The Role of Identity and Religion in Peace Processes[1]
George Mason University

Overview: While numerous scholars have conducted thorough comparative studies that evaluate the elements that promote or impede the effectiveness of peace accords, the role of identity and religion in these processes remains understudied. Exploring how identity and religion play roles in achieving conflict resolution success offers valuable insights. Lessons drawn from peace processes can prove relevant for addressing other prolonged, ethnonational, and asymmetric conflicts, as well as aiding in the prevention of violence resurgence post-peace agreement. The aim of this study is to explore those factors and processes of identity and religion that address and transform relations between different groups.

Model: The paper draws on significant previous work into the nature of identity-based conflicts. In identity-based conflicts, individuals sharing the same identity display strong loyalty to the group, believing in a shared fate, interests, and experiences of deprivation and stress. Mobilized by leaders, these groups pursue communal goals, aiming to change the existing social situation and confront outgroups in the struggle for power and resources.

A religion lens is then incorporated into the analysis. In many peace agreements, religion, as well as religious leaders, religious organizations, those guided by religion, are not only a key factor in identity dynamics but critical to the success of peace processes. The focus on religion was designed to elicit examples from the cases of different ways religion and religious leaders played a positive, constructive role in peace processes. Too often religion is considered relevant to peace processes only when religion is a core problem or cause of the conflict. However, this ignores the power of organized religion to mobilize citizens. That religion is often essential to peacebuilding because of widespread buy-in from those who might not otherwise be supportive, is crucial for peace processes to be effective and long-lasting.

To further the research a new model is developed:

BRIDGE Model of Identity-Based peace processes

The identity-related mechanisms of peace processes are presented in the BRIDGE Model:
1.   ***B****onding* strategies: promotion of shared values and goals; development of common identity.
2.   ***R****eassuring strategies:* support for freedom of expression, self-determination and autonomy.
3.   ***I****nvolving* strategies: inclusion of multiple actors and parties.
4.   ***D****etermining **G****uides* for addressing the core issues of social identity dynamics, including redefined social boundary, reduced threats, addressed collective traumas, and built trust.
5.   ***E****qualizing* strategies: reduced asymmetry between parties and of the third party.

Bonding strategies foster mutual understanding, interdependence in promoting positive change, and the capacity to discover shared pathways forward. The promotion of shared values of human rights, socio-economic development, and common faith (deep commitment to spiritual beliefs and sacred values independent of a specific religion) are connected to sustainable and successful peace processes. Moreover, the values of human rights and justice should be prioritized over values of economic development and prosperity as, in some cases, peace is linked to economic development as a dominating shared goal without achieving equality and inclusion of disadvantaged groups or addressing their traumas. Successful peace processes involve the formation of common- regional or national- identity. There are compelling correlations between the formation of civic meaning of national identity and sustainability of peace processes. A multicultural meaning of identity is linked to less successful processes. A parochial ethnic concept or no attention to common identity concepts are linked to failed processes. These strategies aim at addressing the complexities of identity-based conflicts, working to diminish stereotypes, biases, and prejudices among groups; mitigating the opposition of goals, interests, and competition; confronting salient mobilized identities; and modifying the collective acceptance of violence.

Reassuring strategies aim to ensure that the identities of involved parties are acknowledged, respected, and duly considered within the peace process. Cultural protection of minorities and freedom of religion are linked to more sustainable and successful peace processes, while failed peace processes do not include considerations for identity freedom. In successful peace processes, national identity was defined through the inclusion of all ethnic communities in the process of negotiating and building peace as an essential part of the socio-political structure of the country. Sustainable peace agreements called for the satisfaction of the cultural demands of minorities, eradicating discrimination of minorities and guaranteed cultural, civil, political, social, and economic rights. However, policies toward integration of minorities into a common identity are addressed in conjunction with a development of a civic meaning of national identity and economic development. The establishment of autonomy for specific regions and groups should take into consideration threats to both the minority and majority of a population.

Involving strategies emphasize the importance of incorporating a diverse range of actors and activities from all sectors of society in the development and implementation of peace processes. These strategies reshape the dynamics of identity-based conflicts by addressing the need for optimal distinctiveness, social status, and self-esteem; minimizing incompatibility of goals and interests; and mitigating threats. The inclusion of multiple parties proved crucial in transforming the peace process from a two-party negotiation to a comprehensive agreement. These strategies encompassed various approaches, such as (1) involving grassroots groups and communities, (2) engaging multiple sectors of society, and (3) incorporating various minority groups. The inclusion of multiple sectors and actors of society and public referenda tend to increase the sustainability of a peace process, especially if actors' skills for conflict resolution and dialogue are developed through special programs and they are included in defining the negotiation agenda and have ownership of a final agreement. Democratic processes are critical for the creation of shared deliberative spaces.

Determining Guides are guiding principles for addressing the fundamental aspects of social identity dynamics that include redefined social boundaries, minimized threats, addressed collective traumas, and fostering trust. Successful peace processes concentrate on the transformation of social boundary- how people see outgroups and act across group lines. Sustainable peace processes include creation of cross-cutting identities that emphasize similarities and ties between groups, increase in intergroup awareness, and changes in social norms of intergroup relations. The realistic threat was reduced through a ceasefire agreement to conduct free and fair elections, introduction of an amnesty law, pardon and

amnesty for paramilitary groups as a part of the peace process, demilitarization of paramilitary actors, establishment of peace zones, and through assurances of no expulsion or forced relocation of the population. Symbolic threats can be addressed through inclusive nation-building processes as well as cross-ethnic and cross-religious educational initiatives that reduce intergroup stereotypes. Addressing former traumas of participating parties includes analysis of historical records and community testimonies, dialogues and national conferences on addressing the past, formation of human rights organizations and their inclusion in peace processes. Dialogues and symbolic gestures are linked to the development of trust as a foundation for the success of peace processes.

Equalizing strategies aim to rectify not only power imbalances between parties but also disparities in their perceptions of justice. The asymmetry between conflict parties is addressed through the acceptance of the legitimacy of one or several of the parties involved. Forming civil alliances and the unification of minorities also has a positive effect by increasing the power and strengthening the position of new coalitions. Challenging the legitimacy of the parties significantly reduces the success and sustainability of peace processes. The asymmetry of 3rd party involvement is addressed through the removal of a moderator/facilitator with biased regional interests or shared identity with one of the parties. Additionally, this asymmetry can be reduced through involvement of a 3rd party that has a strong interest in peace and stability, rather than its own interests in the region. However, the involvement of an impartial 3rd party has no significant positive effect on the successful peace process as it does not promote or facilitate focusing on identity issues.

Case Studies: In order to incorporate religion into the analysis and complement the BRIDGE model, the cases explored the positives and negatives of religion's role or lack thereof in both destructive conflict and peacemaking processes. In the analysis of the role of religion in conflict analysis and conflict resolution, we particularly explored and emphasized the positive role of religion in peace processes. Too often researchers tend to discount or de-emphasize any possible positive roles for religion, either focusing primarily on religion, religious ideology, or religious identity as a cause of conflict or minimizing how religion often cuts across or adds to different identities. Conflicts have multiple vectors of causation that require multiple resolution vectors which was quite evident in many of the cases explored by this project.

To conduct the comparative analysis cases were assigned to four groups: Successful peace processes (Algeria, Northern Ireland, South Africa); Partially successful peace processes (Angola, Colombia, Nigeria, Philippines, Sudan); Problematic peace processes (Bangladesh, Guatemala, Kosovo); and Failed peace processes (Sri Lanka, Ukraine). We examined all twelve elements of the BRIDGE model across these four groupings, discerning how these elements operated in both enduring and successful peace processes compared to those that faltered in achieving and maintaining peace. This analysis aided in identifying efficient forms, varieties, and instruments associated with these elements, while also exploring the factors contributing to the shortcomings of peace processes. The case analysis leads to the development of a number of specific recommended strategies for each phase of the BRIDGE model.

Conclusions: An emphasis on identity and religion is not a suggestion that these two critical elements of any peace process should be considered simply as important factors that can be added onto or layered into the negotiation process. Since societal transformation is critical to the resolution of identity-based conflicts, a focus on identity dynamics and giving voice to and including key stakeholders in peace processes increases the prospects for a sustainable peace agreement. As the BRIDGE model emphasizes, at the heart of this model is the need to address and transform relations. The identity-related mechanisms of peace processes put forth by the BRIDGE model should be considered as both transformative and normative. At the same time, and equally important, religion can be a powerful means to achieve the inclusion envisioned by the BRIDGE model. It is important to acknowledge and include religious actors

who work to reduce violence and who are more just, more compassionate, and more peaceful, particularly by drawing upon the best of religious traditions and preventing the weaponization of religion and undermining the worst uses of religion for warfare and the obstruction of peace processes. The BRIDGE model reinforces lessons from the respective case studies that show how important it is to include religion and religious actors because religion is so often an underutilized means to promote common values, common traditions, and shared strategies of peacebuilding that are essential to future peace processes.

The BRIDGE model also highlights the importance of both expanded inclusion and meaningful representation which must include those who are religious but not represented by traditional authorities. As the case studies demonstrated, successful peace agreements have been helped by *radical inclusion* so that the process is not confined just to increasing religious leaders who should be included but also secular actors and select religious actors and all others who are not fairly represented by powerful organized religion elites, thus better reflecting a more diverse range of beliefs and perspectives in communities. Such success often depends on utilizing radical inclusion as a counterbalance to religion's use of extreme exclusion.