

WHAT FAITH-BASED DIPLOMACY CAN OFFER IN KASHMIR

by Daniel Philpott and Brian Cox

As faith-based intermediaries in a land that *The Economist* has called “the world’s most dangerous neighborhood,” we were not encouraged when, at the start of one of our seminars on reconciliation, a participant rose to launch a volley of invective against his rival ethnic community. Our enraged orator was a Hindu Pandit, a member of an ethnic group that fled their homes fearing the attacks of Muslims shortly after violence broke out in the Kashmir Valley in 1989. They settled in squalid camps in Jammu, where Hindus are a majority.

At the end of the three-and-a-half-day seminar, our attention was naturally piqued when the same man stood up again before the participants, but with a different message. He apologized to Muslims for his insensitivity to their suffering in the conflict, and forgave them for their violence against Hindus. What had elicited the change? The man had experienced telling his story to Muslims for the first time. The seminar allowed him to understand the complexity of social justice, and to come to terms with the historical wounds of his community, ultimately moving him to embrace apology and forgiveness. All this was accomplished in an atmosphere of religious ritual and reflection. We learned that Muslim members of the seminar leadership team had stayed up with him into the wee hours of the morning to hear about his suffering and to express remorse for the plight of the Pandits. Might the transformation of this Pandit’s heart bear an important resource for high-level peace negotiations?

Over the past eighteen months, new possibilities for negotiating the end of the war in Kashmir have emerged. In February 2004, former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf committed their countries to comprehensive peace talks. Meanwhile, the Indian government has begun to talk with Kashmiri separatists. In recent months momentum has accelerated. In February 2005, the two states established a bus service across the Line of Control (LOC) that separates Indian- and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir, an important symbol of their willingness to negotiate. Now, they are stepping up the pace of their talks. Progress is essential: the conflict in Kashmir has taken the lives of somewhere between 30,000 and 80,000 people, and is the most likely source of a nuclear conflict in the world today.

Peace in Kashmir, however, will not come easily. Pakistan has long maintained that in 1947 India illegally seized the part of Kashmir it now controls, and that Kashmiris are entitled to a plebiscite to determine whether all of Kashmir will accede to India or Pakistan. If Pakistan were to compromise on some of these claims, it would likely face the violent internal opposition of Muslim militant groups. For its part, the Indian government maintains that Kashmir is not a disputed territory; it is a legal state in the Indian federal union, one whose sovereign member-

ship requires no plebiscite. India views the LOC as a legitimate international border. India further insists that Pakistan must also cease supporting cross-border terrorism.

Most difficult of all are historical wounds. Muslim patriots nurture communal memories of thousands of martyrs who died for the cause of *azad*, or freedom, and of decades of rigged elections, denials of democracy, and human rights abuses at the hand of the Indian government. Kashmiris loyal to India also remember the thousand lives lost, many of them civilian, at the hands of Muslim militants.

Activists, analysts, and officials have proposed scores of schemes for a settlement, involving varying arrangements of borders, sovereignty, power-sharing institutions, and economic transfers. It is highly uncertain whether or not negotiation on these issues alone can overcome long memories and still distant positions. Even a comprehensive settlement may fail to endure, as Bosnia, Angola, Northern Ireland, and Israel all attest.

Something else is needed. What diplomats often overlook are resources for peace outside of official channels. For example, Dennis Ross, chief U.S. negotiator of the Israel/Palestine 1993 Oslo Accords, commented in a speech in 1999 " [I]f there is one area that has been neglected but needs to be worked on between the Israelis and the Palestinians, it is the people-to-people component . . . Peace will not last if it is made only by the negotiators and the leaders." Ross's words apply in Kashmir as aptly as they do in Israel/Palestine.

Herein lies the importance of the transformed Hindu Pandit. Through a seminar rooted in religious faith, he experienced a change in heart and began to restore his relationships with Muslims. Repeated and integrated into a strategy for an entire country, this kind of initiative can be called faith-based diplomacy. If Ross is correct, then faith-based diplomacy, like other unofficial "track two" efforts, may well deserve the attention of official, "track one" diplomats.

Track two diplomacy—that which is practiced by actors outside of official "track one" channels—cannot replace the power and authority that government officials bring to negotiations. Yet actors who are unchained from official objectives and national interests can exercise a freedom that allows them to create initiatives for a lasting peace, often in unconventional and surprising ways. Faith-based actors will be particularly important in regions like South Asia, where religion is integral to culture and politics. Still, how might faith-based diplomacy—the experience of the Pandit and scores of others like him—specifically create "capital" for the peace process between India and Pakistan, particularly as it involves Kashmir?

Faith-based diplomacy, in fact, can yield two kinds of assets. One is the transformation of the hearts of grassroots and civil society leaders. As Ross suggests, a sustainable settlement depends vitally on such leaders. Their choice to become either actively supportive, violently oppositional, or passively indifferent to a settlement may well determine whether it succeeds. The strategic role of civil society has indeed informed some of the great faith-inspired political movements of the twentieth century—the American civil rights movement, India's colonial independence, and the movements that toppled authoritarian regimes in Poland, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Though their targets were structures of injustice rather than com -

munal conflict, their strategy is portable: impart to cadres a vision of justice rooted in faith that can motivate a political movement.

In our work in Kashmir, civil society leaders have come to embrace a vision of reconciliation through a seminar in which they reflect on what their own faith traditions teach about subjects like conflict resolution, social justice, healing historical wounds, and forgiveness, and on the meaning of these teachings for themselves and their communities. Since September 2000 working on behalf of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, we have conducted eight of these seminars, involving more than 400 members of Kashmiri civil society on both sides of the LOC. The results have sometimes been dramatic, as in the case of the Pandit, and of a Muslim man who forgave militants eight years after they had killed his father and brother and had riddled his own body full of bullets. More common are simpler expressions of a willingness to embrace and promote reconciliation like these from a recent seminar: "Religion is often blamed for conflicts. This is a whole new concept. Reconciliation is in the religious texts. We can study that and bring reconciliation to this place. My heart has been changed."

Such transformations alone, though, are not enough. Civil society leaders need support to connect and coordinate with each other. The networking of civil society leaders committed to a common cause is a second asset for peace that faith-based diplomacy begets. In his book, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), political scientist Ashutosh Varshney demonstrates that in Indian cities where Hindus and Muslims are connected through civil society organizations, communal riots are much less likely to occur. A key tool in this networking is spiritually based friendships, ones created through conversations that reach beyond positions and arguments to the sharing of experiences of the loss of loved ones, property, homes, businesses, and careers. Rooted in mutual concern about spiritual welfare, such friendships create a level of trust that allows effective cooperation.

In Kashmir, our seminars have created linkages across civil society organizations by giving rise to a core group of committed leaders and a network of cell groups that meet together for mutual encouragement in reconciliation. The resulting connections are sometimes surprising. At recent conferences in London and Geneva, leaders from both sides of the LOC who had never met before discovered a common commitment to faith-based reconciliation formed through their involvement in the seminars. We have also established spiritual friendships with various top political, religious, and military leaders.

Recommendations for the Kashmir Peace Process

How can these assets of transformation and connectivity be brought to bear on the Kashmir peace process? We propose an organic linkage between civil society initiatives and track one negotiations. It can be forged through creating two Kashmir Diplomacy Roundtables, one on each side of the LOC, that would connect faith-based diplomacy in civil society to the work of track one officials involved in the peace process. Roundtables can be fruitful in three key stages of a settlement: attainment, maintenance, and deepening.

Roundtables would convene regularly—quarterly or semi-annually—and include diplomats from foreign ministries and related liaison offices, representatives from Kashmiri civil society, and nongovernmental organizations involved in faith-based diplomacy. To minimize the risk of participation, the roundtables could meet privately, away from media exposure, and on separate sides of the LOC. Over time, though, links between the roundtables could be forged across borders, creating a new dimension of support for the peace process.

The story of the transformed Pandit suggests one way in which a roundtable contributes to a settlement and its sustenance. The return of the Pandits to their homes in the Kashmir Valley is one of several thorny problems in the negotiations. The Pandits' need for security in the Valley, compensation for lost property, and reconciliation of the hostilities all stand in the way of an agreement, and will likely hamper its implementation. Over the past four years, several Muslim core group members have traveled to the Pandit settlement camps to meet with their leaders, speak at community meetings, hear the Pandits' stories, apologize for their fate at the hands of Muslims, invite their return, and offer assistance in the transition. By and large, the Pandits have welcomed the visits, and have showed an increased willingness to return. Through the roundtable mechanism, official negotiators now might become linked with these track two efforts, gaining confidence that the Pandit issue can be resolved and discovering allies and expertise for this resolution.

The Pandit issue, of course, is only one of many that divide India, Pakistan, and the several factions of Kashmiris. It does illustrate, however, how track two efforts informed and motivated by faith can be linked with track one efforts. Roundtables can create this link and make policymakers aware of civil society reconciliation initiatives, which can encourage them to lend their support to these initiatives and to cultivate the assent of civil society and grass roots leaders for an agreement. Several steps are recommended to create and to implement these roundtables:

- Faith-based intermediaries should convene two concurrent Kashmir Diplomacy Roundtables respectively for participants in India and Pakistan.
- The purpose is to exchange ideas regarding the assets that faith-based civil society initiatives bring to negotiating and to sustaining a peace settlement.
- Faith-based intermediaries should meet quarterly or semi-annually.
- The roundtable goal should be to develop and to carry out concrete initiatives that are important to negotiating and to sustaining a peace and that require their cooperative efforts, such as the return of displaced Hindu Pandits to the Kashmir Valley.
- After each of the two roundtable groups have gained experience working together, they should begin to meet with the other on both sides of the LOC to explore joint initiatives.

Multiplied over several issues and regions, the work of roundtables will bring crucial, but too often overlooked, assets of civil society leaders into the peace process, as well as the fresh, but underemployed, logic of reconciliation. Together, these amount to an innovative approach to resolve international conflicts.