

FOREWORD

On April 21–22, 2001, the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, in cooperation with Princeton University, held a two-day seminar entitled, “Religion, Law and the Role of Force.” Gathered at that round table were many of the pioneers who are leading the inquiry into the role of religion in conflict resolution.

The world’s major religions are all based on profound notions of justice, peace and good works. But, as the twentieth and all the preceding centuries have shown us, these concepts are terrifyingly easy to subvert. The point was keenly made by United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan at a Tanenbaum Center Award Ceremony and Memorial Lecture:

Religion, sadly, has been misused throughout history in the cause of division, discrimination, and even death. From antiquity through the Crusades to the present day, religion has been distorted, turned from a personal matter of faith and sustenance into a weapon of power and coercion. The cry of the soul for meaning, and for God, has been drowned out by the battle cry of those claiming to have God on their side.

How we can shift religion from being part of the problem to being part of the solution: is the issue that motivates the Tanenbaum Center’s programs.

Its mission is to defuse the violence that people do to each other in the name of religion. We are gripped by the conviction that religion can serve as a resource to prevent and resolve deadly conflicts. Religious institutions, religious tenets, religious leaders and other religious actors all bring assets to the table that can be mobilized in dealing with conflict. These may take the form of moral authority, sanctuary, constituencies, communications networks and myriad other resources that range from the theological to the pragmatic.

In recent years, the changing international environment has enhanced the ability of religiously-motivated individuals to influence events and has led to a mounting interest in the helpful role that religion can play in promoting peace and justice. The Tanenbaum Center is committed to exploring what religion can do to achieve these goals and to facilitating efforts to do so. And in so doing, it must grapple with the dilemma of how peacemakers can be true to their own beliefs without demonizing those of others, a move that can only lead to more violence.

One issue of particular interest to us is that of preventing conflict and, should it occur, of alleviating or resolving it. We know that religions differ in how they define the sacred. Those definitions reflect and impact on the cultures in which they arise. Therefore, it is no surprise that religions, religious elements and the state are often in conflict with each other and that the conflict involves force. We must untangle the threads of religion, politics, law and force as a prelude to action. The seminar, whose proceedings appear on these pages, was one attempt to do this and we would like to thank all those who gave time, effort, thought and support to this endeavor.

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