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Christians must play a pivotal role in conflict mediation

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

When I was a boy of almost 13, I went with my family to Jerusalem, which at the time (late 1957) was divided between Israel and Jordan.

We had to stay on the Jordanian side because next we were headed to Egypt, and that country wouldn't allow us to enter if we were coming from Israel, with which it had no diplomatic relations and no intentions of ever having them.

As we traveled around to Bethlehem and other locations I saw several of what I was told were refugee camps, full of Palestinians who were without a permanent residence as a result of the conflict in the region.

I could not have imagined then that more than five decades later the issues dividing the Middle East would not be resolved. Something obviously has failed dramatically right in the midst of a land claimed as sacred by the three great Abrahamic faiths.

Partly as a result of reading Douglas E. Noll's challenging new book, *Elusive Peace*, I have concluded that much of that failure must be blamed on people of faith who have been so bogged down protecting their exclusivist religious turf that they have failed to wage peace with modern tools that might well have achieved it.

Noll is a professional mediator. In *Elusive Peace*, he outlines various mediation techniques that international negotiators and the politicians who appoint and instruct them should be using but often aren't.

'Peacemaking,' writes Noll, 'is the hardest work a human being can be asked to do.' But instead of

adopting modern mediation methods, our ego-driven leaders rely on the old tools of power, bluster, bluff and win-lose bargaining.

Worse, "old diplomacy," Noll says, "also assumes that human beings are rational players." This assumption's "greatest flaw is that it discounts the importance of emotions in decision making and therefore fails to predict the actual behaviors of human beings with any reasonable accuracy."

Over and over, negotiators in the Middle East seem unable to take into account the way in which a visceral attachment to the "Holy Land" -- and the belief of each party that it is acting in accordance with divine will -- affects the positions each side takes.

But there is hope. If we can recognize that, as Noll says, "many, if not most, international conflicts are driven by deep-seated beliefs and emotions that are intractable to a buyer-seller negotiation," we can begin to adopt mediation techniques that can get us past the paralysis.

This requires that we understand that "I cannot trade away what creates my sense of self, belonging, and identity in a negotiation." And it requires a frank acknowledgement that "distributive bargaining will never work with radical fundamentalists of any stripe."

Religion does not have a monopoly on radical fundamentalism, but its various versions of that disease seem so destructive because the people holding such beliefs are convinced that they have been deputized by God.

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Anything that religious leaders can do to create an atmosphere in which followers are permitted to ask hard questions and to have open discussions about why things are the way they are can help to undermine the attraction of radical fundamentalism.

This kind of openness should be rooted in the Benedictine virtue of humility -- an attitude that doesn't deny that there is both truth and falsehood but one that at least suggests we aren't always infallible judges of which is which.

It's way past time for people of faith to begin to demand that our political leaders and the diplomatic negotiators they appoint adopt some of the modern mediation practices Noll outlines in his book.

If we let yet more decades go by without finding a just resolution to the conflict that has meant turmoil and chaos for millions of people, we who are Christian will fail in our resolve to be disciples of the one we call the Prince of Peace.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for *The Star's* Web site and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. E-mail him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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