

An Introduction to Just Peacebuilding

Our approach is grounded in *religious literacy*, which defines a broad understanding of how to approach the role of religion in human experience. It is focused on understanding how time, place, and power affect expressions of religion.

Religious literacy, in its most basic form, is a skill which begins with an understanding that there is a difference between the devotional expression of a religious worldview as normative and the academic study of religion which recognizes the factual existence of diverse devotional assertions. In the study of religion, religious literacy acknowledges that religions are internally diverse, religious traditions change over time, and religion and culture are intertwined. Thus, religion is embedded in all aspects of human experience. Furthermore, a religiously literate person recognizes that all knowledge claims, including religious ones, are socially constructed and therefore nothing need be seen as inevitable. Violence and peace are both shaped by conscious and unconscious human agency where religious influences are always operative.

This contextual approach, the first component of our method, is deepened incrementally through seven other components of our method, which include:

1. Religious Literacy
2. Cultural Studies
3. Situatedness
4. Secularity
5. Coloniality (including constructions of race and religion)
6. Power analysis
7. Typologies of Violence/Typologies of Peace
8. Moral Imagination

Cultural Studies recognizes that there is not a neat separation between religion and culture. The material situation of people impacts all aspects of how they express themselves, and those expressions lay a basis for future actions and worldviews. Cultural Studies also emphasizes human beings as agents, and that what is created at all levels of society is important.

Recognizing this agency demands an awareness of *situatedness*. Situatedness operates on three levels: the particular social and historical context of the people we are studying; the context of scholars and scholarship who produce knowledge on other people; an acknowledgement that all knowledge is partial knowledge and should open new avenues of more nuanced inquiry.

The demand for situated knowledge reveals that *secularity* emerges from a period of the European Enlightenment that saw a transfer of power from church structures to state structures. While this transfer created a nominal division between “church and

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state,” it did not eliminate religion from the public sphere. It normalized particular understandings of Christianity as societal norms, thus diffusing and embedding religion in subtle ways throughout Western European systems.

This revelation about secularism illuminates the role of a dominant belief system in defining the broader category of “religion.” The idea of religion, tied to notions of secularity and particular notions of rationality that emerge from secularity, is connected to the construction of *race* and provides a justification for *colonialism*.

Once the construction of race and religion are made explicit, structures of *power* become apparent. It is the exercise of power that contributes to structures of inequality. Thus, in every investigation of human experience we must question the role and use of power.

When structures of power become apparent, *typologies of violence* are distinguishable. These violences are cultural, structural, and direct. Once these typologies are named, it becomes possible to move to action to create *typologies of peace* that are also cultural, structural, and direct.

After distinguishing typologies of violence and the moving to typologies of peace, we can exert our *moral imagination* towards just peacebuilding. We must be able to move beyond **what is** to **what is possible** and to conceive of just futures that are more equitable.