societal violence and even so-called "religious violence," as demonstrated in provocatively titled books like William Cavanaugh's *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (2009) and Ziya Meral's *How Violence Shapes Religion* (2018). Religion scholar Stephen Prothero (2020, 7) concisely summarizes all this while highlighting the relevance of religious studies: "Critics who claim that religious people have perpetrated many of the world's greatest horrors are, in my view, correct. Also correct are defenders of religion who claim that religious people have been some of the world's greatest peacemakers. Put these two facts together and what do you get? A world in which religion matters."

Beyond acknowledging religion's difficult sources and complex record, Christian theologian Miroslav Volf (2017, 76–79, 186–190) asserts also that religions offer the world an "indispensable gift" through their visions of human flourishing and moral frameworks for peace. Like others, Volf (2017, 76) acknowledges that religions often "malfunction" with disastrous consequences. When this happens, he says, "the gift turns into poison." Nevertheless, the most powerful antidotes to religious poison are arguably found in religions themselves. Through the gift of their moral frameworks and visions of justice and peace, religions provide adherents unique resources to break their own cycles of violence, pursue inclusive justice, heal wounds, and—if we are to believe the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu (2016)—unleash joy. Volf (2017, 13) summarizes: "Religions are a global problem requiring sustained attention. But religions aren't just a problem. They are also an indispensable part of the solution."

Volf also offers another helpful way to articulate these challenges and opportunities by introducing a critical distinction between "thin" and "thick" religion.[3] Religions become *thin* when they are "emptied of their moral visions," reduced to "vague religiosity," and especially when their institutions become entangled with political power (2017, 189). As such, *thin* religion is easily hijacked by political forces or, to borrow

[2] This contrast between Spencer and Armstrong draws on the work of Gabriel Said Reynolds (2012, 3–10). See also how Armstrong (2014) herself addresses the challenges of violence in Islam.

[3] Using the contrasting ideas of "thick" and "thin" has been a practice in philosophy and the social sciences at least since Gilbert Ryle and Clifford Geertz, although scholars use the contrasts in a variety of ways. Volf (2013, 153) provides more detail on the history and the use of the terms.

language from social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2013, 311–312), becomes a handmaiden to in-group agendas and sectarian interests. In fact, the thinning of religion is the single most significant factor that determines whether religions will be implicated in violence (Volf 2013, 40; Volf 2017, 189).

Thick religion, on the other hand, leans into a tradition's moral framework and originating vision, which is independent of any cultural, political, or imperial systems in which it operates.[4] Among other things, *thick* religion provides powerful motivations and resources for intergroup peacemaking, genuine kindness, and altruistic concern for strangers and even enemies. As such, the peacemaking visions of *thick* religion are often subversive, since they resist becoming mere tools in the hands of the powers that be.

We will build on these ideas in the next section, but for now we see that religion can take on both *thin* and *thick* characteristics, producing both *poison* and *gift*. One way to understand the task of interreligious peacemaking, therefore, is as an attempt to neutralize religious poison and mobilize religion's thick gifts for peace. From this perspective, what the world needs is not *less* religion, but *more* religion—that is to say, more of religion's thick bridge-building, malfunction-disrupting, peace-generating gifts.

We now turn our attention toward some relevant conceptual issues related to religion's peace-generating gifts.

The Problem with *Peacefulness,* and the Promise of *Peaceableness*

Interreligious peacemaking starts with imagination. We must be able to imagine its possibility in order to pursue its actuality.[5]

With that in mind, consider a potentially surprising claim: *Interreligious peacemaking does not require religions to be peaceful.* While this statement may sound counterintuitive, it actually points us in some helpful directions with regard to the possibilities of interreligious peacemaking. For one thing, embedded in the statement is a reminder that religious peacemaking does not happen *between religions*, but between *religious people*. In other words, peacemaking does not depend on peaceful institutions and traditions as much as peace-loving people. As such, rather than needing to establish the essential peacefulness of the represented religions in and of themselves, we only need to demonstrate that religions offer their peace-loving adherents thick resources for the peacemaking task. This more modest focus on *resources* rather than *essences* now invites a fuller description of my proposed conceptual shift from "peacefulness" to "peaceableness."[6] While this shift in terminology is subtle, it reflects the significant difference between trying to assess a religion's inherent nature with regard to peace (i.e., its *peace-full-ness*, or lack thereof) and emphasizing a religion's peace-enabling capacities (i.e., its *peace-able-ness* or *peace-able-izing* potential). In short, replacing references to religious *peacefulness* with those of religious *peaceableness* avoids essentialism, better aligns with the nuanced understandings of peace and violence in religion outlined above, and opens more theoretical space for a peacemaking imagination.

To get more specific, the development of a peacemaking imagination is undermined by essentialist and circular arguments that require a singular answer to questions such as the following: *Is Islam essentially peaceful and tolerant, or merely political and theocratic? Is Christianity peaceful and loving, or intolerant and imperialistic? Is Hinduism universally inclusive and unifying, or hierarchical and ethnocentric? Is Buddhism essentially social and compassionate, or merely individualistic and escapist?*[7] Other traditions could be listed as well, but the point is that effective peacemaking is not dependent on Islam being peaceful, or Christianity being loving, or Hinduism being inclusive, or Buddhism being compassionate. Of course, adherents of each of these traditions will inevitably want to advocate for their tradition's highest ideals, and offer explanations and perspectives on their historical malfunctions; there is certainly much more I could say about my own Christian faith in this regard. But for our purposes here,

[4] Volf (2017, 85, 189) makes this point especially with regard to the originating visions of the major religious traditions: "As I interpret them, world religions are cultural systems distinct from governments" and "all world religions were originally articulated, received, and practiced as just such 'thick' religions."

[5] This section draws on Barton (2022, 21–36).

[6] For the concept of peaceableness, I broadly draw on Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas (1983).

[7] In the United States, opponents of Islam increasingly claim that American Muslims do not qualify for the religious protections outlined in the U.S. Constitution because, presumably, "Islam is not a religion" but a political ideology opposed to American values. Similar logic is used to criminalize Christian minorities in other parts of the world, such as in some states in India where some authorities promote the idea that "Christianity has never been a religion" but only a form of "predatory imperialism." In both contexts, these ideas and policies have often translated into harassment of Muslims and Christians, respectively (Uddin 2019).

effective interreligious peacemaking does not require religions to establish themselves in essentialist terms. As such, the language of *peaceableness* avoids the circular debates, and more modestly invites us to identify and mobilize resources that empower peacemakers.

While religious peacemaking does not require peaceful religions *per se*, it does require the dual combination of peace-seeking *adherents* and peace-able-izing *resources*. In terms of the latter, therefore, it is significant that peaceable capacities and peace-activating principles are evident in the ethical visions of all major religious traditions. We can note, for example, the Jewish notion of *chesed* (steadfast love), the Muslim call to *ta'leef* (mutual love), the Christian imperative of *agape* (unconditional love), the Buddhist ideal of *karuna* (compassion), Jain commitments to *ahimsā* (comprehensive nonviolence), the Bantu notion of *ubuntu* (intersubjective concern), and close equivalents in Hinduism, Daoism, Confucianism, Sikhism, Native American spirituality, and other spiritual pathways. These concepts, as they emerge in different traditions, are not equivalent to one another, nor do they need to be. Despite different content and contexts, however, they collectively demonstrate enough ethical overlap to make thick religion and, in turn, reciprocal peacemaking imaginable.

Similarly, such peace-able-izing ethical overlaps also manifest in what is known as "The Golden Rule." Karen Armstrong (2006) demonstrates that the ethical visions of all major religious traditions feature versions of the Golden Rule, the principle that one should treat others as one wants to be treated. To make her point, she cites variations of the Golden Rule in Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and other traditions. She especially highlights two of its most influential versions, that of Confucius from the *Analects* ("never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself"), and from Jesus in the *Gospel of Matthew* ("in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you"). For the purpose of this article, the claim is that the Golden Rule provides a common code of conduct across the world's religions (Volf 2017, 117) that makes collaborative and mutually enriching peacemaking imaginable.

Some critics, however, are not easily convinced. After all, they claim, even if the Golden Rule can be identified as a broad point of overlap between religions, it offers little more than a soft and vague sentimentality that is too flimsy to anchor interreligious peacemaking. As such, the Golden Rule is mere fool's gold, a candle flickering in the gale force winds of human hostility.[8] This critique, however, misses the deeper logic and power of the Golden Rule. When understood properly, there is nothing simple or soft or formulaic about the Golden Rule. In fact, it is best understood as a principle more than a rule, and a call to adaptive and context-specific compassion that requires wisdom, empathy, and courage. Moreover, when put into practice—which is the *real* challenge the world faces—the Golden Rule has the kind of thick capacities that can infuse into every interaction a genuine concern for neighbors, strangers, and even enemies. In this sense, therefore, as a common code of conduct shared across different traditions, the Golden Rule represents thick peaceable capacities for compassion that make reciprocal interreligious peacemaking imaginable.

In sum, interreligious peacemaking does not require grand arguments about the essential peacefulness of religions, but it does require peace-seeking people who are motivated and empowered by peace-able-izing resources. And, in fact, such resources are found in a variety of forms across the ethical visions of the world's religions. With all this in mind, we now turn to some relevant elaborations on a few key concepts.

On Truth and Truthfulness

I have argued that effective interreligious peacemaking does not require religions to be peaceful *per se*. Likewise, there is also a sense in which peacemaking does not require religions to be *truthful*. Like the former, this claim can sound counterintuitive and thus requires some explanation.

Interreligious interactions reveal both the similarities and differences between religions. While some differences reflect merely superficial variations, others are more substantive, such as conflicting truth-claims about matters of ultimate importance related to divine, human, and cosmic realities. Moreover, logically speaking, truth-claims that contradict one another cannot all be true. It stands to reason, therefore, that some religious truth-claims are more true (i.e., more aligned with reality) than others, and some religious worldviews are overall more truthful than others. Of

[8] Immanuel Kant (1998, n.12) famously critiqued the Golden Rule for its inability to attend to contextual and personal complexities. It has also been fashionable in recent decades in popular business literature to dismiss the Golden Rule because of its simplicity—"What if the other person doesn't want what you would want?"—and replace it with the so-called Platinum Rule—"Do unto others as 'they'd' like done unto them" (see, for example, Alessandra and O'Connor 1998). The philosopher Kwame Appiah (2006, 60–63, 155–174) also critiques the Golden Rule along Kantian lines, but ultimately ends up endorsing its principles in the form of discerned and contextually appropriate "kindness to strangers," which aligns with my point in this section.

course, this immediately raises questions about how religious claims might best be compared and tested for consistency and accuracy. Such questions of religious truthfulness are beyond the scope of this article.[9] Nevertheless, here is the relevant point for this article: *Interreligious peacemaking does not require religions to be equally truthful or for religious people to agree about ultimate realities*. This is an important point of emphasis because peacemaking efforts have often been held captive by the misguided assumption that conflicting truth-claims inevitably breed intolerance and hostility and thus undermine peace efforts.[10] As a result of such assumptions, peace activists have often felt the need to minimize or neutralize the differences between religions, or locate some foundational *belief* or underlying *purpose* on which all religions agree and on which peacemaking efforts can be built.

For a notable example, Mahatma Gandhi (2013, 51) famously suggested that interreligious peacemaking flows from a universal belief in and quest for God, which he described as the "cornerstone of all religions." And yet, to our broader point, this immediately raises many classic philosophical questions that reveal conflicting and even irreconcilable truth-claims: *What do we even mean by "God"? Is God to be understood as one or many, as personal or non-personal, as perfect or in process? Is God a heavenly parent, divine lawgiver, cosmic energy, ground of being, ultimate emptiness, or all or none of the above?* Even within Gandhi's own tradition, Hindus are all over the map on these issues, with some believing in one God, some in thousands of gods, and others having little interest in God at all.[11] Similarly, the world's Buddhists, Jains, Daoists, and indigenous practitioners represent a wide variety of nontheistic, polytheistic, pantheistic, and cosmotheistic worldviews. Even among monotheists, who agree on the mathematics of divinity ("God is One"), there is significant disagreement about how to understand that oneness. Should, for example, God's oneness be understood as a kind of absolute unity, like in the Muslim doctrine of *tawhid*, or as a differentiated unity, like in the Christian doctrine of Trinity? (see Volf 2011, 127–184).

Conflicting truth-claims are also evident in rival understandings of the human self and subsequent cross-purposes in different religious systems. For example, classic Vedantic Hinduism envisions humans as caught in cycles of rebirth (*samsara*) and seeks liberation through the union of the human self (*atman*) with ultimate reality (*Brahman*). By contrast, many Buddhist accounts envision the extinguishing of the self and its desires through enlightenment that leads to *nirvana* (literally "blowing out"). Meanwhile, mainstream Abrahamic religions typically reject ideas of reincarnation and offer a positive affirmation of the human self and its desires, seeking its proper fulfillment through submission to the will and design of the Creator.[12]

Again, without getting lost in the theological weeds, the main point for our discussion is that these fundamental disagreements about divine and human realities, and the different religious goals that they spawn, do not necessarily undermine prospects of peacemaking. The importance and subtlety of this point can be emphasized by considering again the role that the Golden Rule plays across religions. Even though, as outlined above, the Golden Rule represents a "common code of conduct" shared across religions, that should not be understood to negate the different and even irreconcilable goals and truth-claims that also exist. Prothero (2011, 2) has been critical of Armstrong on this point, claiming that she is often guilty of trying to "erase" or "wish away" the differences between religions by collapsing them into the ethics of the Golden Rule. This, he notes, risks making theology the "water boy for morality." But as we have seen, while the world's traditions do converge when it comes to this ethical mandate, religions are about much more than ethics, and they in fact diverge sharply on doctrine, ritual, cosmology, experience, and law.

Significantly, sharp religious divergences emerge even when considering *motivations* for Golden Rule compassion itself. While a Christian may extend Golden Rule compassion to others to obey the commands of Jesus and show gratitude for God's own compassion, practitioners from other traditions may be

[9] Theologian Harold Netland (1999) provides a classic Christian account of such matters, and Drew Collins (2021) explores a recent "refiguring" of the classic issues that seeks better engagement with a religiously diverse world. It is also relevant that unresolvable disagreements between religions do not imply *total* disagreement. As Volf rightly notes, "no world faith, even when it asserts its own exclusive superiority, can claim that all other faiths are entirely false" (2017, 250–51, n. 72).

[10] For an extended discussion of this and other correlating myths, see Barton (2022, 123–142).

[11] While Gandhi fluctuates between personal and impersonal expressions of pantheism, he typically favors personal images and shows himself to be especially devoted to the Hindu deity Rama (see Gier 2014; and Rambachan 2019, 104–5).

[12] See Volf 2017, 78. For succinct summaries of internal Buddhist debates about the self and related themes, see Damien Keown (2013, 56–58, 88).

motivated for very different reasons. Some extend Golden Rule compassion to avoid or even purge bad karma so that they can escape cycles of rebirth; others "cultivate" Golden Rule compassion to allow a cosmic energy to flow unobstructed through one's life and relationships; still others show Golden Rule compassion as a result of rational calculation and enlightened self-interest. But as dissonant and uneven as these motivations are, they can still generate mutual expressions of compassion and love that can disrupt hostilities and feed an imagination of peacemaking.

In the end, this highlights a key theoretical anchor point for interreligious peacemaking: *Different traditions can agree on peace-activating ethical norms, while disagreeing sharply on why those norms are the right norms*.[13] And that can be enough to identify and construct collaborative pathways toward peace, even across the most irreconcilable of differences.

On the Meaning of Peace

All this also invites some elaboration on the concept of peace itself. In this article, I have used the term *peace* and its derivatives (i.e., peaceful, peacemaking, peaceable) without directly addressing its meaning. While a comprehensive exploration is beyond our scope, we can still briefly address the question: *What do we mean by peace?*[14]

When we consider peace in the ultimate sense, we again encounter conflicting truth-claims. The notion of peace is used in divergent and often incommensurable ways by different religious traditions. *Is peace an ego-renouncing internal bliss? A God-given pathway to world order? Reconciliation with God and each other? A restored primordial harmony between land and ancestors? Or is it a mix of all of these, or something altogether different?* These are significant questions that demand more attention. But this article primarily considers *peace* in the more ordinary and down-to-earth sense of social well-being. Significantly, all religions incorporate some version of this ordinary sense into their more ultimate and cosmic visions.

But peacemaking and social wellbeing—even in the ordinary sense—are not about mere tolerance or simply helping different communities get along better. Tolerance is, of course, important and, in some cases, a critical first step. But the bigger aim of interreligious peacemaking is not *cold tolerance* as much as *active collaboration* for mutual flourishing. Put differently, interreligious peacemaking is not simply about neutralizing hostilities, but creating equitable opportunities for flourishing.

A focus on mutual flourishing also reiterates and expands the earlier point about the relevance of religion in the world today. To illustrate this, it has often been assumed that the big challenges of the twenty-first century—including progressive ecological devastation, aggressive nationalisms, ever-widening discrepancies of power and wealth, the global mental health crisis, and others—can be diagnosed and addressed without significant reference to religion. This is an assumption that scholars call "secular myopia." Appleby (2014) highlights a stark example of secular myopia when he notes that religion is mentioned in passing only once in the 750-page history of the World Bank and its work at the forefront of international development and poverty reduction. The clear implication is that religion has little or nothing constructive to offer when addressing the world's major problems. Such short-sighted postures have been standard in development circles for decades. But as we have seen, scholars like Appleby (1999), Volf (2017), Katherine Marshall (2013), and a growing chorus of others now demonstrate that secular myopia not only fails to adequately address the *challenges* that religion presents in the world today, but also overlooks the multiple *resources and contributions* religions can make toward sustainable solutions.

Such an acknowledgement also allows us to clarify different aspects of peacemaking and the various terms that describe them. For example, it is increasingly noted that interreligious peacemaking does not simply pursue what peace theorists call "negative peace" (i.e., the *absence* of violent conflict between religious communities), but also "positive peace" (i.e., the *presence* of harmony and mutual flourishing).[15] This distinction also highlights the differences between "peacekeeping" (i.e., protecting against the emergence of open hostilities) and "peacemaking" (i.e., working for ecosystems of equitable flourishing), and between "disruptive peacemaking" (i.e., breaking cycles of hostility) and "constructive peacemaking" (i.e., active

---

[13] Here I draw on Charles Taylor (2011, 105).

[14] This section draws on Barton (2022, 49–53).

[15] The contrast between negative and positive peace has been common in peace studies since the 1960s. While the concepts are not intended to be pitted against one another, a certain priority is given to positive peace. In other words, while negative peace is important and sometimes even urgent (the containment of open violence sometimes must take precedence), it is embedded within the larger goals of positive peace and human flourishing. When those larger goals are neglected, "peace" ends up being reduced to mere security issues or crisis management or, at best, signed truces and peace agreements. Johan Galtung (1969; 1985) is especially associated with the classic formulation of these terms and ideas.

collaborations for mutual benefit).[16] These distinctions and nuances also demonstrate the fact that peace, in its positive sense, cannot be understood apart from justice, and vice versa. This is captured in Susan Thistlethwaite's (2012) description of "interfaith just peacemaking" and by the blended term "justpeace," which is becoming increasingly common in peace studies (Lederach and Appleby 2010, 24).

In the end, anyone who wishes to understand the world and address issues related to societal wellbeing must take religion seriously both in terms of its challenges and its peaceable contributions.

Conclusion: The Risk and Hope of Christian Peacemaking

Given the context of this article and journal, I conclude by offering reflections on a few Christian anchor points for this discussion.

When it comes to interreligious peacemaking, there are two misguided postures that sometimes have currency in Christian circles. On the one hand, some equate peacemaking and interreligious cooperation with religious compromise and even spiritual weakness. Relatedly, others assume that peacemaking is incompatible with the exclusive claims of the faith or, at least, that peacemaking efforts should take a back seat to mission efforts such as proselytization. Both of these postures, I argue, are caricatures of a Christian vision of peacemaking.

For one thing, the idea that peacemaking reflects spiritual weakness does not square with the overall vision of discipleship and sacrificial love found in the pages of the New Testament. Take, for example, Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that includes him saying, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). Even a quick perusal of Jesus' teachings in this sermon clearly shows that peacemaking is not understood as something soft and passive, but is part of the radical and demanding call of discipleship. We can also consider the way the Apostle Paul links "spiritual fervor" and "zeal" with attempts to "live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:11, 18), or how the author of Hebrews links holiness with making "every effort to live in peace with everyone" (Hebrews 12:14). From these and many other passages, it is clear that the peacemaking envisioned in the New Testament is central to discipleship and linked to spiritual vitality and courage, not weakness and compromise.

On the other hand, even Christians who embrace peacemaking as part of discipleship often resist notions of exclusivity and judgment, assuming they are incompatible with the call to kindness, hospitality, and inclusivity. Jesus, however, does not seem to resist defining his work and the Christian Gospel in exclusive terms. The pertinent question, however, has to do with the *content* and *parameters* of Gospel exclusivism. Much could be said here, but the relevant point is demonstrated in a passage from the *Gospel of Luke* when Jesus sends his followers out into various towns and villages with a mission:

"I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves… Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you… But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you'" (Luke 10:5–6, 10–11).

I can note three things here. First, Jesus clearly does not shy away from using exclusive and judgmental language in this passage, but his exclusivism is not based on things typically associated with religious exclusivism today. For example, this exclusivism is not based on people's religious standing or identity, or agreement on specific theological claims, or commitment to specific political causes of the day. Rather, *the exclusivism of Jesus is specifically based on people's willingness to embrace his radical mission of peace*. In other words, at least in this passage, peacemaking is the Gospel litmus test.

Second, this mission of peace is not for the faint of heart; it involves risk and requires courage. Part of this is due to the fact that, in this violent and hostile world, peacemakers often feel like lambs among wolves. As such, peacemaking always carries the potential for rejection and opposition. This is part of the logic of Paul's encouragement in Romans: "*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you*, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18, emphasis added). In short, while the peaceable call of Jesus is unequivocal, there is no guarantee that it will work, at least in the short term. For this reason, peacemaking requires not only courage, but a trusting faith that God will use our work in ways that we may not immediately see.

Third and finally, while there are no short-term guarantees of success, Jesus clearly believes that sending out his small band of Galilean peacemakers, like lambs among wolves, opens the possibilities of kingdom hospitality, healing, and the defeat of Satan (Luke 10:8–9, 18). In other words, peacemaking is a powerful force in the world. It is not mere wishful thinking but is anchored in faith and hope even when, and maybe especially when, success seems unlikely and optimism

[16] See Barton (2022, 49–52, 139–140).

is in short supply.[17] And actually, while the task is often daunting, extensive research now demonstrates that small-scale nonviolent peacemaking campaigns by ordinary citizens are more likely to bring about large-scale societal changes than armed conflicts or the work of elite political actors.[18] In other words, research shows what Jesus knew all along: humble grassroots efforts for peace, against all seeming odds, can change the world.

To end where we started, Salman Rushdie is certainly right that peace feels like a pipedream in today's world ("a fantasy born of a narcotic smoked in a pipe") (2023). But faith and hope call Christians to extend peace anyway, radically and impartially, and to be ready to collaborate with all peaceable people, trusting God to steer all good efforts toward divine completion (Philippians 1:6).

References

Akyol, Mustafa. 2021. *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Alessandra, Tony, and Michael J. O'Connor. 1998. *The Platinum Rule: Discover the Four Basic Business Personalities and How They Can Lead You to Success*. New York: Grand Central Publishing.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2006. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: Norton.

Appleby, Scott. 1999. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

——. 2014. "Religion and Peacebuilding: The Necessary Art of Specialization." *University of California Television (UCTV)*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uf51nK2El0I

Armstrong, Karen. 2006. *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*. New York: Anchor Books.

——. 2014. *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*. New York: Knopf.

Assmann, Jan. 2010. *The Price of Monotheism*. Translated by Robert Savage. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Barton, John D. 2022. *Better Religion: A Primer for Interreligious Peacebuilding*. Waco: Baylor University Press.

Boyd, Gregory A. 2018. *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Cavanaugh, William T. 2009. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Collins, Drew. 2021. *The Unique and Universal Christ: Refiguring the Theology of Religions*. Waco: Baylor University Press.

Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu (with Douglas Carlton Abrams). 2016. *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. New York: Avery.

Ero, Comfort, and Richard Atwood. 2024. "10 Conflicts to Watch in 2024." *International Crisis Group*. https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2024

Galtung, Johan. 1969. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research 6* (3): 167–91.

——. 1985. "Twenty-Five Years of Peace Research: Ten Challenges and Some Responses." *Journal of Peace Research* 22 (2): 141–58.

Gandhi, Mohandas K. 2013. *All Men Are Brothers*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Gier, Nicholas F. 2014. "Gandhi, Deep Religious Pluralism, and Multiculturalism." *Philosophy East and West* 64 (2): 325–29.

Haidt, Jonathan. 2013. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Vintage Books.

Hauerwas, Stanley. 1983. *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Hitchens, Christopher. 2007. *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve.

Jenkins, Philip. 2011. *Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses*. New York: HarperOne.

Kant, Immanuel. 1998. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Keown, Damien. 2013. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[17] This implies that hope and optimism are not the same thing. According to Christian theologian Jürgen Moltmann, *optimism* is what we project onto the future based on our own assessments of facts and how well things are going, while *hope* draws on forces beyond human sight and the calculation of facts. See Moltmann (1991; 1996).

[18] Based on decades of longitudinal research across multiple contexts and situations, political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan demonstrate that a small percentage of a population—around 3.5 percent—active in grassroots peacemaking efforts are twice as likely to bring about large societal changes than are military and government efforts. See Barton (2022, 9).

Lederach, John Paul, and R. Scott Appleby. 2010. "Strategic Peacebuilding: An Overview." In *Strategies of Peace: Transforming Conflict in a Violent World.* Edited by Daniel Philpott and Gerard E. Powers, 19–44. New York: Oxford University Press.

Marshall, Katherine. 2013. *Global Institutions of Religion: Ancient Movers, Modern Shakers*. London: Routledge.

Meral, Ziya. 2018. *How Violence Shapes Religion: Belief and Conflict in the Middle East and Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Moltmann, Jürgen. 1991. *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

——. 1996. *The Coming of God: On Christian Eschatology*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Netland, Harold A. 1999. *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*. Vancouver: Regent College Publishing.

Omar, Irfan A., and Michael K. Duffey, eds. 2015. *Peacemaking and the Challenge of Violence in World Religions*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.

Pew Research Center. 2020. "Harassment of Religious Groups Continues to be Reported in More than 90% of Countries." *Pew Research Center*. https://www.pewforum.org/2020/11/10/harassment-of-religious-groups-continues-to-be-reported-in-more-than-90-of-countries/

Prothero, Stephen. 2011. *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World*. New York: HarperOne.

——. 2020. *Religion Matters: An Introduction to the World's Religions*. New York: Norton.

Rambachan, Anantanand. 2019. *Essays in Hindu Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Reynolds, Gabriel Said. 2012. *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Rushdie, Salman. 2023 (October 31). "If Peace Were a Prize: The World of Fable Teaches Us That Even Our Most Precious Values Are Contingent, or Won at Great Cost." *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/if-peace-were-a-prize

Schwartz, Regina. 1997. *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Spencer, Robert. 2007. *Religion of Peace? Why Christianity Is and Islam Isn't*. New York: Regnery Publishing.

Taylor, Charles. 2011. "Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights." In *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, 105–123. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Thistlethwaite, Susan Brooks, ed. 2012. *Interfaith Just Peacemaking: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on the New Paradigm of Peace and War*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Uddin, Asma. 2019. *When Islam Is Not a Religion*. New York: London Pegasus Books.

Volf, Miroslav. 2011. *Allah: A Christian Response*. New York: HarperOne.

——. 2013. *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*. Grand Rapids: Brazos.

——. 2017. *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Weinberg, Steven. 1999 (October 21). "A Designer Universe?" *New York Review of Books* 46: 46-48. https://rtraba.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/adesigneruniverse-weinberg.pdf

---

John D. Barton is director of the Center for Faith and Learning at Pepperdine University, where he also teaches in the Religion and Philosophy division. He is the author of *Better Religion: A Primer for Interreligious Peacebuilding* (Baylor University Press, 2022).

Author email: john.barton@pepperdine.edu