

## *The Impact of Religion in Processes Aimed at Achieving Lasting Peace with Sustainable Development: the Colombian Case Study*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Considering the existence of various conflicts, that in one way or another have deeply penetrated the economic, social and political arteries of many countries, it is necessary to study the linear relationship of religion and its social contribution in peacebuilding and human development in conflict settings, such as that of Colombia.

The theoretical analysis proposed is based on the recent declarations of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, who states that: “There can be no peace without development, no development without peace and neither can be achieved without full respect for human rights and the rule of law.” Therefore, the construction of a conceptual framework for religion and peace is studied, including the study of cases that sustain the relationship mentioned above and the precise description of both variables.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Can religion positively impact peacebuilding? Is peacebuilding necessary for sustainable development? Based on these questions, one can formulate the following hypothesis: religion has the capacity to influence processes for achieving peace, including those designed to compromise or negotiate for peace, to build and maintain it (peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding). That contribution to peace is relevant in any of the three areas, but especially in peacekeeping, thanks to the ability of religion to encourage forgiveness and reconciliation.

This analysis has been conducted from the Colombian case study, in which several armed conflict negotiations have taken place in the last 25 years and have had the participation of religious actors.

This study integrates four sections:

1. Armed conflict;
2. Negotiations of the late eighties and early nineties;
3. Deepening of the conflict and the agreement negotiated with the State paramilitary organizations in the 2000s;
4. Current negotiations and their main challenges;

The study then concludes with the lessons and challenges for religious impact for durable and sustainable peace development in Colombia.

It is worth anticipating that, as explained in the conclusion, lessons can be learned from the Colombian process about the impact of religion on achieving peace. Examples include; religion is an actor of public issues related to peace, and it has a unique impact on negotiations, (peacemaking). It can contribute to cultural and social transformations, and sustainable development in general, (peacebuilding), and lastly religion has a non-military impact on preserving peace and preventing further conflict, (peacekeeping), from the inner transformation of persons.<sup>1</sup>

## SECTION 1: GENERAL CONCERNS ON THE ARMED CONFLICT

To begin with, albeit in a very general way, we need to analyze what the armed conflict is. The armed conflict in Colombia is an internal conflict that began in the country in the late 50s. It has a background in the era known as “La Violencia” (The Violence), a period of bipartisan conflict between 1940 and 1958. It is regarded as one of the oldest internal armed conflicts, and we find in its origin and evolution factors such as rural inequality, poverty, limitations on political participation, weakness in the state, and, since 1980, a strengthened presence of drug trafficking (¡BASTA YA! 2014). In other words, all its justifications are situations that relate to poor development.

In reaction to the actions of these groups in the 80s, self-defence groups arose that constituted large armies prone to violent action that reached their greatest expressions in the following 15 years when they also became recognized as paramilitaries (Peñaranda Supelano 2015, and Gutiérrez- Sanín 2005). The violent action of the guerrillas and the paramilitaries left from 1984 to the 1st of November 2015, 7,758,935 officially registered victims of the conflict (Registro Único de Víctimas 2015).

Colombia has conducted negotiation processes to end the armed conflict and build peace with

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<sup>1</sup> According to the United Nations, *Peace-making* or establishing peace is understood as “[...] measures to address conflicts in progress and usually involves diplomatic action to bring hostile parties to a negotiated agreement.”

*Peacebuilding* or the consolidation of peace “[...] aims to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundation for sustainable peace and development. It is a complex, long-term process of creating the necessary conditions for sustainable peace.”

*Peacekeeping* or maintaining peace undertake actions that “[...] facilitate the political process, protect civilians, assist in the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants; support the organization of elections, protect and promote human rights and assist in restoring the rule of law.”

It also undertakes the following: “UN peacekeeping operations may use force to defend themselves, their mandate, and civilians, particularly in situations where the State is unable to provide security and maintain public order.” (Peace and security n.d.)

all these groups who have been responsible for these violations, but none has achieved this entirely. This does not, however, mean that we cannot use this experience as an example of religious participation in order to find its best contributions to the current negotiations.

### **SECTION 2: NEGOTIATIONS DURING THE LATE EIGHTIES AND EARLY NINETIES**

During the late 80s and early 90s, the government conducted peace talks with M-19, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT), the Quintin Lame Armed Movement (MAQL), and other smaller groups, which led to the demobilization of approximately 4700 people (Villarraga Sarmiento 2015a, and Consolidación de Paz 2014).

Given that religion has been one of the main negotiation processes in recent decades, it is necessary to inquire about the role religion had in these consultations. The Catholic Church participated in and signed the political agreement of the 9th of March 1990 with the M-19, as a moral and spiritual guardian of the process, a clear example of the contributions of religion as an actor in peacemaking for achieving agreements. That negotiation produced the demobilization of approximately 1200 men and women (Joya Ibarra 2015).

In the agreement with the indigenous guerrillas, Quintin Lame signed on the 27th of May 1991, the responsibility of compliance control of the arrangement was entrusted only to the Confederation of Evangelical Churches (Giraldo Moreno 2004). This consensus between the parties showed recognition of religion's impartiality and respect for indigenous communities from which members of the subversive group came, able to carry out the particular role of overseeing compliance with the agreement, in a peacekeeping exercise.

Similarly, the peace settlement with the EPL on the 15th of February 1991, in which 2500 combatants were demobilized, was signed by the Catholic Church, represented by the Episcopal Conference and was also granted the role of overseeing compliance with the agreement (Joya Ibarra 2015, and Villarraga Sarmiento 2015a). In the PRT case, the national watchdog of agreements consisted of the Catholic Church (Franco Echavarría 2012). This ratifies that the role of religion then was conceived as guarantor or watchdog of the agreed peace, an exercise in peacekeeping.

Additionally, the agreements embodied the provision of subsidies to the demobilized and the creation of a program of social support concentrated in the areas most affected by violence and poverty, called the National Rehabilitation Plan, PNR, and then the Social Solidarity Network (Villarraga Sarmiento 2015a). These initiatives became public entities, but without direct leadership

of religious organizations that could have meant a process of peacebuilding.

The guerrilla groups agreed to their conversion into political organizations and participation in the National Constituent Assembly, which adopted a new constitution in 1991 (Villarraga Sarmiento 2015a). This policy letter was regarded as the general peace agreement in Colombia, and it was hoped that its mission would overcome the structural causes of the conflict. It would also facilitate the solution with the groups that had not negotiated, which would ensure higher levels of development without it being necessary to have a social or religious leader to build peace directly because it would derive from the agreements in the new constitution (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2011).

In particular, this Constitution appropriated pluralism as the basis of the State, as well as respect for religious freedom and equality (Article 19), which until then had experienced marginal development and justified, in part, the almost exclusive action on public affairs of one church. The constitutional entrenchment of religious freedom legally made visible liberty and equality of religions and the presence of churches as social actors.<sup>2</sup>

The intervention of some religions in the peace agreements, primarily as facilitators (peacemakers) and compliance watchdogs (peacekeeping), granted religion the role of guarantor of peace that in Colombian society was widely understood as fulfilled and completed with the issuance of the new constitution. In the background, the causes of the conflict were not overcome as poverty increased between 1992 and 2000 (Hacia una Colombia Equitativa 2005)<sup>3</sup> In other words, this meant that the agreements lacked a component on assuring development (peacebuilding) with the participation of all social actors, including religions.

That omission explains, in part, why many of the violent expressions continued and deepened in the following decades, as shown in the following section.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information: Hoyos Castañeda, Ilva. 1993. *La Libertad Religiosa en la Constitución de 1991*. (Religious Freedom in the 1991 Constitution). Bogota: Editorial Temis. Prieto, Vicente. 2011. *Estado laico y libertad religiosa: antecedentes y desarrollos de la Constitución colombiana de 1991*. (Secular state and religious freedom: background and developments in the 1991 Colombian Constitution). Bogota: Universidad de La Sabana

<sup>3</sup> In 2012, inequality in Colombia, as measured by the GINI index, was superior to that in 1991: “At the South American level, Colombia is in the third position among the countries with less equality. While there was a decrease in the GINI index from 2010 to 2012, it was less in 1991”. (Contraloría General 2014)

### **SECTION 3: THE DEEPENING OF THE CONFLICT AND THE AGREEMENT NEGOTIATED IN THE 2000S**

Between 1992 and 2002, the violent actions of armed groups operating outside the law increased. Between 1992 and 1995, military operations and combat deaths decreased, but from 1996 to 2002, they increased up until 2002, which is when they reached the highest number in the entire history of the conflict (García Durán 2004). From 1998 to 2001, the country was expecting a negotiation between the government and the FARC, which did not happen.

Since 2002 the country saw the implementation of strong defensive state activity against illegal armed groups in general and the beginning of a negotiation process with the paramilitaries. The latter's links to drug trafficking and the crimes committed, especially massacres generated a profound downgrading in society, which still questions the legitimacy of negotiations with such groups.<sup>4</sup> What role did religion play in the dilemma of perpetuating a war with uncertain outcomes or negotiating with a group criticized for its lack of political orientations and ties, and its numerous criminal acts?

Between 2003 and 2006, the government continued with the paramilitaries. As a result of that process, 31,000 men and women were demobilized. The mediation of the Catholic Church was relevant in conciliation, to the point that the Agreement of Santa Fe de Ralito, initiator of the process, was signed on the 15th of July 2003 by members of the Episcopal Conference, the government and paramilitary groups (Proceso de Paz 2013). As for the 90s, religious action was focused on peacemaking.

The agreements with the paramilitaries focused on the delivery of their weapons, and in bringing them to justice, with the condition of reducing sentences, deriving from a regime that was called justice and peace (Villarraga Sarmiento 2015b). Unlike the processes of the 90s, the AUC scheme focused on justice, not on political participation, and was based on individual demobilization and reintegration (La Reintegración en Colombia 2015).

The general perception of the paramilitaries as perpetrators, also explains that the most developed policies focus on publicizing the truth, to judge them and restore the rights of victims. Peacebuilding concentrates on the development of the conditions of the victims. Even so, managing

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<sup>4</sup> For more information: Rivas Nieto, Pedro and Rey García, Pablo. Las autodefensas y el paramilitarismo en Colombia (1964- 2006) (The self-defence groups and paramilitaries in Colombia 1964-2006). Revista CONfines de Relaciones Internacionales y Ciencia Política. 4/7 January-May 2008. <http://confines.mty.itesm.mx/articulos7 /RivasP.pdf>

to build peace is limited, and on frequent occasions, it does not guarantee non- repetition. Results of a study published in 2013 noted that:

The precariousness of care became evident in the testimonies of displaced families. An example of this is the situation of thousands of people who were forced to abandon their land, homes, and places of work, and who arrived in the city of Medellin in appalling conditions and had to settle in the “Comuna 13”. After years of effort and attempts to acquire a place in the city, they were again victims of dispossession and intra-urban displacement. The lack of care and protection in these cases resulted in re- victimisations, new damages, and losses added to those generated by previous violations (¡BASTA YA! 2014 p.326).

In contrast to the restrictions of the transformation of external conditions of development, the same study on victims highlights how peacekeeping has a dimension of forgiveness in which religion plays a central role:

Given the challenging and dramatic situations experienced, without early psychosocial care and the required support, many victims found in Catholic and Christian churches a prominent place where they were heard and have also given them faith, hope, and comfort. The churches are a privileged place to speak and be heard, of a more liberal character, they not only recognise pain but also seek to give explanations to events exceeding Christian resignation (¡BASTA YA! 2014 p.390).

That peacekeeping which transforms the heart, with the support of religions, is a void in the processes of the 90s, an aspect to strengthen in the attention given to prioritized victims from the negotiations with the paramilitaries, and a factor of particular relevance to provide and strengthen in the current negotiations with the FARC. This seems to be adopted by religions themselves and the current government, in the manner explained in the next section.

#### **SECTION 4: CURRENT NEGOTIATIONS AND PRINCIPLE CHALLENGES<sup>5</sup>**

Since 2012, the dialogue between the national government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as FARC, began. The negotiations are grounded in the “General Agreement on the Termination of Conflict and the Construction of a stable and lasting peace” (Acuerdo General 2012).

The dimension of this negotiation is much broader than the previous due to the FARC guerrillas having the longest historic persistence in Colombia. The FARC possesses more than 20,000 weapons, and their demobilization would mean the reintegration of approximately 22,000 people.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the blood-stained conflict with this organization has generated more than 45,000 direct

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<sup>5</sup> ¡BASTA YA! 2014 p.157

<sup>6</sup> Data from the National Army of Colombia and the Centre for Conflict Studies from the Universidad Javeriana.

victims.<sup>7</sup> Does a negotiation of such importance justify the intervention of religion, or does the mere magnitude of violence from one of the parties in the negotiation demand religion to remain foreign to facilitate or implement any agreement?

This process has seen considerable participation from religious leaders who have joined scenarios to express support and clarify the contributions of religion to peacebuilding through the promotion of sustainable development and the leadership of processes of forgiveness and reconciliation (peacekeeping). An example of this is a letter to President Santos from religious leaders, written in July 2015 where they indicate their willingness to contribute to: “[. . .] recover and position the civic culture of forgiveness as a vaccine and powerful remedy against this evil and eternal return of vengeance” (Las armas son el fracaso n.d.).

Similarly, in November 2015 the Ministry of the Interior organized the “First International Meeting of communities and faith-based organizations: Managers of Peace” attended by 150 religious entities. During the event, the Minister mentioned the important role of religious communities in peacebuilding, emphasizing that: “It makes no sense if the result of the peace agreement is only the silencing of guns rather than transcending to the transformation of the Colombian” (Sala de Prensa 2015a).

In the National Development Plan, a law passed in 2015 that guides transformation efforts to be implemented by the government<sup>8</sup> stands out as the primary objective of peace. Within its specific policies and goals, religions agreed among themselves and with the government to incorporate a standard for developing public policy on religious freedom and equality. Furthermore, they decided to contribute to the aims of peace adopted by Colombia, which are evident manifestations of peacemaking as it adds to the consensus of the negotiating parties, and peacebuilding as it integrates commitments to the country’s development.

Finally, the partial agreements of the negotiation table note that the parties have adopted a

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<sup>7</sup> Data of the Colombian Federation of Victims of the FARC

<sup>8</sup> Law 1753 of 2015. Article 244. Freedom of Religion, Belief and Conscience. The Ministry of Interior, in coordination with the competent authorities, will take action to promote the recognition of the associative forms of civil society based on the principles of religious freedom, of belief and conscience. The national government will formulate and update the public policy on the matter with the participation of religious entities, guaranteeing religious freedom and equality in terms of equality and recognizing their contribution to the common good in the local, regional and national levels

model of territorial peace, which “[. . .] mobilizes the population in those territories (affected by the conflict) towards peace” (Enterese del Proceso de Paz 2015), with public policies that they propose and endorse through different participation mechanisms

It has been possible to demonstrate that in the formation of the community, some implicit cultural negotiation mechanisms occur that simultaneously govern solidarity exchanges (Domínguez 1993). It is for this reason that religious leaders are strong in constructing such a model of territorial peace. Why? Because faith communities, particularly their leaders and temples spread throughout the country, including places the State has not permanently reached. They are, therefore, a tool that facilitates direct interaction with the community and building models of conflict resolution adapted to the real circumstances and context of each group, and therefore compatible with the scheme of territorial peace.

In particular, religious work on forgiveness and reconciliation exert an essential part of religion in the same territories as the actors who were in conflict before or victims with their aggressors, creating an opportunity for religious organizations to contribute to preserving peace from the convictions and spiritual experiences of each individual.

This was mentioned by the Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Colombia, Juan Fernando Cristo Bustos, who recently invited all the churches and religions of the country to unite for peace, under the following terms:

“You are critical to help us in our search to end the conflict, because signing an agreement in Havana is just the starting point, but in the regions of Colombia is where this purpose is truly fulfilled and the presence of the churches is very important for this task” (Sala de Prensa 2015b).

The Colombian experience to advance negotiations to end armed conflict with some actors does not amount to a complete absence of war or direct violence. Neither does it lead to a peace consistent in the dynamic balance of social, political, and economic aspects, nor to a holistic peace in a spiritual approach (Armengol 1998). However, it does allow us to identify lessons and challenges to advance partial agreements, and especially a durable peace and sustainable development, as presented in the following conclusion.



### **CONCLUSION: LESSONS AND CHALLENGES OF RELIGIOUS IMPACT FOR DURABLE PEACE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN COLOMBIA**

From the experiences of negotiations made by Colombia in terms of achieving peace, the following lessons and challenges can be highlighted regarding religious impact for the achievement of a lasting peace and sustainable development:

First of all, religion is an actor with presence and legitimacy, which allows actors in the conflict to seek it to facilitate negotiations. According to the Colombian experience, the contribution to peacekeeping is one of the more established roles of religion regarding peace.

As a challenge to that strength, it is desirable for that religious impact to spread to as many actors as possible. In so far as the emergence of a concerted and coordinated interreligious action for peace, it will be possible to approach more actors in the conflict to contribute to peacemaking, and progress could lead to a comprehensive and lasting peace.

Secondly, the role of religion in peacebuilding, in the sense of strengthening sustainable development, involves recognizing that it is not enough to achieve an agreement, even when it involves the preparation and issuance of a new constitution policy. Actions of influence are necessary by implementing programs for victims, and people who have been demobilized and reintegrated into civilian life, and religions have significant advantages in doing this because of the volunteer work they promote, its territorial presence and its permanent communication with communities.

Concerted action between religions and the State, aimed at specific results in specific territories, facilitate the contributions of religion to lasting peace. It also adds to the contribution of religious communities to sustainable development, as recognized in the draft outcome document of the United Nations Summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda. This report states that the 2030 Agenda aims to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom, promoting the construction of peaceful, fair and inclusive societies, which are free from fear and violence.<sup>9</sup> Section 35 of the resolution states that:

Sustainable development cannot be realized without peace and security, and peace and security will be at risk without sustainable development. The new Agenda recognizes the need to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies that provide equal access to justice and that are based on respect for human rights (including the right to development), on the effective rule

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<sup>9</sup> Draft outcome document of the United Nations summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda

of law and good governance at all levels and transparent, efficient and accountable institutions.

Contributing to the 2030 Agenda is the main task of all communities in which social agents must converge on all areas, including religious confessions.

So far, the emphases of the contributions of religion to peace through peacemaking and peacebuilding focus on collective order activities, but can religion make an impact on the individual level and contribute to peace?

A particular contribution of religions is to ensure peace through forgiveness and overcoming the emotional and spiritual wounds left by the conflict in every believer. This recognition of the contribution of religion to peace, through forgiveness and reconciliation, like peacekeeping, has even been made by the Colombian state as it generates individual transformation and collective security, based on the internal development of the people for coexistence with others. Particularly the ability to choose and practice a religion allows those who want to exercise their freedom, as well as religions, to promote the use of participative citizens who, in cases of conflict, appeal to the peaceful treatment of problematic situations (Carrasco and Mayor 2005).

According to Robert Schreiter,

“Despite all the work that must be done from the perspective of the rule of law, economic restructuring, and social reconstruction, reconciliation must also deal with the status of moral order, values and attitudes in a post-conflict society. If a religious tradition has maintained credibility among people, it can serve as a resource to help rebuild the moral fiber of society” (2003).

Additionally, religions maintain and promote truth in its foundations. Establishing the truth about what happened during the time of violence, without further injuring or reviving aggression (peacekeeping), is one of the first and most important steps towards reconciliation.; religions can help with this, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa are a clear example of such participation (Freeman 2006).

The contributions and challenges of religion in building a lasting peace with sustainable development, confirm the importance of their impact and prominent exercise in contributing to the peace born in every being, as the best guarantee of no return to a state of violence.

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