This essay examines how religion and the indiscriminate use of religious language have become key themes running through international politics. Recent conflicts have not only been between different nations but are perceived by many to be between different religions and different values. This has caused alarm amongst those who believe that it is imperative that religious dialogue and reconciliation through religious dialogue continue to heal the scars left by political conflicts. Over the last few years, Islam in particular has become central to global politics. The argument here is that despite the tensions between the perceived Muslim world and the West, dialogue can rebuild where conflict and wars have left so much misery and destroyed so much trust. In essence, however, religion may be a powerful tool, but without the international political will any attempts at reconciliation through religious discourse will have very limited success.

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THE TITLE OF THIS ESSAY reflects a growing contemporary concern about the place of religion in local and international conflicts as well as the influence of religion in the complex arena of global politics. Here, I reflect on what I see as some of the key issues in the relations between current international politics, the increasing use of religious language, and religious symbols and the politicization of Islam as a faith and as a social force.

Old conflicts have not ended but are already being overshadowed by new ones. And religion is being used as an instrument, defended as an
ideology, and attacked as extremism on all fronts. In a world where the pace of communication determines so much, religion too has become part of the global market and is selling itself in completely different and often dramatic ways. The exploration of theological language should no longer be seen as an ivory tower exercise which breathes and dies in textbooks. No, it is a living and passionate reality; it travels thousands of miles and echoes within hearts and minds and in so doing affects people’s personal, social, and political realities at all levels, local, national, and international. Global communication is now faster than ever, the audience is bigger and more diverse, the impact of language is instant, for that is the colossal reality of globalization. But as words and images are swept across continents, they often accumulate different layers of meaning as well as different layers of drama and poignancy.

Two words that have risen to a certain public prominence over the last few decades are “dialogue” and “reconciliation.” Religious dialogue has long been both an intellectual and ethical imperative of the recent years for certain scholars and practitioners of religion. It has, however, become an overused word reaching almost feverish activity at certain times, so much so that often there seems to be very little merit in the concept either as an intellectual problem or as an ethical imperative. However, that is often overlooked on the assumption that even if the concept is ill defined or an umbrella term for any activity involving multi-faith participation, it must be fostered because it is about communication, and furthering communication between various religious groups could bring about change at individual, social, and political levels. Interfaith dialogue as it is more commonly known is promoted on the simple premise that when people understand each others’ religions, to the extent of even sharing in each others’ rites and rituals, they become more open and accepting of the idea and reality of living with the other. This in turn should mean that where there are tensions already, the possibility of actual violence erupting between different religious communities is, it is hoped, reduced and a level of social cohesion is maintained; where actual conflict already exists, religious dialogue has a role in affecting the political and human consequences of violence and hatred that can explode within the different communities. This type of dialogue activity usually tries not to let other factors of race, background, culture, economics, and politics get in the way of faith speaking to faith. Furthermore, intra-religious diversity is played down and religions are often seen as monolithic. For many, the simplicity of this basis is perhaps the fundamental weakness as well as the potential strength of dialogue activities.

The word now has a parallel in the word “reconciliation,” which though not a new concept, has become an increasingly significant debate
in the study of religion and in the interface between religion and global politics. The word brings with it a particular kind of focus that assumes a sharper reflection on the vocabulary of truth-telling, repentance, forgiveness, embrace, healing, and restitution. If religious dialogue arose largely from the vestiges of a postcolonial Christian world, then so does much of the core terminology around the concept of reconciliation. But despite the Christian tone to this word, the concept relies fundamentally on a very general and inclusive premise. To be truly effective in building sustainable human relations by healing the wounds of different peoples, reconciliation must be a twofold process between all peoples who have been affected through violence, marginalization, or political injustice. It must begin with the individual’s desire and pursuit of forgiveness, that is, from interpersonal relationships to the more complex dynamic of political forgiveness between all the parties involved.

So what exactly is meant by reconciliation in both religious and political terms? The word is perhaps best explained through processes that have used this concept in their quest to bring about change. The most famous example lies in South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In a country where “white Christianity” was partly responsible for the extreme oppression of society during the era of institutionalized apartheid (1948–1994), it was in some ways only fitting that Christianity would be the source and context in which any movement toward amnesty would be found. Chaired by the Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu, it set out in simple words what reconciliation might mean in the South African context, “We will be engaging in what should be a corporate nationwide process of healing through contribution, confession and forgiveness. To be able to forgive, one needs to know who one is forgiving and why. That is why the truth is so central to this exercise” (Tutu 1995).

Discerning the truth and extending the awareness of this truth is a national process to which all the parties concerned must be committed, “We are meant to be a part of the process of the healing of our nation, of our people, all of us, since every South African has to some extent or other been traumatized. We are a wounded people because of the conflict of the past, no matter on which side we stood. We all stand in need of healing” (Tutu 1995).

Thus, healing comes from truth-telling, apology, and a commitment on the part of each of us to build a more just society. But in complex societies where there are different mixes of race, ethnicity, religion, and wealth, words such as “forgiveness” and “reconciliation” may mean very different things. Furthermore, what of forgiveness without justice in society and justice for the individual victim? One of the starkest criticisms
of the TRC focused on this very particular version of Christianity, which focused more on forgiveness of the perpetrator, in this case, the white South African, rather than justice and apology for the victim. Farid Esack, a Muslim South African writes that a particularly Christian version of forgiveness “is not a version that finds a resonance in all South Africans or even among all Christians. This is a version that seeks stability rather than justice and that derives its strength from a Christ who asks the father to forgive his persecutors even as he is being crucified” (Esack 1999:187). The question is, how does one translate the theology of forgiveness into meaningful social and political realities? Theologians such as Miroslav Volf have largely from a Christian perspective, talked about “embracing” the enemy as the ultimate act in the process of reconciliation. But this embrace is based not on a complacent acceptance of past conflicts but on a remembrance and recognition of the past, and only then a demand for accountability and justice so that the victims can restore balance and a level of integrity in their shattered lives.

Though the above are simplifications of much deeper theological analyses, they nevertheless suffice to show how religious sentiment lies at the heart of ideas of reconciliation and forgiveness. Today we have only to take a cursory glance at the Internet to see how the term “reconciliation” is being used to mobilize interfaith and multi-faith activities taking place all over the world. Descriptions of certain events also reflect a real desire and effort to ask for forgiveness for events that are steeped in history but whose legacies still seem to be painful and divisive. The Reconciliation Walk, which took place in 1996 from Cologne to Turkey to mark the Crusaders Walk, in which Christians apologized to Muslims for the atrocities of the Crusades, is one such example. The 2000 mile, three year walk across Europe, through the Balkans and Turkey, then south to Jerusalem, finished with an apology to 200 Muslims. The purpose was to heal old rifts between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and by lifting the Cross, the message was that the Crusaders had “betrayed the name of Christ by conducting themselves in a manner contrary to his wishes and character.”1 In such events we begin to perceive that framing forgiveness in theological constructs is more than symbolism and rhetoric—it is or at least should be about a positive transformation of the individual, of the communities collectively, and the society in which they live.

Another walk, albeit with a different basis and rather less dramatic, was to commemorate the attacks of 11 September 2001, in New York. This took place in New Mexico on 11 September 2001, between various

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Muslim and Jewish organizations as a two mile walk to pray for peace in times of rising religious violence.² Again, in May 2004, Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Buddhists were part of more than 500 people who walked three miles in Philadelphia to promote peace and understanding, to call for an end to continuing violence and bloodshed in so many parts of the world.³ Walks are organized to bring people physically together so that they can stay together for a considerable period of time. This allows for stereotypes to be broken and political and personal resentments to transform into genuine curiosity about another human being.

On the rise are other meetings such as those organized by Christian churches that try to “correct” images of other religions, mainly Islam, through apology or by working towards increasing sympathetic awareness of the other faith. For example, in February 2004 the United Church of Canada acknowledged a long history in Christianity of hostility toward Muslims. Their 80-page reconciliation document, entitled, “That We May Know Each Other,” aimed to “commit itself to a journey of reconciliation with Muslim neighbours” (United Church of Canada 2004). In a country where Muslims make up 2 percent of the population and where Islam is the fastest growing religion, such a document was not simply refuting Islam as a violent religion but delving into all areas of discourse, from marriage laws to notions of prophecy.

There are many such dialogue activities all over the world, some at an international level. The various interfaith meetings and organizations use faith to build bridges and trust between religious peoples, even where faith continues to be a divisive force in conflicts. Such meetings resonate in the personal and social lives of those whose faiths are politically intertwined in distant national and international conflicts. Even such a brief glance at activities that center around reconciliation reflect the variety of approaches and contexts in which the word can be used to bring people together. But are conflicts really healed by small or large, local or national attempts to reconcile wounded parties? Furthermore, conflicts come in different forms, both physical and psychological, personal, and political. Is reconciliation an adequate concept to deal with the range of human suffering and the desire for revenge and justice?

In our current international climate, the century after the most violent century in history, we are witnessing the rising visibility of religion as a social and cultural force, as a political tool that speaks both for the people and for the politicians. Religion is also taking center stage.

² http://www.peacewalk.blogspot.com/.
³ http://www.peacewalk.blogspot.com/.
in decrying social deprivation and economic failures on a global scale and struggling to create meaning in the lives of those who feel alienated, on the periphery of societies. Many of the more recent conflicts have involved Muslim countries, and the current aftermath of the war in Iraq is only the latest addition. There is a sense amongst many that religion may be the biggest threat to international peace and that Islam might be the biggest destabilizing factor to global security.

The rhetoric that accompanies such clichéd phrases as “Islam and the West,” “Europe and Islam,” and “the clash between the Muslim world and the West” assumes a false bipolarity between Muslims and the western world, as if the two are homogenous and comparable entities. Furthermore, it fosters the continuous tension that whereas the western world is progressive and civilized, the Muslim world is incoherent, political, and archaic. Even if one were not to agree with the sweeping comparison here, humility and honesty is needed on all sides; where we are in the real world as opposed to where we should be in an ideal world is often ignored. If the governments and regimes in many Muslim countries are dictatorial and repressive, the first step is to acknowledge this and not to insist that there must be a call for a true Muslim state, whatever that may mean. The distrust that many Muslim citizens feel in their own regimes, in their ruling powers, combined with anxieties and anger at western policies, has been a key element in sparking off a reactionary element amongst many marginal groups who either turn the faith into a militant expression of anti-westernism or insist that some semblance of the pristine Islam of the Prophetic age, is the only alternative in keeping orthodoxy alive and revitalizing the Muslim world. Though it would appear that both of these two elements are rejected by the overwhelming number of Muslims across the world, political activism of this nature creates the image of Islam as a religion essentially at odds with the contemporary world and where ethical debates seemingly end up being little more than apologetic and defensive. In this state of apology, will Muslim communities really be able to meet the internal as well as the political challenges of twenty-first, century or will they just hide behind the agendas that the media and politics set for them? Whatever political injustices are playing out in Muslim countries and elsewhere, how can empowerment begin in the West when the perception and the argument on both sides is that Muslims are somehow different and will not face but distance themselves from moral and social challenges? How can any social cohesion and understanding begin when in the name of the ummah, anything that happens in one place is used to mobilize resentment or conflict all over the world?

This naiveté and self-obsession, expressed by both Muslims who continuously apologize for Islam and by those who think that the religion is
fundamentally a violent political religion diametrically opposed to the values of the western world, beg the question of how is it that so little has changed in the past fifty years? Post Rushdie, post the Iranian revolution, post the Gulf War, the war in Bosnia, the war in Afghanistan, why does Islam as a religion appear not only violent but so riddled with internal problems? The rhetoric of fear accompanies this debate, and the diasporic setting of Muslim migration results in many Muslims feeling that they are under siege—for them being a Muslim in today’s society is the same as being a victim, real or potential. The problem that lies behind much of Muslim opinion is that Muslims are so busy reacting to the global interpretations and agendas in front of them, that they lose sight of two fundamental realities. On the world stage, Muslim countries as a whole are not particularly politically powerful countries; they are not setting the global agendas. In the Western world, whether or not the governments are religious or nonreligious, Muslims will be a minority for a very long time, at least for the foreseeable future, and, subsequently, their position as the minority obliges them to rethink how best to live in societies that are inclusive in structure and that accept Islam as part of their multi-faith and multi-ethnic social fabric. Irrespective of the racism or prejudice that may well be a component in these societies, these places are now home to generations of Muslims who have migrated knowing only too well that they were entering non-Muslim societies. Thus, Muslim communities must be prepared to work socially, intellectually, and politically within the very societies they call home. They owe this to the wellbeing of their faith, as well as to the society around them. Seeking refuge in an ummah that works only at an abstract level, seeking refuge in religious rhetoric at the expense of dealing with the internal issues of the faith, will only increase feelings of marginalization and demoralization.

Conversely, if reconciliation depends in the first instance on truth-telling, then we have to be realistic about the consequences of our international political climate and think who needs to be involved if reconciliation is to mean anything. Do governments need to be honest about their blatant abuse of religious language when it suits their own strategic aims and objectives? We are living in a time when the power of religious language and religious sentiment has once again been affirmed in the most alarming and dreadful of ways. Our current conflicts are political in nature but have assumed a different character as they are reflected and discussed increasingly through religious language. There has been a bloody conflict between Israel and Palestine for the last fifty years which has been described as a cancer at the heart of the world; there are civil wars in central Africa; there is currently a post-war situation in Iraq that has divided western nations; there is the threat of possible wars
in other parts of the Arab and Middle Eastern world; and the whole world is now living with a new language of terror that is located for many within a religion, namely, Islam. Though I do not personally feel that 9/11 should be seen as the only significant backdrop from which to assess all that is happening in the international arena, it has perhaps been the watershed on two fronts, namely, the rising paranoia that sees Islam or at least the curious phrase “militant Islam” as the new threat to world peace, and it has been key in determining how international leaders are aligning themselves on the world stage. On the level of identity politics, this current climate has challenged many on all sides to rethink questions of political allegiances and loyalties, relationships with communities and neighbors, and their own recognition of those who were once invisible to them. But what the consequences of 9/11 showed was that world leaders often choose their conflicts, either out of political necessity or self-interest, and if they want to take action, they do so by all the powers that they have. A prime example of political indifference is the recent crisis in Darfur where thousands have been killed. Darfur is witness to the longest running civil war in the world where hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost to a legacy of political apathy, albeit in the full knowledge of the international media and international governments.

The continuous cycle of hatred and killing in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has now used religion to its very extremities on both sides, because that is the last refuge in which to mobilize anger and action. Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, have launched suicide attacks since 1993 but especially so after the current intifada of 2000. Ignoring the social and emotional impact of these attacks on world opinion for a very long time, politicians have only recently tried to tackle the issue by relying mainly on intercepting funding for militant organizations or trying to destroy those who are seen as the leaders. As Basel Saleh writes, they have failed to understand the psychological causes behind the human bomb. Making poverty the biggest link with terrorism is itself mistaken. Saleh says that “attempts to explain suicide attacks and terrorism in purely economic terms ignores the real political, social, psychological factors which have always motivated collective violence. Recent research on Palestinian suicide militants has failed to consider the full range of stressors leading to suicide attacks. Restricting attention to only economic factors or level of education has resulted in no understanding of why young Palestinians carry out suicide attacks. Individuals are not only driven by poverty or education but also by imagination” (Saleh 2004).

But the suffering is caused from both sides. Israeli “surgical strikes” that have annihilated the infrastructure of Palestinian lands and led to enormous civilian casualties have also been condemned internationally.
But the international community’s inability to see beyond the most obvious theories and to do little more than condemn has perpetuated the conflict. Furthermore, there has been an unwillingness to create political space where a measure of truth-telling on both sides can be a first step towards any form of peace. Condemnation alone has not reduced the attacks and, if anything, has often polarized opinion between the Israelis and the Palestinians. This in turn impacts on Jewish–Muslim relations in many countries where people sympathize with the suffering of their co-religionists. For it is both the suicide bomber and the Israeli military targets offensive that end up killing indiscriminately. The tragedy and anger that ensue never meet with any justice or resolution from the powers that can effect such a process. Yasser Arafat’s death and the victory in February 2005 of Mahmoud Abbas as the next Palestinian leader have been seen by many as possibly bringing in a new era of hope and stability to the war-torn region. Already there are talks of pursuing the ambitious two state plan in order to give Palestinians freedom and autonomy. However, tentative and fragile the hopes for some form of lasting peace, will America and Europe show the political resolve and commitment necessary to bring about any form of political reconciliation, and how will the personal tragedies on both sides influence the manner in which they regard each others’ truths?

The war in Iraq and its present aftermath have once again aroused interest in the way religious discourse colors political debate and refers to polarities between cultures and civilizations. There is a growing sense that leaders have developed a taste for war and that the endless cycle of violence will eventually bring peace. This itself is problematic, for it assumes that there is always a normative acceptable level of injustice and suffering that can be perpetrated systematically by governments in the name of international security and a barbaric evil that resides in the other, and which must be wiped out or brought to its knees. Whilst leaders condemn others for being evil, their own language normalizes the concept. Cities, communities, and sacred sites are demolished in the name of rights and freedoms. The soldiers are called heroes in battle; those resisting are called insurgents; and while feeble lip service tries to distinguish radicalism from mainstream, it is within the latter that the casualties and fatalities occur. When every western soldier who dies is counted and mourned, this tragedy itself is subdued by the relative ignorance of how many thousands are dying on the other side. If the television images of murdered hostages are ugly and barbaric, then the phrase “collateral damage,” a euphemism for hundreds of innocents dying, is also hypocritical and hurtful. How can any level of reconciliation as a generic concept of healing and restoring justice weave in and out of these various levels of conflict?
In this situation religious communities might be able to formulate a language of healing, but can they really show the social and political tenacity that is imperative for stability and a genuine gesture of friendship amongst nations?

We must acknowledge the power of religious language; but if religion itself is not the cause of a conflict, can it realistically be its solution? Two recent examples will show how religious engagement with international conflict often obscures the actual realities of our contemporary conflicts and lulls us into thinking that when those who have religious convictions get together and talk about peace and living harmoniously, they are making a significant impact in the political arena. In summer 2004 a delegation of Iraqi leaders came to Windsor House, an annex of Windsor Castle near London, which is used for open and free discussions about any topical issue. Many people, the so-called religious leaders, both Muslim and Christian, had been invited as well as representatives from the U.N. and certain members of the Foreign Office. The discussion was based on the premise that our own personal engagement with dialogue in Europe could have something to say about dialogue and reconciliation between the various sectarian rivalries in Iraq. This was at a time when there was much talk of the possibilities of a war within a war breaking out between Sunnis and Shia in Iraq. My personal reservation was that perhaps this might be a hopeless endeavor, since intrareligious diversity in Europe could not be compared with the scale and type of conflict taking place in Iraq. The real issue was the war itself, and whatever our personal and political stance on the war, we could not ignore all the contentious issues associated with the American led invasion. So much violence and suffering had been unleashed on ordinary Iraqis in the hunt for Saddam Hussein as well as the weapons of mass destruction, just as previously the Afghans had suffered in the feeble chase for Osama bin laden, that it was quite simply ridiculous to think that our two situations were in any way comparable. How long can religious voices continue to mop up the mistakes and injustices inflicted by world leaders by trying to elevate religion to a position it does not enjoy or by thinking that religious language on its own can create a distinct consciousness at a global and political level?

The elections in Iraq in early 2005, which were hailed as the first step toward democracy, are seen by many in the international arena, as a positive way forward for Iraq to become a truly democratic state. The fact that the leadership is now predominantly Shia means that Iraqi leadership has become a religious leadership. Do western leaders understand what this means in practical terms for Iraqi societies, and some of the tensions that may ensue as a consequence of religious
leadership in a country where religion has not been a potent force in politics for decades?

The second issue is that it is a complete fallacy to think that when faith speaks to faith to bring about harmony and reconciliation between people it speaks the same language. There is an obvious treading on eggshells so as to create a context for discussion but in which very often the real issues that polarize even the most liberal of us end up being ignored or moved into different spaces. Again earlier in 2004, the previous Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, delivered a speech in Rome where his comments implied that Muslims had failed to make any real contribution to the sciences or the arts during the last two hundred years. George Carey is certainly entitled to his opinion; but not only was he wrong, he created an unhealthy and heated backlash from all quarters of British society. When the current Archbishop, Rowan Williams, then hosted the “Building Bridges” seminar, an international meeting bringing together some thirty Muslim and Christian scholars in Georgetown in May 2004, the air was thick with expectation. Would Rowan Williams apologize or say something in response to his predecessor’s comments? He did not, but nor did he have to. For, essentially, if the Muslim voice is allowed to be free to say what it thinks about its relations with the West, then it also has to extend this sentiment and freedom to those who may disagree or be critical. It is exactly this kind of latent resentment and paranoia that ends up becoming divisive news, making Muslims apologetic about their faith and resorting to condemnation of any critique. Thus when real conflicts arise, there is a sense that the Muslim world, whatever that means to us, is already hostile or unable to intellectualize moral and political judgments.

The 2004 election results in the U.S.A., the second biggest democracy has, brought home to us once again that religion and the use of religious language continue increasingly to be such a potent force in how contemporary moral issues are discussed and shaped. The startling rise of the evangelical right wing, neoconservative Christian movements in America, for whom morality and politics must be based principally on their vision of a Christian moral vision, may well be sending shock waves amongst millions of Americans. This is now aligned with an Islamism that has arisen as much out of global, political inequalities and injustices as out of their own real contempt for anything other than their own vision of Islam. In this fragile situation religious language may well find enough commonalities for communication and understanding. People will come together out of genuine concern for torn communities and for the good of humanity. They will, however, be a minority, for the concerns expressed in religious discourse are still mainly on the
periphery of real politics. Real peace and reconciliation of any sort and on any level can only be brought about if it is part of the public consciousness on a global scale and sustained by the necessary political will and determination.

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