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Bury the Bloody Hatchet: Secularism, Islam, and Reconciliation in Afghanistan

By Eric Patterson

Abstract

When the US negotiated peace with American Indians just a few years after the American Revolution, they used religiously-inspired, culturally relevant symbols to "bury the hatchet." However, the secularist approach to contemporary Western foreign and security policies has largely overlooked, or contemptuously disregarded, the highly religious context of war zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, it is time to consider a religious approach to peacemaking in Afghanistan based on Islamic concepts of arbitration and mediation (*sulh*). This paper argues that the larger secularist bias in Western foreign policies have made the West blind to the religious aspects of contemporary global affairs and reports on the one-size-fits-all Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs instituted in Afghanistan following the Tokyo Donor conference of 2003. Finally, this paper articulates Islamic religious concepts that could be the basis for establishing reconciliation between warring parties in Afghanistan.

Buried was the bloody hatchet;
Buried was the dreadful war-club;
Buried were all warlike weapons,
And the war-cry was forgotten;
Then was peace among the nations.
--- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Hiawatha*

In 1759 Shawnee leader Missiweakiwa argued that it was time to "bury the bloody hatchet" with the English, following defeats of Franco-Indian alliance. The practice of "burying the hatchet" was more than a cliché or a novel symbol of peace. Rather, it was rooted in American Indian religious and cultural history, the belief that a divine peacemaker had taught mankind to end violence by burying their weapons and planting a sacred tree of peace. According to Mohawk Chief Jake Swamp, "the Peacemaker gave The Tree of Peace as a symbol of the Great Law of Peace. This is a great white pine tree whose branches spread out to shelter all nations who commit themselves to Peace. Beneath the tree the Five Nations buried their weapons of war; atop the tree is the Eagle-that-sees-far; and four long roots stretch out in the four sacred directions -- the 'white roots of peace.'" Following U.S. independence, American diplomats employed this culturally relevant approach in the first US peace treaty with American Indians, the Treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1784: a hatchet was buried beneath a formal Tree of Peace and a peace pipe was smoked (Yarrow 1987).

In contrast, the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan has lacked thoughtful, culturally and religiously relevant efforts at reconciliation by the US, its NATO allies, or under UN auspices. From 2002 onward, efforts to reconcile Afghanistan's warring parties focused on secular approaches tried (often with only modest success) elsewhere, such as Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR). Such efforts have not halted the violence.

It is time to consider a religious approach to peacemaking in Afghanistan based on Islamic concepts of arbitration and mediation (*sulh*). This paper argues that the larger secularist bias in Western foreign policies have made the West blind to the religious aspects of contemporary global affairs and reports on the one-size-fits-all DDR programs instituted in Afghanistan following the Tokyo Donor conference of 2003. Finally, this paper articulates Islamic religious concepts that could be the basis for establishing the basis for reconciliation between warring parties in Afghanistan.

The Secularist Failings of US Foreign Policy

Although the U.S. is characterized by a diverse, religiously vibrant population it has, until very recently, largely failed to apprehend the religious undertones in its foreign policy, just as it has not organized to engage the religiosity of others. Princeton University professor Robert Keohane writes, "The attacks of September 11 reveal that all mainstream theories of world politics are relentlessly secular with respect to motivation. They ignore the impact of religion, despite the fact that world-shaking political movements have so often been fuelled by religious fervor" (Keohane 2002, 29-43). This secularist bias means that our leaders fails to appreciate the religious dynamics of foreign and security policy or disregard the religious dimension out of lack of tools, disinterest, fear, or antipathy. Cultural and religious blunders in Iraq and Afghanistan provide cases in point. There are at least five reasons that the U.S. and its allies have failed to consider interreligious approaches to ending the conflict in Afghanistan, all rooted in the secularist bias of their foreign policy commitments.

First, a secularist bias has become entrenched in most recent U.S. foreign policy. The classical meaning of "secular" was the social space shared by the sacred and the profane: the present, temporal world with all of its good and evil. However, today the term's popular usage tends to place boundaries around religion; everything outside the formal sphere of organized religion is now "secular." There is obviously a normative connotation in the contemporary evolution of meaning: that religious influences are not welcome outside a narrow sector. This secularist bias consciously restricts or bars religion from the wider public sphere due to concerns that religion is irrational, violent, or difficult to understand. Former Secretary of State Madeline Albright has made this point numerous times in interviews, stating that "Diplomats trained in my era were taught not to invite trouble. And no subject seemed more inherently treacherous than religion" (Albright 2006). The effect of a secularist approach to U.S. foreign policy is that it fails to account for the diversity of religious actors and trends in international affairs, making mutually productive alliances with religious actors impossible. In short, U.S. foreign policy generally does not, but should, take religion and religious actors seriously on their own terms.

Second, modernization theory (wrongly) predicted the end of cultural factors, including religion. Modernization theory, a school of thought about economic and political development, was particularly influential in the decades after World War II and remains influential in Washington and at the UN today. A fundamental tenet of modernization theory expects developing societies and citizens to become secular, bureaucratic, and materialist ("rational") in outlook as they take on aspects of the industrial West. One of America's premiere sociologists of religion and a key exponent of modernization theory in the 1960s says,

> I think what I and most other sociologists of religion wrote in the 1960s about secularization was a mistake. Our underlying argument was that secularization and modernity go hand in hand. With more modernization comes more secularization. It wasn't a crazy theory. There was some evidence for it. But I think it's basically wrong. Most of the world today is certainly not secular. It's very religious. So is the U.S. The one exception to this is Western Europe. One of the most interesting questions in the sociology of religion today is not, "How do you explain fundamentalism in Iran?" but, "Why is Western Europe different?" (Berger 1997, 972-978)

Berger observes that secularization theory is founded upon and asserts a universalist myth developed from the experience of Western history. The lesson that Europeans (and their progeny) drew from their own history was that the defensive wars against expansionist Islam and the subsequent Crusades, as well as the post-Reformation "wars of religion" ending in the Peace of Westphalia, "proved" that public religion was dangerous. The "lesson" (myth) continues: European governments banished religion from politics and the last four hundred years demonstrate the steady advancement toward the secular, peaceful apogee of civilization that Europe enjoys today—and which is available to all who will severely circumscribe religion in public life in favor of secular governance.

Although Western Europe has become increasingly secular over the past century in tandem with many of the features we associate with modernization, it seems to be the exception, not the rule. Indeed, there is a certain amount of self-serving academic, and normative, smugness in the claim that increased modernization results in secularization, but major trends of the past half century suggest that the reality for most people in much of Asia, Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the United States is that religious faith continues to play a role in individual and community life. In fact, religion's role is growing in many places. Many social scientists and policy practitioners, trained in Western universities, have been shocked by the reemergence of ethnic, cultural, national, and religious identities that were obscured by the ideological cleavages of the Cold War. In practice, U.S. leaders have largely continued to follow the dictates of modernization theory, thinking that economic inputs alone, such as road and school building, will advance our foreign policy objectives in religious cultures from Kandahar to Kuala Lumpur.[1]

A third reason for Western secularist approaches is that foreign policy "schools" fail to provide intellectual resources for engaging religious dynamics. Foreign policy practitioners tend to be schooled in two main traditions of international relations theory: realism and liberalism (liberal internationalism). The first, realism, focuses primarily on the interactions of governments as they compete for security, power, prestige, and material interests. Realists like Henry Kissinger see international affairs as anarchic, competitive, and driven by the national interest. Such a worldview generally dismisses religion as irrelevant, be it embodied in non-state entities or the soft, but real, power of transnational actors such as Pope Benedict XVI or domestic heavyweights like Nigeria's Anglican Archbishop Peter Akinola. Liberal internationalists are more willing to acknowledge transnational and international actors such as the United Nations or multi-national corporations as well as the variety of domestic politics, but likewise give religion short shrift. Like realists, they tend to narrowly focus on materialist definitions of interests, rather than how religious and cultural identities inform the behavior of individuals and societies. Consequently, many liberal internationalist policy prescriptions offer economic and political development (democracy) without clear reference to how such *institutions* relate to embedded *identities* and *cultures* abroad. Liberal internationalists tend to highly value political processes (e.g. dialogue, consensus-building) and focus on political outcomes, whereas many people of faith world-wide are equally concerned with first principles and ultimate questions.

Fourth, foreign policy practitioners are not trained to deal with religious phenomena. Distinct from individual interest in matters of faith or university education in world religions is the issue of professional know-how: a government representative may or may not be personally religious but could work hard to develop professional understanding of faith and culture relevant to their posting. However, the U.S. does little in this arena. The secondary education of most of our diplomatic corps is law school or graduate study in international relations, steeped in the theories of realism and liberal internationalism discussed above. Furthermore, their superb on-the-job professional training on issues of economics, law, and development is weak in preparing our personnel for engaging religious actors and publics overseas. Former Secretary of State Albright captured this lacuna well: "When I was secretary of state, I had an entire bureau of economic experts I could turn to, and a cadre of experts on nonproliferation and arms control…With the notable exception of Ambassador [for International Religious Freedom] Robert Seiple, I did not have similar expertise available for integrating religious principles into our efforts at diplomacy. Given the nature of today's world, knowledge of this type is essential" (Albright 2006).

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[1] Another way that the myth is inaccurate has been explored by scholars like José Casanova, Daniel Nexon, and Daniel Philpott is that Europe did not privatize or banish religion—European governments clipped the transnational Church in favor of nationalized religion on the principle that the king could choose the national faith, "*Cuius regio, eius religio*." Hence, many people and communities within these societies continued to exercise religious faith intertwined with national identity (i.e. Spanish-Catholic, northern German-Lutheran). See Daniel Philpott, "The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations," *World Politics* 55 (October 2002); Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Daniel H. Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe: Religious Conflict, Dynastic Empires, and International Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Finally, separation of church and state is a contested construct, not only in the US but in Europe as well. It is unhelpful when US government officials set aside religious actors, themes, and issues as beyond the pale because of ambiguously-defined "separation of church and state" or "Establishment Clause issues." For some, this is laziness; for others it is trepidation. Either way, the results can be disastrous. Uncertainty about the boundaries of church-state issues often make government agents overly cautious and reluctant to acknowledge, engage, and support interreligious dialogue, even when such actions are perfectly legal.

Failed Secularist Approaches to Afghan Reconciliation

The US and its allies, as well as the UN, have simply not done a good job in engaging religious leaders and themes in interreligious efforts to "bury the bloody hatchet" in Afghanistan. Good faith efforts were made over a number of years to establish the rule of law, demobilize combatants, and develop a government of national unity. These approaches, however, were rooted in secularist cookie-cutter models employed with only limited success elsewhere. Such approaches tend to fail, in part, because they do not engage disenfranchised leaders (e.g. the Taliban) and because they lack culturally-relevant mechanisms for peace.

Following the formal defeat of al Qaeda and the Taliban in December 2001, wide-ranging efforts followed the Bonn Agreement to build Afghan institutions, invest in development and reconstruction, and ensure that Afghan citizens not only had livelihoods, human rights, and civil liberties, but also that violent jihadists no longer had a base to work from in Afghanistan.2 In 2003 the United Nations Development Program launched a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) campaign like those previously implemented in other post-conflict environments from the Balkans to Africa to Central America. It was titled the "Afghan New Beginnings Program" (ANBP). The goal was to demobilize the many armed competing power centers around the country, thus diluting the power of warlords and the potential for renewed conflict. ANBP had a budget of $140.9 million and a mandate to demoblilize 100,000 soldiers from the umbrella Afghan Militia Forces who helped topple the Taliban. Senior leaders were often co-opted by giving them high-ranking government positions (UNDP 2008).

Combatants who demobilized participated in a formal military ceremony, often with a military parade or review, handed in a weapon (often an antique model inferior to what they kept hidden), attended a seminar, and received compensation consisting primarily of food and clothing. The former militia members, after two decades of war, were to return to their families and become productive citizens. According to the International Center for Transitional Justice, over 62,000 former combatants, 11,000 children, and nearly 25,000 women were recipients of assistance through ANBP at a cost of $100 million. Moreover, much of the heavy weaponry (e.g. tanks) was turned in to cantonment sites (ICTJ 2008).

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2 Technically speaking, the ANBP program followed the Tokyo Donor conference of February 2003. Japan was to take the lead country on Security Sector Reform (as agreed in Bonn).

A second phase of DDR began with Presidential Decree 50 in the summer of 2004. This declared any extant militias to be "illegally armed groups" and essentially was a final chance for such individuals and their leaders to demobilize. With the advent of national assembly elections the next year and concerns about Afghan security, a second formal program called Disarmament of Illegally Armed Groups (DIAG) began. The "carrot" was that the leaders of illegally armed groups (regional and local militias) could participate in the elections if their groups disarmed; the "stick" was that those who had not/would not disband their fighting forces were barred from office. DIAG was largely unsuccessful except in a few cases.

Finally, it should be noted that the government of Afghanistan's Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) did adopt an Action Plan on Peace, Reconciliation, and Justice in December 2005 (AIHRC 2009). Four years later, there are few results, particularly as the security situation has deteriorated with a rebounding Taliban. The Action Plan called for a) formal remembrance of past victims of abuse, b) human rights (and corruption) vetting of government officials, c) truth seeking, d) reconciliation, and e) creation of a Task Force to recommend further measures (ICTJ 2008, 3).

It is worth noting that these approaches were all good faith efforts based on what was considered state-of-the art Western approaches to post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction. There are numerous reasons why these approaches have not brought safety and security to Afghanistan, but one of them is simply that these efforts often did not take root because they lacked a cultural and religious relevancy to the local population. Secular human rights approaches, rather than those that appeal to the religious authority of Islam, seem unlikely to provide a firm foundation for respecting human rights in Afghanistan. Secular reconciliation efforts that disregard the cultural symbols of weapons and neglect the role of tribal and religious leaders in waging peace have proven their futility in engaging so-called "reconcilable" elements of the Taliban and other illegally armed groups. What is needed to complement other efforts is a religiously relevant approach to dialogue and reconciliation. Islamic concepts of arbitration and consultation may provide such an approach.

Reconciliation and Islam

There are multiple conflicts overlapping in Afghanistan and Pakistan: the violent Taliban and its al Qaeda associates attacking indigenous government and civilian centers in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the intervention of NATO following the September 11, 2001 attacks and ongoing operations against insurgents in Afghanistan and Pakistan's semi-autonomous tribal areas, the looming Kashmir question and stepped-up Islamist attacks in India, and the regional pressure of Shia Iran (long a rival to Sunnis and Hindu Indians alike), not to mention lethal criminality and warlordism. Many in the conflict justify their position based on their understanding of Islam. Thus, if there is to be reconciliation (as opposed to withdrawal or annihilation), Islamic theological and juridical resources need to be associated with practical political efforts.

The distinction between *dar al harb* and *dar al islam* is well-known. The latter refers to the world governed by Islam, the "abode of peace" where humanity is in right relationship to God and neighbor through submission to Islam. The former, the "abode of war," is that region, both temporal and moral, ungoverned by the law of Islam. Many believe—particularly those associated with violent Islamists like al Qaeda—that this portends and justifies violence against non-Muslims, at least in lands formerly conquered by Muslims or on the borders of Muslim countries. However, some (particularly from the al-Shafi school of jurisprudence) conceive of a third model, *dar al-sulh* or the *dar al-`ahd*, relationships of negotiated peace between Muslims and their neighbors (Johnson 2009).

From the time of Mohammed, Islam has had a tradition of arbitration and reconciliation, both internally and with non-Muslims: *sulh*. Mohammed (at times) sought peaceful accommodation with his Jewish and Christian neighbors and the fourth caliph—Ali—accepted arbitration (*tahkim*) with the governor of Syria over the objections of many of his hard-line supporters. The Quran and many jurists emphasize the importance of *sulh* as a binding contract for peace. (El Fadl 2003, 194-195). Muslims historically signed treaties with numerous non-Muslim neighbors, including Syria, Armenia, Cyprus, and Sudan (Nyang and Johnston 2003, 220). UCLA expert Khaled Abou El Fadl argues:

> Muslim jurists regularly cited the arbitration precedent in support of the desirability of negotiated settlements in political, commercial, and personal disputes. Although the arbitration incident sheds little light on recommended parameters of compromise, it does help to establish the normative value of compromise in Islamic political and legal discourse (El Fadl 2003, 185).

What of those who refuse to participate in efforts to resolve the conflict? According to El Fadl, the Quran (49:9) calls such people “transgressors” for violating the need for peace, and they are to be fought against:

> If two parties among the believers fall into a quarrel, make peace between them. But if one of the parties transgresses against the other, then fight all against the transgressor until it complies with God’s command. If it complies, then make peace between them with justice and fairness (El Fadl 184).

Furthermore, according to El Fadl, Islam does have a tradition of dealing with Muslim secessionists and rebels. If the rebels’ underlying motivation is principled (*ta’wil*), “the rebels [were] to be treated leniently…they acquired a protected status known as *bughah*.” Such rebels operated from an authentic normative commitment, not for the sake of violence itself, greed, kin- or tribal affiliation. El Fadl argues that conflict resolution—rather than battlefield domination or extermination—is the appropriate step with such rebels, providing them with a forum to air their grievances and attempting to reconcile them peacefully. Moreover, defeated rebels could not be “executed, tortured, or imprisoned” or lose their properties, but had to be reconciled to the community.[3]

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[3] Ibid.

Towards Afghan Reconciliation in 2010

Billions of dollars have been spent by the UN and donor countries on Afghanistan and hundreds of millions provided in various forms of assistance to Pakistan. The international community has tried a variety of efforts to ensure a post-conflict future for Afghanistan that no longer threatens others and provides security, opportunity, and human rights protections for its citizens. In short, the West would like to get out and allow the locals to run their own affairs, assuming that Western citizens are safe from Islamist terrorism at home. The West should find a way forward that is culturally relevant, provides order, and reconciles many of the "accidental guerrillas" in Afghanistan and Pakistan while buttressing representative government, the rule of law, and human rights.

However, in some parts of the country violence has steadily increased in intensity over the past few years and the Obama Administration and its allies will send over 35,000 additional troops to Afghanistan in early 2010. Past efforts at reconciliation seem to have been unsuccessful, particularly in efforts under the influence of the Taliban. What are the prospects for some form of reconciliation, and what steps must be taken?

Assuming no game-changing event occurs (such as India invading Pakistan, Iran invading Herat, etc.), the Afghan government and its Western allies must try to achieve a basic level of security. Establishing a modest, durable security environment is the key to Afghanistan's future, and that future will have to include some sort of reconciliation with individuals and families that in the past have been associated with the Taliban—perhaps even senior figures in the Taliban.

That reconciliation must first be rooted in religiously and culturally relevant ideas, such as arbitration and consultation. Additionally, any arrangement that brings the Taliban in "from the cold" will have to be appealing enough to cause a reappraisal of their interests. That appraisal might be based on major military victories that leave the Taliban and its tribal allies stricken and on the verge of collapse, allowing its members to switch sides. A reframing of the Taliban's, and tribal, interests might include the opportunity for it to participate in governance, such as an evolution to being a political party. We have seen elsewhere how rebel groups can disband and become part of the political process, as occurred with Colombia's M-19 in 1991. Most importantly, however, such a "reframing" of its interests could take place in the context of arbitration (*sulh*) and/or a formal Afghan *loya jirga*.

Counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen, and others, argue that it is possible to strip away "second- and third-tier Taliban" from the hardened, "irreconcilable" leadership of the Taliban (and al Qaeda) (Kilcullen 2009). This may be accomplished primarily by reaching out to tribal leaders as points of authority rather than the Taliban's leadership, and could follow the first model of reconciliation noted above. For such to happen, there would need to be a reappraisal of interests combined with religiously-informed appeals to dialogue, not unlike what happened in Iraq's Sunni Awakening in 2007. In the Iraqi case, not only did the West commit to increasing security (through the "surge"), but tribal and religious leaders concluded that al Qaeda in Iraq was morally corrupt and that it was no longer in Sunni interests to avoid national reconciliation. A major summit of religious leaders—the Iraqi Interreligious Congress of July

2007 which included Muqtada al Sadr and dozens of other key religious figures—helped establish the basis for national reconciliation (Maki 2008).

Related efforts toward reconciliation could include religiously-relevant post-conflict efforts at justice and reconciliation, be it through a blanket amnesty rooted in "forgiveness" or like the model employed in East Timor. The government of East Timor had a two-tier transitional justice system. The first included a Special Crimes Investigation Unit and courts to try egregious crimes, defined in terms of the Rome Statute (war crimes), murder, and rape. However, the vast majority of East Timorese went before a separate juridical institution based in local communities, often including religious leaders. Perpetrators confessed their guilt publicly and were "sentenced" to modest community service. This quasi-amnesty allowed thousands to return to their homes while paying their debt to society and establishing the "truth" of what happened (Stahn 2001).

Conclusion

When the US negotiated peace with American Indians just a few years after the American Revolution, they used religiously-inspired, culturally relevant symbols to "bury the hatchet." However, the secularist approach to contemporary Western foreign and security policies has largely overlooked, or contemptuously disregarded, the highly religious context of war zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan. This secularist bias, rooted in Western thinking on international relations and the appropriate role of disestablished (and therefore no longer dangerous) religion, has plagued our understanding of the dynamics of conflict and the possibilities of peace, from the Iranian Revolution of 1979 through the Afghanistan conflict of 2009.

What is to be done? One aspect of a religiously aware approach to ending conflict in the region is to engage theologically relevant approaches to mediation, arbitration, and consultation that are part of Islamic theology and history. In the case of Afghanistan, establishing a long-term peace that most Afghan citizens can embrace must include dialogue and reconciliation informed in part by Islamic principles. Moreover, it is likely that Muslim leadership on this issue (perhaps in the way that Malaysia has been a peace agent between Mindanao and Manila), such as through the offices of the Organization of Islamic Countries, may be the best way to mobilize religious resources to bury the hatchet in Afghanistan.