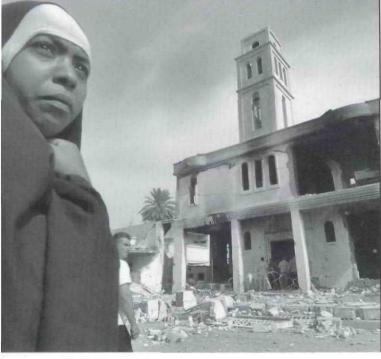DAVID LITTLE is Professor of the Practice in Religion, Ethnicity, and International Conflict and Faculty Associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University.

Phenomena of Faith
Religious Dimensions of Conflicts and Peace

Is religious conflict on the rise, or are we just beginning to focus on a phenomenon that has been going on for a long time?

I think the latter, but let us consider ethnopolitical conflict in general, without reference to religion. Ted Robert Gurr reports, after reviewing some 275 minorities worldwide, that, as of 1995, there was a fairly sharp decrease in ethnonational conflict. Governments began to get the point that if you deal more accommodatingly with minorities and extend to them some degree of tolerance and nondiscrimination, there are fewer conflicts. Gurr is able to point to a number of new developments in that direction.

I would say that Gurr's conclusion probably applies to religiously influenced conflict as well. Jonathan Fox, whose studies expand on Gurr's work and apply it more directly to religious conflict, confirms the same conclusion. So on one hand, it appears there is a general decline in religious conflict, and that is very encouraging.

That does not mean that we have seen the end of long-term, intransigent forms of conflict that are religiously influenced. I use that term rather than "religious conflict," because I do not think conflict is all about religion; it is about politics, economics, nationalism, and a whole range of things. But conflict is religiously influenced in numerous cases, for example, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Israel-Palestine.

Religion plays a role in conflicts like these in three ways: legitimation, recruitment, and peace settlements. Any analysis of the Israel-Palestine conflict, for example, will have to take account of the way religion is used on both sides to justify armed conflict and to mobilize warriors. In order to work out a stable peace agreement, religion must also be accounted for in regard to the disposition of the holy sites and holy places. Religion is not the only question, but such considerations do show that religion plays a role.

My general point is that ethnonational conflicts and religiously influenced ones are on the decline, but that there continue to be a number of very difficult, rather intransigent conflicts in which religion plays an important role, such as Sudan, Sri Lanka, the festering situation in Tibet, and Israel-Palestine. There are two conflicts that I think have improved: Northern Ireland and Bosnia. Opinions differ as to how important religion is in these conflicts, but I believe a strong case can be made. So, there are two fairly recent examples of ethnoreligious conflict that are improving.

Are governments understanding the need for accommodation of minorities because of something that the international community has done, or is it a spontaneous development?

Gurr refers to this development as a "contagion," which leaves it a little bit unclear exactly how the message gets across. Gurr speaks in an earlier work, *Minorities At Risk*, of a contagion in the opposite direction, namely, toward increasing violence, and there he has in mind the importance of the Internet and other forms of communication as a way of spreading the message of minority rebellion. You can of course make a similar point with respect to international terrorism. So, up until 1995, according to Gurr, insurgent groups interacted internationally and influenced one another. In addition, diaspora communities worked in various ways to intensify conflict by providing money and adding encouragement.

After 1995, Gurr finds governments changing their attitudes toward minorities and discovering new, more cooperative ways of settling differences. The fact that governments and minorities share common interests in working out patterns of peaceful coexistence, then, becomes the new message that gets spread abroad by means of the internet, media, etc. Contagion works both ways.

The international community plays an important role in this process. For example, more and more attention has been given in human rights circles to the importance of minority and indigenous rights, as, for instance, in the Draft UN Resolution on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In his most recent book, *Ethnic Conflict and Global Politics*, Gurr argues that the attention being given to minority rights and indigenous rights by the international community has had a significant global effect on changing people's attitudes and expectations. That is an important influence, I think.

You use Northern Ireland and Bosnia as two examples of drawn-out conflicts that are finally turning the corner. What deserves credit for the reduction of conflict in these two cases? Is there a commonality between the two?

These are different cases. In Bosnia from 1992 to 1995, the United Nations and NATO engaged in various forms of third-party military and humanitarian intervention. In Northern Ireland, on the other hand, the British were the governing body. In that sense, the cases are dissimilar.

Eventually, however, third-party participation did become important in resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland. It is clear that US President Bill Clinton in particular contributed in a very important way to the peace process by sending US Senator George Mitchell and supporting his mediation. Mitchell was a third party who proceeded diplomatically to break the political logjam, in part because he was backed by Clinton and the United States. Thus, third party intervention in Northern Ireland was, in the end, very important. That is a point Gurr makes: third party international mediation is frequently indispensable in ending ethnopolitical conflict.

I think in both cases the outcomes have been relatively successful. I am still a bit uncertain whether they are really going to work out, but Bosnia is certainly in better shape than it was in 1995, and Northern Ireland is also moving haltingly toward a stable peace. In the Bosnian case there is, of course, need for continuing international presence. There was considerable concern when President George W. Bush took office as to whether his administration would pull US troops out, a move that, in my view, would have been a severe mistake. We do not have more than several thousand troops there now; nevertheless, symbolically, it is important that the international community, including the United States, continue to provide monitoring and support for the Dayton Agreement. Without such support, a still fragile situation might quickly deteriorate.

With respect to how the international community intervenes or mediates, there is presumably a risk that the actions of a third party, like the United States, can be seen as imposing democratic values or a Western mindset on local conflicts. How do we work around that?

Opposite: An Iraqi woman looks at the remains of a church after an explosion in Baghdad. The Iraq war highlighted the divisions among the religious communities in Iraq. *Above:* A soldier stands guard at a Catholic church in Northern Ireland. Many believed the presence of Protestant Orange Order men would incite violence.

For one thing, it is critical that the local population be on board. One of the problems with the present situation in Iraq is precisely that Iraqis were never clearly on board. Perhaps they were initially, but things were so poorly planned that there was little attempt or provision for encouraging positive local attitudes.

Incidentally, Bush's use of religion in this connection is itself highly controversial. For example, in responding to the terror threat, he has said things such as: "Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil;" or, "America is the hope of all mankind…. That hope still lights our way. And the light

"RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM SETS THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THE TERRORIST PROBLEM ARISES IN THE MUSLIM WORLD."

Let us take Bosnia, in contrast. The Bosnian community—particularly the Muslims there, and to a lesser degree the Serbs and Croats—had an enormously welcoming, positive attitude. What we had hoped for in Iraq we got in Bosnia. Many Bosnians just love Clinton. They think he was too slow to act, but nevertheless they were grateful when he finally came around. They admit they still have problems; the Dayton Agreement is not perfect, but it is the best that could be expected, and it does preserve a coherent Bosnian entity with the eventual possibility of full integration with the European community. On balance, there is the feeling that it was an acceptable deal.

In Northern Ireland, also, you find varying degrees of support, reinforced by a general sense of war weariness, since the conflict had gone on so long. There was a readiness to receive third-party mediation. That is key. If such reception is not present, intervention breeds resentment and hostility. There is the feeling that, "You outsiders are coming in here trying to run the place." I think we see that in Iraq. In that setting, the United States has essentially discredited itself. It has managed to alienate large segments of the Iraqi population. Intervening parties must make sure that at least a majority of the population will support them and come to see that what is proposed is a better deal than alternatives. If that is missing, interveners are really in trouble.

Looking at specific US actions and how the United States justifies its actions abroad in the war on terror, is the United States adding a religious dimension to the conflict with its particular rhetoric or action? Do you think that the recently waged war on terror is religiously motivated?

I think that for the Bush administration, the religious factor is undoubtedly important to the so-called war on terror. President Bush himself has mentioned that freedom is God's gift to humanity and that the United States is God's instrument to spread that message. So there is the assumption that the liberation of Iraq is the first step in a wider religious mission against worldwide terrorism.

shines in the darkness." These are remarkable statements. The suggestion that it is the United States' responsibility, or the responsibility of any earthly power, to "rid the world of evil" is close to idolatry from an orthodox Christian point of view. The second comment is likely to cause even more distress. It is a surprising adaptation of some famous words from the New Testament—namely, the opening five verses of the Gospel of John. President Bush's proposal that it is the United States, rather than the "the Word of God," that is the source of light in darkness would be an astounding idea for many Christians.

In Bush's defense, he has been fairly honorable about not demonizing Islam and trying to distinguish between mainstream and extremist Islam. He said some good things that have set an appropriate tone. To be sure, religion is not the only factor in the administration's war on terror. There are the obvious economic and geopolitical interests which are quite independent of religion. Nevertheless, in Bush's mind, the religious factor is significant.

To what degree is terrorism a religious phenomenon?

I think religion has become very important in regard to terrorism. Bruce Hoffman wrote a book back in the late 1990s called *Inside Terrorism*, and he showed statistically that, as of 1995, the incidence of religiously influenced terrorist acts increased precipitously. So there is evidence, and my guess is that the number has only gone higher in the past nine years. We see anecdotal evidence of that everywhere. Jessica Stern, in her recent book, *Terror in the Name of God*, indicates the same thing.

This question about religious terrorism is related to a broader question: is there a resurgence of religion in general? I think that the answer is yes, in part. In various sections of the world, such as the Middle East, there is unquestionably a rise in religious consciousness. But compared to the period of the Cold War, when religious consciousness was obscured by or subordinated to ideological concerns, religion consciousness has, in recent years, become tied to nationalism in a very overt way. I think this is a crucial point.

Looking around the globe, we see religion invoked again and again as a warrant or justification for nationalist activity. The claim is that one ethnic group has a sacred right to political control over a given territory, and if that group is challenged, it believes it has a holy obligation to defend its rights, by force if necessary. In that way, nationalist conflicts take on religious nationalism, and this sets the context in which the terrorist problem arises in the Islamic world with a religious dimension.

I do not want to say that this is only true in the case of Islam, since it applies much more broadly than that. But it is true that religious nationalism sets the context in which the terrorist problem arises in the Islamic world. Osama bin Laden can be seen as a kind of Islamic nationalist. When he looks at Saudi Arabia or Egypt he sees states that are governed by "apostates" or "infidels" who are corrupting and polluting the entire Quranic message. He believes it is his obligation as a devout Muslim to incite armed revolt in order to transform those governments and others like them. In the long run, of course, he seeks a transnational form of Islamic rule. However, his immediate target is the radical reform of Middle Eastern governments in the name of his Islamic ideals. Palestinian terrorism is a similar example. It has strongly religious and nationalist features to it. An important objective is to win independent statehood for the Palestinian people. But for important segments of the population, as well as for many non-Palestinian Muslims, that goal also has strong religious significance, and the Palestinian nationalist struggle is interpreted as part of a wider Islamic campaign. So the nationalist context is important, I am suggesting, for understanding the rise of religious terrorism.

Speaking generally about religious nationalism, is it a goal to make nationalism more secular? Do we ultimately want to see a world in which nationalist aspirations are not religiously articulated?

That is the debate. The question of religion and nationalism should be seen, I believe, as part of the basic struggle between liberal and illiberal nationalism. Liberal nationalism is characterized by constitutional democracy, including a strong commitment to religious and ethnic impartiality and inclusiveness, or the equal freedom of all, regardless of religious and other particularistic forms of identity. Illiberal nationalism is the opposite. It rejects constitutional liberalism, equal freedom, and so on, and typically favors religious and/or ethnic exclusivity and corresponding laws and policies of discrimination against out-groups. There are, of course, religious communities that encourage and support both forms of nationalism, and the critical struggle, religiously speaking—and manifest in one way or another in virtually all forms of nationalism—is between the "liberal" and the "illiberal" types of religion. The former is at home in an inclusive, constitutional democracy, and the other is not.

As I examine cases of nationalism around the world, I am interested in the movement toward liberalism or illiberalism. The pattern of movement in places like Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Northern Ireland can be plotted, historically, either in a liberal direction or an illiberal one. My general hypothesis is that the more countries move toward the illiberal direction, the more conflictual and violence-prone they become. Conversely, the more they move toward the liberal direction, the less violent and conflict-prone they are. Economic and political factors surely play a very important part in all this; it is not just about religious and ethnic attitudes and government structure. But again and again, the ethnoreligious aspects of the contest over national control are significant, I believe.

The debate between liberal and illiberal nationalists is a serious one because in some countries like Sri Lanka and

Irish Catholic nationalists confront British soldiers in the town of Ardoyne outside Belfast after the Protestant Orange Order march in 2004.

Sudan, there are constituencies saying that moving toward democracy means Westernization, including the increase of sexual immorality, crime, and violence. They believe they have to return to a more protective environment in which the government actively favors a particular notion of religious and ethnic identity, and the enforcement of certain religiously-sanctioned family values. ∎