Religious Communities and Institutions in Colombia: Supporting or Spoiling Peace?

Policy brief and recommendations for those who work with or in religious communities and institutions, on their role in peace-building

Special Report for the Occasion of the Visit of Pope Francis

August 2017

1 This policy brief was written by Gwen Burnyeat and Andrei Gómez-Suárez, members of Rodeemos el Diálogo (ReD). The recommendations do not represent the position of St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, nor necessarily the opinions of the panel participants. The authors have compiled the central arguments from the presentations in order to offer general reflections on Colombia’s transitional conjuncture.
This policy brief compiles reflections from a panel organised by Rodeemos el Diálogo and St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London in May 2017, looking at the role of religious communities and institutions in peace-building in Colombia. The panel participants were: Rowan Williams, ex-archbishop of Canterbury, professor of Theology and Master of Magdalene College of Cambridge University, and chair of trustees of Christian Aid, who has visited many countries in conflict and knows the challenges that multiple religious communities face in transitional contexts; Ana Victoria Mendoza, victim of the guerrilla, and the first female Colombian priest in the Anglican church, and member of the Commission on Truth, Memory and Reconciliation of Colombian Women in the Diaspora in London, who helps victims to share their testimonies; and Andrei Gómez-Suárez, teacher at the Instituto Alberto Merani school in Bogotá, research associate at Oxford University and author of the book El triunfo del No: La paradoja emocional detrás del plebiscite (Icono 2016), who has researched peace processes in Colombia.

Executive Summary
Religious communities and institutions are key actors in the economic, political and social life of Colombia. The latest study from the National Consultancy Centre shows that 85% of Colombians consider religion to be important in their life. It also shows that 61% of Catholics and 70% of Evangelical Christians and Protestants have a negative perception of the peace process.\footnote{The National Consultancy Centre’s study was published by Semana magazine: http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/colombianos-consideran-a-la-religion-muy-importante-en-sus-vidas/530679 (Accessed August 2017)} Have religious communities and institutions contributed to this negative image of the peace process? Can they contribute to rebuilding trust among Colombians?

International experience in countries in conflict such as South Sudan, Congo and Burundi demonstrates that religious communities and institutions can play both positive and negative roles in peace-building. These experiences can offer contributions to the debate in Colombia, particularly after the Peace Plebiscite of 2 October, in which faith communities played a crucial role in the social mobilization both for and against the agreement reached by the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla in August 2016, titled ‘Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace’.

At an individual level, faith has had a restorative impact on those who have been direct victims of armed conflicts throughout the history of humanity. Many victims have been able to process their pain through their spirituality. Similarly, many religious leaders have played an important role in attending to those affected by years of conflict. Religious institutions and leaders have also supported communities affected by conflict, often intervening in favour of the defence of human rights.

However, other religious communities and institutions have been linked to political agendas. For example, in Colombia, the Evangelical churches largely supported the ‘No’
campaign against the peace agreement in the plebiscite of 2016, propelled by the Democratic Centre party, and they promoted the “gender ideology” script – with no basis whatsoever in the content of the agreement – among other scripts within the discursive arsenal used to persuade Colombians to vote against the “Final Agreement”.2

The panellists identified the positive and negative roles that religious communities and institutions play in peace-building in Colombia. They incorporated a general and comparative approach, drawing on other peace processes in the world; they analysed the role of the churches during the armed conflict and especially during the Peace Plebiscite; and they proposed a gaze towards the future, making recommendations which we consider relevant in the framework of the visit of Pope Francis to Colombia in September 2017.

In conclusion, as in other countries worldwide, religious communities and institutions in Colombia have played both positive and negative roles in peace-building. Churches are a reflection of their societies, and a society like Colombia which has lived in war for over 50 years is naturally divided and polarised. Transitional societies experience uncertainty, fear, anger and other emotions. Religious leaders can use their influence to help diverse sectors of Colombia society to interpret reality through a new lens, no longer that of the armed conflict, by encouraging the cultivation of equanimity, solidarity and the spirit of reconciliation. However, they could also use their influence to destroy the fragile beginnings of peace in Colombia. Overcoming this ambiguity is the main challenge for communities and institutions to get on board with peace-building in the country.

FOUR ADVANTAGES FOR PEACE-BUILDING

In Colombia, religious institutions have great potential to contribute to peace and reconciliation, especially those regions with little state presence. Today, both the Catholic and Historical Protestant churches are playing a constructive role in the peace negotiations with the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla in Quito. The Ecumenical Table for Peace, made up of different faiths, has participated in civil society forums to support the negotiations, and some priests have participated in the Social Table that seeks to promote the participation of Colombian society in the definition of the necessary transformations for peace (point 4 of the agenda for the Quito peace talks).

However, scepticism dominates in Colombian society. The peace process is going through a complex conjuncture: the first year of the implementation of the agreement with FARC, and the first months of the formal negotiations with ELN, are taking place in the middle of a long electoral year which will define the

2 The term ‘script’ refers to a narrative which simplifies reality and condenses in few words images that promote primordial emotions such as fear and anger. See Gómez-Suárez, Andrei (2016). El triunfo del No. La paradoja emocional detrás del plebiscito. Bogotá: Ícono Editorial, p36.
commitment of the next government to peace-building between 2018-2022. There is disappointment, opposition and polarization. In this context, according to Rowan Williams’ international experience, Colombian churches could play a key role for the following four reasons:

1. **Churches have legitimacy** in the eyes of the majority of the population. They are seen as actors who work for the benefit of the community. Additionally, in the particular case of Colombia, churches have a wide reach and have been able to access remote regions where there is no presence of other actors, including the state.

2. **Churches promote social cohesion**, they bring people together; therefore they can facilitate reconciliation. **Reconciliation is in churches’ DNA.**

3. Because of the role they play in social cohesion, **churches can play a key role in reintegrating ex-combatants**, helping people accept those who return to communities from which they have been separated.

4. Finally, because religious communities are committed to **human dignity and equality**, they can promote a culture that is respectful of these values.

**FOUR CHALLENGES FOR PEACE-BUILDING**

Globally, there is a general anxiety about peace and security. All religious communities and institutions should recognise that discrimination against minorities is not acceptable. While maintaining respect for their autonomy, churches should be clear and unambiguous about the defence of a fair society, with civil rights and liberties.

However, some religious communities and institutions across the world tend to go against peace-building, due to the lack of an honest (and maybe difficult) dialogue about tensions and debates related to deeply-held values which define the morality of communities. Rowan Williams suggests that faith communities in societies in transition face the following four challenges:

1. Sometimes there are **tensions between international human rights discourse and religious institutions**, including in Christian communities.

2. This tension is often sparked by the issues of gender and sexuality. Some religious communities and institutions see the discourse of human rights as an attack on the traditional roles of gender, especially those of women. It is urgent to overcome this problem because many religious communities and institutions have played a key role in empowering women around the world.

3. This insistence in setting up a tension between tradition, Christian values and human rights, especially gender equality, is a conflict that has been exported to Colombia from Christian communities in the USA, which have been influential throughout history in the form of missions and diverse forms of work in the country.

4. In Colombia, the link between politics and religion is especially concerning. **Co-optation of churches for political interests could convert spirituality into a battlefield for emotional manipulation, instead of spaces for the**
The recognition of humanity, with its virtues and defects, thus impeding actions based on goodness and gratitude.

The apparent political agenda of some churches in Colombia goes against the Constitution of 1991 which sought to break from the previous system in which the Catholic church was formally connected to the state. This causes concern among those religious leaders who are committed to spirituality and the principles of reconciliation because they fear the imposition of a political use of the church, according to Ana Victoria Mendoza. Religious institutions should be independent from politics according to the law, but many politicians use churches to promote their own interests. Especially worrying is the stigmatisation of the LGTBI community in Colombia, which has suffered the effects of the conflict disproportionately and many have been persecuted for their sexual orientation.

The Role of Churches in the Peace Plebiscite

In the context of the Peace Plebiscite, a national referendum to approve the “Final Agreement” on 2 October 2016, many actors circulated scripts to persuade people to vote “No”, and created an anti-peace emotional framework. According to Andrei Gómez-Suárez, these included the discourse of “castro-chavismo”, the idea that the peace process threatened democracy and private property; and “peace without impunity”, the idea that the FARC would not receive justice for their crimes against humanity; among others. In this way, they simplified and distorted reality, and the State Council subsequently declared the campaign invalid because it was based on “generalised deceit”.

Another script was that of “gender ideology”, which suggested that if the “Yes” vote were to win in the Peace Plebiscite, the agreement would destroy family unity and traditional values, because the peace agreement promoted homosexuality, and affirmed also that sexual education in schools had been negotiated in Havana. Different Evangelical churches, which represent around 10% of Colombian society, used the script of ‘gender ideology’ to campaign for the “No”, and even led marches against the peace process arguing that “in Havana the destruction of the family had been negotiated”.

The majority of Historical protestant churches promoted the ‘Yes’ vote (Presbyterians, Lutherans, Anglicans, Baptists, Mennonites, among others which together represent around 5% of Colombian society). For these faith communities, the peace process was an important step on the road to reconciliation in Colombia.

The Catholic church (which nearly 70% of Colombians belong to) played an ambiguous role. On one hand, it was active in the peace process, for example, selecting the victims for the five delegations of 12 victims who travelled to Havana. However, despite the public support of

Pope Francis to the peace process, the Catholic church took the decision to adopt a neutral position to the Peace Plebiscite to put an end to over half a century of armed conflict in Colombia, leaving their members at liberty to promote votes for the ‘Yes’ or the ‘No’. Some members of the Catholic church openly promoted the ‘No’ vote.

**Challenges for the Future**

To today, many church leaders, especially of Evangelical churches, continue to employ the “gender ideology” and other anti-peace scripts to encourage fear among Colombians, undermining peace-building and maintaining an adverse emotional framework to reconciliation. This blocks implementation of the peace agreement between FARC and the government, and creates an unfavourable climate for the peace talks with ELN in Quito.

The Democratic Centre party is strengthening its links with the Evangelical churches and with the International Charismatic Mission. This political co-option is worrying, especially in a society whose constitution establishes freedom of religion. However, the antidote to spiritual manipulation, concluded the panel, is to encourage critical thought among religious communities, to prevent their leaders creating perverse links with political sectors who might convert churches into spaces for politicking and corruption.

The anti-peace stance of many churches in Colombia has reduced the credibility of some religious communities and institutions. This has caused rejection among some youth sectors. Paradoxically, this position has also fed the religious fanaticism of other youth sectors.

**Recommendations to Religious Communities and Institutions to Contribute to Peace-Building:**

International experience indicates that the relationship between religion, peace, human rights and development is fundamental during the phase of rebuilding the social fabric of societies affected by decades of armed conflict. Based on all the above, the following recommendations, though not exhaustive, are a call for religious communities and institutions in Colombia to contribute to improve the life conditions of all Colombians. Convening spaces of encounter for the reconstruction of trust in the other is fundamental for the struggle against inequality and poverty and for the defence of human dignity.

1. It is urgent to create spaces of encounter between those churches that campaigned for the ‘Yes’ vote and those that campaigned for the ‘No’ in the Peace Plebiscite. Reconciliation should be above political affinities.

2. It is important to support bottom-up transformations, because churches have a wide territorial reach and legitimacy among communities.

3. It is necessary to contribute to the empowerment of women as agents of peace-building. Liberating the capacities of women leads to crucial social transformations.

4. Though it is difficult to counter anti-peace scripts, such as ‘gender ideology’, it is necessary to construct and transmit narratives which
affirm that the recognition of the rights of minorities, such as LGTBI communities, does not mean endangering traditional values.

5. Religious leaders must get training in how to explain the “Final Agreement” to communities and help them to interpret the moment of implementation the country is living through.

6. Religious leaders can facilitate difficult dialogues within communities and support conflict transformation.

7. Religious leaders can encourage the participation of civil society in the peace talks with the ELN.

8. Religious communities and institutions can support processes of reintegration of FARC ex-combatants, by creating spaces of encounter with communities.

9. Religious institutions abroad that work with the Colombian diaspora can play a positive role in helping to interpret the advances of the Quito negotiations and the reconciliation processes resulting from the peace agreement with the FARC.

**General Recommendations for the Visit of Pope Francis**

Constructing dialogues between different sectors associated with the Catholic church who still hold doubts about the need to implement the “Final Agreement” with FARC and the importance of ending the armed conflict with the ELN is urgent and must not be delayed any longer. These attitudes undermine the conviction of many other sectors of society of the need to work arduously for reconciliation.

1. The visit of Pope Francis must constitute an epic event to consolidate the leadership of the Catholic church in the task of peace-building.

2. It is important to include many religious communities and institutions, as well as representative of civil society organisations, in events related to the visit of Pope Francis. This would establish precedents of social cohesion in the name of peace.

3. The visit of Pope Francis must be taken full advantage of in order to promote exercises of dialogue, reconciliation and forgiveness by civil society, for people to appropriate the peace process and not see it only as part of a political agenda. The National Day of Reconciliation and Forgiveness, promoted by the academic and student community, is an exemplary step in this sense.

4. **Recommendation to General Colombian Society**

Respect between secular organisations and religious communities and institutions is essential to build a transformative dialogue which allows the discovery of common goals for improving the life conditions of those persons in marginalised regions. Multi-actor dialogues are necessary pillars not only for peace-building, but also for building a shared vision of the country.

---

*About the event and the panellists:
This event was convened by Rodeemos el Diálogo and St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London. You can listen to a podcast of the event in English here: https://soundcloud.com/rodeemoseldialogo/ep-1-religion-in-colombia-supporting-or-spoiling-peace

**Rowan Williams**: ex-archbishop of Canterbury (2002-2012), professor of Theology and Master of Magdalene College in Cambridge University, and chair of the board of trustees of Christian Aid.


**Andrei Gómez-Suárez**: co-founder of Rodeemos el Diálogo, PhD in International Relations in the University of Sussex, research associate at Oxford University, teacher at the Instituto Alberto Merani school in Bogotá, author of the book *El Triunfo del No. La paradoja emocional del plebiscito* (Icono, 2016).

The panel included a welcome by **Sir Tony Baldry**, chair of trustees at St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, and **Germán Espejo**, Deputy Head of Mission of the Colombian Embassy in the United Kingdom.

It was chaired by **Gwen Burnyeat** for Rodeemos el Diálogo, PhD candidate in Anthropology in University College London (UCL).

Rodeemos el Diálogo (ReD), literally ‘Let’s Embrace Dialogue’, is a transnational civil society network which supports the negotiated solution to armed conflicts and the building of a culture of dialogue for reconciliation, from a non-partisan position.