

Spiritual Practice as Reorientation: Digital Polarization and JustPeace

Ahmet TAŞKIN¹

Abstract: This paper examines how spiritual practices can contribute to conflict transformation under contemporary conditions of digital, moral, and relational polarization. It argues that many conflicts today are not only struggles over power, resources, security, or political authority, but also crises of shared reality. In contemporary context of polarization, disagreement often becomes destructive because persons and communities no longer share a stable interpretative ground through which truth, grief, accountability, and responsibility can be pursued together. Against this background, the study does not romanticize spirituality, since religion and spirituality may also intensify exclusion, moral superiority, and hostility. Instead, drawing on Thomas W. Porter's account of conflict transformation and JustPeace, the paper presents spiritual practices as transformative practices of reorientation. Silence, listening for understanding, and speaking the truth in love reshape the habits through which persons attend, perceive, speak, and relate within conflict. While these practices are already central to conflict transformation and peace studies, this study relocates them at the micro level of everyday digital life, where ordinary acts of reaction, judgment, and attention can either wound and damage, or support and restore others. The study then extends this reorientation through moral imagination and public trust. The study concludes that spiritual practice does not eliminate conflict or guarantee peace but can reorient persons and communities capable of living out conflict differently, so that harm can be named, accountability can be faced, relationships can be restored, and JustPeace can become morally imaginable and communally practicable.

Keywords: Spiritual practice, Conflict transformation, Digital polarization, Moral imagination, JustPeace

¹ School of Theology / Dokuz Eylül University, İzmir, Türkiye. Email: ahmet.taskin@deu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-1215-714X

Introduction

In today's technological and digital contexts, few aspects of human life can still be approached through familiar patterns of thought, forms of action, and structures of practices. Almost every aspect of contemporary life is unfolding at a rapid and often unpredictable pace. In this sense, the conflicts of our time are no longer confined to visible struggles over land, power, resources, security, or political authority. They have moved far beyond classical understandings of conflict because it has become difficult to maintain a shared ground of reality in which people can interpret events within a common world of meaning, seek truth together, and establish meaningful relationships with one another. In elections, wars, pandemics, disasters, and public moral debates, disagreements no longer take place within a shared framework of meaning. Even matters that once seemed to command broad moral agreement, such as opposition to war, condemnation of crimes, or trust in democratic human choices, are now filtered through competing systems of justification. People may still appeal to justice, freedom, security, humanity, or truth, but these terms carry different meanings within divided and polarized interpretative worlds.

This paper argues that spiritual practices enable a rethinking of conflict and peace beyond secular power dynamics by addressing digital, epistemic, moral, and relational forms of contemporary polarization. Here, spirituality and spiritual practices are not understood apart from religion, but as the lived and formative dimensions of religious traditions. The aim, however, is not to claim that spirituality or spiritual practices automatically produce peace. Religion and spirituality can themselves become sources of conflict, especially when they absolutize exclusionary forms of identity, intensify exclusive moral superiority, or transform difference into hostility.

The question, then, is how spiritual practice can be understood without romanticizing spirituality or ignoring its conflict-producing potential. Thomas W. Porter's account of conflict transformation provides the conceptual bridge needed here. He does not treat conflict transformation as a merely technical method for

resolving disputes. Rather, he presents it as a spiritual, relational, and communal way of life directed toward the creation of JustPeace.² In Porter's usage, JustPeace refers to peace that moves beyond the absence of violence toward justice, restored relationships, truthful engagement, and the transformation of persons and communities. Spiritual practices, then, should be understood not as guaranteed instruments of peace, but as transformative ways of engagement through which conflict may be perceived and transformed differently in response to the conditions and complexities of our age.

This transformative emphasis also has an ethical dimension. Mehmet Türkeri argues that ethics is the production of positive value.³ Ethics involves reflection, questioning, awareness, and grounding in relation to the moral field, while morality concerns the formation of human life and value. Spiritual practice can therefore be understood as ethically significant because it forms the positive conditions through which persons and communities may cultivate attention, responsibility, and relation.

This rethinking of conflict and peace in light of conflict transformation does not move away from geopolitical realities. Rather, it expands how they are understood. Power, security, borders, institutions, laws, treaties, and formal agreements remain important. Yet conflicts are shaped by persons, communities, and the practices through which they learn to perceive, listen, imagine, and relate to one another.

Large-scale political and social conflicts are reinforced by habits of hostility, fear, humiliation, revenge, and dehumanization. These habits are not formed only in formal institutions or oval offices or in moments of crisis. They are cultivated in ordinary spaces such as families, religious communities, schools, news environments, every day public discourse, and particularly digital platforms. Conflict transformation must therefore attend not only to institutions and procedures, but also to the formative spiritual practices through which persons learn how to perceive, speak,

² Thomas W. Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation: Creating a Culture of JustPeace* (Upper Room Books, 2010), 1–5.

³ Mehmet Türkeri, *Etik Değer Açısından Eğitim, Siyaset, Kamu, Çalışma Hayatı ve Bilim*, 2nd ed. (Lotus, 2017), 9.

listen, imagine, and relate. Peace, in this sense, cannot be reduced to the absence of violence or the management of political disagreement. It requires the reorientation of the habits, practices, and relationships through which persons and communities perceive truth, assume responsibility, seek accountability, and recognize human dignity.

The paper develops the argument through the example of social media polarization and its effects during public crisis. During elections, wars, disasters or major moral debates, digital publics often divide into competing moral and epistemic communities. A person's political identity becomes closely tied to what they believe, whom they trust, which sources they follow, and whom they reject. The result is not simply disagreement, but a relational breakdown. These dynamics are not entirely new. Suspicion, exclusion, group loyalty, and moral hostility have long existed in social life, often at more local or less visible levels. What digital technology changes is their scale, speed, and reach, making them capable of affecting even the smallest communities and most ordinary relations. The other is no longer approached as a partner in a shared search for truth, but as a threat to reality itself.

A similar dynamic appeared during the pandemic, when debates around vaccines, masks, scientific expertise, and public authority divided families and communities. It also appeared in the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquakes in southeastern Türkiye, where public attention quickly moved from shared grief and destruction toward competing interpretations concerning aid organizations, media narratives, victims, officials, refugees and collective blame.

Against this background, this study proposes that spiritual practice operates as a practice of reorientation under conditions of contemporary forms of polarization. Such practice does not remove disagreement or dissolve conflict. Rather, it reshapes the way disagreement is perceived and engaged. Its significance therefore lies not in offering an immediate solution to conflict, but in transforming the habits, practices, and relationships through which conflict is either reinforced or transformed.

The study proceeds in four parts and a conclusion. Following the introduction, the second part analyzes digital

polarization as a loss of shared reality through the examples of social media conflict, pandemic debates, and the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye. It shows how contemporary conflict becomes an epistemic, moral, and relational breakdown in which people no longer dwell in a stable interpretative ground. The third part develops spiritual practice as reorientation by examining silence, listening for understanding, and speaking the truth in love as practices that reshape attention, perception, and relation. These practices are already central to many approaches that seek to transform hostility, rebuild trust, and sustain just relationships. My purpose, however, is to bring these practices to the micro and personal level of everyday digital life. In contexts of digital polarization, individuals often react before they attend, judge before they understand, and speak before they recognize the possible harm or support their words may produce. Silence, listening, and truth-speaking are therefore reconsidered as practices that reshape attention, perception, and relation in the ordinary moments where digital conflict is produced, intensified, or transformed. The fourth and final part turns to moral imagination as a way of extending spiritual reorientation toward JustPeace. The conclusion returns to the central claim that spiritual practice can reorient persons and communities so that conflict can be perceived, lived out, and transformed differently.

2. Digital Polarization and the Loss of Shared Reality

Conflict is inevitable because difference is woven into human life. Therefore, conflict can be seen as natural and necessary insofar as tension arises from created difference. Yet inevitability does not make conflict harmless. When conflict is not held within practices such as silence, listening, and accompaniment, difference can harden into polarization, and polarization can become a loss of shared reality. For this reason, the inevitability of conflict requires a form of approach or detachment. Detachment here does not mean indifference, neutrality, or withdrawal from responsibility. It means refusing to allow one's perception of persons and events to be governed entirely by proximity, loyalty, fear, or opposition. Without such detachment, attachment to one's own group easily

becomes moral blindness, while distance from the other easily becomes suspicion, contempt, or hostility.

This section therefore examines how inevitable conflict becomes destructive under contemporary conditions. It does so through the cases of social media polarization, pandemic debates, and the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye. These cases show how inevitable conflict becomes destructive through three related mechanisms. In this process, attention is deformed, perception is reorganized, public trust is shredded, and shared grief collapses into competing interpretation.

Social media polarization shows how digital environments deform attention and reorganize perception around threat, humiliation, and group confirmation. This dynamic appears across many public conflicts, including wars, elections, migration debates, religious conflicts, disasters, violence, minority claims, and the emergence of newly visible social groups. Digital platforms transmit these conflicts in ways that intensify speed, certainty, visibility, and affective reaction. Under these conditions, attention is trained to search for danger, betrayal, and moral failure. Miroslav Volf's exclusionary polarity helps address this condition. In destructive conflict, perception becomes organized around the polarity of "us against them," "their gain, our loss," and "either us or them."⁴ Perception also becomes narrower because the other is increasingly approached through the logic of opposition. The other is no longer encountered primarily as a person within a shared world, but as a sign of ignorance, corruption, or threat. As conflict strengthens, the rich texture of the social world disappears, and thought and practice align around this opposition.⁵

Reading Hannah Arendt alongside Simone Weil, Tone Svetelj shows how ideological thinking becomes detached from experience and interprets events through a closed logic that claims to explain past, present, and future. In Arendt's terms, totalitarian ideology subordinates reality to the logic of a single idea, interpreting events as stages within a predetermined historical

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 1996), 99.

⁵ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 99.

process.⁶ Relational realities such as public discourse, plurality, judgment, and critical thinking as conditions of peace and freedom are therefore displaced by a predetermined interpretive system. Digital polarization does not reproduce totalitarian ideology in the same form, but it often follows a similar logic of closure. As such, events are immediately fitted into pre-existing narratives, and the other is interpreted before being encountered. In this way, digital polarization deforms shared reality.

Pandemic debates show how the fabric of public trust can be torn. Conflicts over masks, vaccines, scientific expertise, and public authority were not only disagreements over policy. They revealed competing structures of trust, including in scientific institutions, government, religious communities, family networks, personal intuition, online influencers, or alternative media. Once trust fragmented, public health measures became interpretable through suspicion. Trust, Marry Elizabeth Moore asserts, once crushed by fear and hostility, cannot be restored simply by public declarations or official claims. It must be rebuilt through practices that address the deeper residues of suspicion, hatred, and fear.⁷ Moore also links this breakdown of trust to truth, noting that the “full, true story” becomes difficult to reach when ideological commitments, selective evidence, and deception shape what people are prepared to believe.⁸ A mask, a vaccine, or a refusal could be read as a practical decision. In a deeper level, however, they can also be seen as a sign of fear or freedom. The conflict therefore became moral and relational because positions began to signify who a person was, where that person belonged, and whether that person could still be trusted.

⁶ Tone Svetelj, “From the Banality of Evil to Spiritual Attention: Emancipation from Hatred and Rehumanization,” *MEΘEXIS Journal of Research in Values and Spirituality* 5, no. 2 (2025): 120, <https://doi.org/10.71210/mjrvs.9.a.4>.

⁷ Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, “Imagine Peace: Knowing the Real, Imagining the Impossible,” in *Handbook of Process Theology*, ed. Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman (Chalice, 2006), 204.

⁸ Moore, “Imagine Peace,” 206.

“The storm has gone, but the ‘after the storm’ is always here.”⁹ With this phrase, Shelly Rambo describes the traumatic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as a condition in which disaster continues to inhabit communal life after the external event has passed. The “after” does not simply follow the event chronologically. It persists as a lived reality in which grief and social injury continue to shape the present. Trauma, in this sense, disrupts ordinary time and unsettles the boundary between past and present. In a similar vein, this insight helps interpret the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye. The earthquakes were devastating events, but its aftermath became a continuing social and moral reality involving grief, blame, fear, and demands for accountability. Under polarized conditions, however, shared grief can quickly collapse into competing interpretation. Instead of remaining together with suffering, public discourse moves into accusation, defense, suspicion, and counter-suspicion. The disaster becomes not only a site of mourning, but also a site of interpretive conflict.

When a society lacks practices for remaining with suffering, grief can be converted too quickly into ideological struggle. Social media accelerates this conversion by pushing crisis immediately into commentary and reduces the slow work of mourning, listening, and discernment to competing interpretations. Therefore, before mourning becomes shared, interpretation becomes competitive. Likewise, before truth is patiently investigated, blame becomes performative. As Moore indicates, when fear, violence, and distrust poison the ground of common life, declarations alone cannot rebuild crushed trust, and the “full, true story” becomes difficult to reach when deception, ideology, and selective justification shape public perception.¹⁰ In this sense, the problem, then, is not the demand for accountability. The problem is that accountability becomes detached from mourning, truth, and repair, and is absorbed into the performance of political identity.

These cases show that the loss of shared reality is not simply the absence of agreement. It is the breakdown of the

⁹ Shelly Rambo, “Saturday in New Orleans: Rethinking the Holy Spirit in the Aftermath of Trauma,” *Review and Expositor* (Berne) (London, England) 105, no. 2 (2008): 230, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003463730810500206>.

¹⁰ Moore, “Imagine Peace.”

conditions that make disagreement meaningful. In each case, conflict becomes destructive because persons and communities no longer share enough orientation to argue, mourn, deliberate, or seek accountability together. Competing groups do not merely interpret facts differently. They increasingly inhabit different factual worlds, each with its own sources, experts, images, heroes, villains, and moral vocabulary. The result is not disagreement within a shared world, but the fragmentation of the world within which disagreement itself becomes possible.

This condition can be described as the loss of shared reality through digital polarization. Shared reality does not mean uniformity, consensus, or the absence of disagreement. It means that people possess enough common orientation to argue meaningfully with one another. They can disagree because they still recognize some shared standards of evidence, truthfulness, accountability, at least human dignity. When shared reality collapses, disagreement itself becomes difficult. The other is no longer judged merely to be mistaken, but is perceived as irrational, manipulated, or dangerous. This is why digital polarization must be read not only as a political or technological crisis, but also as a spiritual crisis of making sense of us and our surroundings. This prepares the turn to spiritual practice as reorientation, because the problem is not only what people think, but how they perceive and relate.

3. Spiritual Practice as Reorientation

If polarization distorts attention, perception, and relation, spiritual practice must be understood as a practice of reorientation. In this study, spiritual practice refers to repeated practices through which the self is reoriented toward what is ultimate, sacred, or morally binding. Such reorientation reshapes how the self attends, perceives, and relates. In conflict transformation, this kind of spiritual practice takes the more specific form of transformative practice.

In Porter's understanding, conflict transformation is not merely a technique for settling disputes but a way of life oriented

toward a culture of JustPeace.¹¹ It begins with one's attitude toward conflict and with the way one looks at and responds to conflict.¹² Ran Kraybill develops the same point from the side of peacebuilder, stating that peacebuilding requires the transformation of the peacebuilder because the work is not only a matter of skill or profession but a lifelong journey of personal transformation.¹³ He states that one cannot facilitate transformation in others without actively pursuing one's own transformative journey, and he describes personal transformation as lifelong, holistic, and shaped by moment-by-moment choices.¹⁴ In this sense, Kraybill defines transformative practice as regular activity directed toward transformation, involving renewal and reflection, and attending to the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of human life.¹⁵ For both Porter and Kraybill, then, the purpose of transformative practice is not merely to improve the handling of conflict, but to transform the person who enters conflict. Transformative practice makes one more attentive, humble, grounded, and capable of remaining present without avoidance or reaction.

This movement from spiritual practice to transformative practice also has a communal dimension. Dukes, Piscolith, and Stephens' "higher ground" approach shows that conflict transformation requires practices that create an enlarged and principled space in which people can listen, learn, imagine new possibilities, share responsibility, and remain in difficult conversation without tearing the community apart.¹⁶ Reorientation through transformative practice is therefore not only inward. It also reshapes the relational space in which conflict is engaged.

Thus, spiritual practice as reorientation is not abstract. It becomes concrete through practices such as silence, listening for

¹¹ Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³ Ronald S. Kraybill, *Restoring Those Who Help Others: Spirituality and Self-Care for Those in Danger of Burnout* (Good Books, 2008), 2–7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16–7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁶ E. Franklin Dukes et al., *Reaching for Higher Ground in Conflict Resolution: Tools for Powerful Groups and Communities* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), 59–79.

understanding and speaking the truth in love. These practices do not remove conflict, nor do they guarantee agreement. Rather, they change how the self and the community enter conflict. These practices create a space between perception and response, weaken the automatic movement from disagreement to opposition. In other words, they make it possible to remain present to conflict and to the other without immediately reacting, controlling, or withdrawing.

3.1. Silence

Silence is the first transformative practice of reorientation because polarization depends on speed. Digital conflict trains persons to respond immediately, to judge before listening, and to turn every event into a position. Silence interrupts this movement. It does not mean passivity, cowardice, or withdrawal from justice. There is a destructive silence that protects oppression and hides harm. That is not the silence meant here. Spiritual silence is a refusal to be governed by immediate reaction. It allows the self to notice fear, anger, superiority, and the need for belonging before these impulses become speech, judgment, or action.

Kraybill's idea of the "pace of guidance" deepens this account of spiritual silence. Transformative work, he argues, does not move according to the fastest speed allowed by workplans, travel, institutional demands, or measurable outcomes. It moves "at the pace of guidance," the pace at which one can act while still receiving guidance along the way.¹⁷ This matters for digital polarization because polarized conflict rewards immediacy, certainty, and visible reaction. Silence creates a different pace. It slows the self enough to notice what is happening inwardly and to resist confusing immediate reaction with truth.

The "pace of guidance" is a way of finding a pace with life, not simply slowing down. It requires setting aside ordinary time, remaining with uncertainty, and allowing what is hidden to become visible. This pace can also be understood as a way of reconnecting to one's emotional and spiritual center amid chaos. In this sense, silence is not the absence of action. It is a practice of pace. It creates the inner space in which the self can listen for guidance before speaking, judging, or acting.

¹⁷ Kraybill, *Restoring Those Who Help Others*, 57.

At a deeper level, silence becomes a space in which the self can see beneath mere information and move beyond the obvious and conventional. For example, mystical and Sufi traditions understand silence as a way of perceiving and knowing God. This perception is transformative because it reorders the self's relation to reality. Silence quiets and places the self before what is ultimate, where perception, desire, and judgment can be reshaped. In the context of conflict, this means that silence trains the self to see the other, the situation, and its own reactions without being governed immediately by feelings such as fear, anger or the desire to control.

3.2. Listening for Understanding

If silence interrupts reaction, listening for understanding reopens relation. In polarized contexts, people often listen to respond, correct, expose, or defeat the other. Just like silence, listening does not require agreement, nor does it suspend moral judgment. It is an attempt to understand the world from which another person articulates. In this sense, listening is not passive reception. It is a transformative practice because it resists the reduction of the other to a position of contempt or hostility.

Listening is not simply receiving information from another person. It can change the way the speaker grasps reality. In this light, Carl Rogers explains why listening for understanding is transformative. He observes that when a person is deeply heard, he or she may become able to “reperceive” the world in a new way.¹⁸ In conflict, persons often become trapped inside defensive interpretations of reality. To be heard does not solve the conflict immediately, but it can loosen the rigidity of perception and make movement possible. Rogers also shows that listening transforms the listener. To listen deeply is to be drawn into another person's feelings and meanings. It requires openness to the other's world rather than control over the conversation. This makes listening a practice of reorientation because the listener learns to suspend the

¹⁸ Carl R. Rogers, “A Counselor's Approach,” in *Bridges Not Walls: A Book about Interpersonal Communication*, ed. John Stewart (1973; 8th ed., McGraw-Hill, 2002), 644.

immediate need to control and becomes available to the realness of the other.¹⁹

Similarly, Kraybill argues that one of the deepest human needs is to feel understood and accepted. When people are denied understanding, they may respond through withdrawal, aggression, or violence, even less extreme forms of being unheard can diminish flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving.²⁰ Listening for understanding therefore addresses one of the roots of destructive conflict. It creates the conditions in which people can remain present rather than defend themselves through attack, withdrawal, or suspicion. Kraybill further shows that listening changes the relational space of conflict. Good listening builds trust which creates a supportive environment, models constructive communication, and moves the focus from apparent impasse to deeper needs.²¹ This means that listening is not merely an interpersonal virtue. It is a practice that reshapes the space in which conflict is held.

Kraybill explicitly describes listening as transformation because it is not reducible to communication technique. Listening skills can guide the process, but transformative listening requires a heart-level connection with the other person's deepest concerns and intrinsic worth. In this sense, good listening creates an opportunity for transformation because "honors the uniqueness of another human being." He states that good listening involves two transformations: the transformation of the person who is listened to and the transformation of the listener's own heart.²²

3.3. Speaking the Truth in Love

Silence and listening are effective transformative practices, but spiritual reorientation cannot remain only inward or receptive. Silence creates space before reaction, and listening opens the self to the world of the other. Yet conflict also requires speech. Harm must be addressed, truth must be spoken, and responsibility must be acknowledged, and particularly disagreement must be expressed.

¹⁹ Ibid., 646–47.

²⁰ Ronald S. Kraybill et al., *Peace Skills: A Manual for Community Mediators*, 1st ed. (Jossey-Bass, 2001), 87.

²¹ Ibid., 88.

²² Ibid., 92–3.

For this reason, spiritual practice must also take an expressive form. In contexts of polarization, people may need more than calmness, empathy, or mutual understanding.

Porter explicitly presents “speaking the truth in love” as one of the relational skills of conflict transformation, alongside listening for understanding, imagination, and forgiveness, and he states that these skills are to be engaged as both essential life skills and spiritual practices.²³ This makes speaking part of spiritual reorientation rather than a mere technique of communication in the context of conflict.

Speaking, however, carries a particular risk. Unlike silence and listening, it can either easily deepen polarization or become a practice through which relation, accountability, and repair can be possible. For this reason, truthful speech must be joined to listening considering relational responsibility.²⁴ Speaking the truth in love follows silence and listening because, for Porter, good dialogue brings good listening and good speaking together. Speaking thus becomes transformative only when it arises from a listening relation.

Porter’s discussion of speaking focuses on story, truth, and emotional impacts. For him, truth is not reducible to factual accuracy alone, because it also includes the emotional weight of events and the truth carried in the other’s story. When a story has been suppressed or denied, speaking the truth in love or simply truthful speech requires more than the correction of those facts.²⁵ Instead, it requires a safe space in which the story can be spoken, heard, and received. This is why telling stories in the presence of true listening becomes transformative.

In polarized spaces, speaking or texting in our contemporary context often becomes a performance for one’s own group. It seeks visibility, victory, exposure, humiliation, or moral confirmation. Speaking the truth in love resists this pattern. It does not silence conviction, nor does it avoid accountability. It asks how truth can be spoken or written without turning expression into domination, how harm can be addressed without reducing the other

²³ Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

to an enemy, and how disagreement can be expressed without destroying the conditions of relation.

The circle process and the relational covenant in *The Journey* by Hixson and Porter give these transformative practices concrete communal structure. In *The Journey* the circle is described as a process that creates space for people, even in conflict, to have a good conversation and move toward a good place together. It offers a safe enough space for the telling and hearing of stories, and it visually represents interconnection and interdependence. In the circle, participants sit as equals. Each person is responsible both for contributing wisdom to the conversation and for hearing the wisdom of others. In the circle, a person holding talking piece speaks without interruption, while the others listen.²⁶

Within this circle process, the relational covenant also gives listening and speaking ethical aspects. Participants are asked to speak with respect, speak honestly, speak only for themselves, and speak in a way that encourages dialogue. They are also asked to listen with respect, listen for understanding, try to understand perspectives different from their own, hold differences together, and remain open to transformation.²⁷ In this way, the circle gives practical and ethical expression to listening and responsible speaking.

4. Moral Imagination and Public Trust toward JustPeace

Having examined how spiritual practices reorient persons and communities enter conflict, this section now asks how that reorientation opens the way to moral imagination, public trust, and JustPeace. Silence slows reaction, listening for understanding opens relation, and speaking the truth in love structures expression. These practices also create the conditions for imagining conflict beyond the narrow categories produced by polarization, such as us and them, right and wrong, innocent and guilty. Once conflict is interpreted only through these categories, people lose the

²⁶ Stephanie Hixson and Thomas W. Porter, *The Journey: Forgiveness, Restorative Justice and Reconciliation* (Women's Division, The General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 2011), 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

capacity to imagine other ways of relating. Porter frames conflict transformation precisely as a relational task concerned with how people may live together, break cycles of injury and violence, and become reconcilers and mediating presences within a conflicted world.²⁸ Moral imagination belongs to this relational task because it expands what persons and communities are able to perceive within conflict.

4.1. Moral Imagination

Therefore, moral imagination is not escape from reality. It is a deeper way of perceiving reality under conditions in which conflict has narrowed what appears possible. John Paul Lederach defines moral imagination as the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world while giving birth to what does not yet exist.²⁹ In this sense, imagination does not deny conflict, violence, or suffering, but allows persons and communities to perceive possibilities that are hidden by them. Lederach grounds moral imagination in relational interdependence by arguing that violence and its transformation both occur within webs of relationship. Moral imagination arises when persons and communities are able to imagine themselves in relationship, even with their enemies.³⁰

Michael Battle develops a similar insight from Ubuntu theology of Africa. Ubuntu describes human beings as intrinsically interconnected. According to this theology, one's humanity is bound up with the humanity of others.³¹ In other words, human beings become fully themselves only through relation, mutual recognition, vulnerability, and shared life. Both Ubuntu and moral imagination challenges polarization because it refuses to imagine the other as external to the self's moral world. The other may remain an opponent, but cannot be reduced to a disposable figure outside the field of shared humanity.

²⁸ Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 39–72.

²⁹ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 29.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

³¹ Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Pilgrim Press, 1997), 141.

Lederach's relationality directly challenges digital polarization because polarization teaches people to see the other as outside their moral concern, while Lederach's moral imagination asks them to see even the enemy as part of a shared relational field. In social media conflicts, this means resisting the habit of treating the other as a faceless representative of ignorance, corruption, or threat. The person who posts, shares, or disagrees is still part of the relational world that one's own silence, listening or speaking help to reorient. In pandemic debates, it means seeing those who trusted different authorities not simply as irrational or dangerous, but as persons reoriented by fear, vulnerability, institutional suspicion, or concern for freedom and care. In the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye, it means refusing to let shared grief collapse entirely into accusations between political groups, aid organizations, refugees, victims, and media communities. Moral imagination does not erase responsibility in any of these cases. It asks how truth, grief, fear, and accountability can be held within a wider relational field instead of being reduced to contempt and hostility.

This relationality explains why moral imagination must move beyond dualistic polarities. Lederach argues that cycles of violence often reduce complex histories into artificial polarities that claim to describe and contain social reality.³² This is precisely what digital polarization does. It compresses complex situations into oppositions such as "us or them," "innocent or guilty," "loyal or betrayer," and "right or wrong." Moral imagination resists this compression by holding complexity open long enough for other possibilities of relation, responsibility, and repair to become visible.

Moral imagination also requires a space in which creative action can emerge. Lederach describes the provision of space for the creative act as one of the key disciplines that "gives rise to moral imagination."³³ This connects moral imagination to the practices developed earlier. Silence creates space before reaction, listening opens relation, and speaking the truth in love gives expression a responsible form. These practices make room for creative responses that are not dictated by conditions of polarization.

³² Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 37.

³³ *Ibid.*, 38.

Moore's imagination clarifies why such creative space is necessary for peacebuilding. She asks how people can engage in peacemaking if they cannot imagine a peaceful world, and she presents imagination as a vital but often neglected element in global peacemaking.³⁴ In her view, imagination increases the capacity to see more than what is already visible, to perceive peace where only war and violence appear. It also becomes a form of attention to sufferers, strangers, and unfamiliar persons. Thus, imagination reopens perception by making it possible to attend to the humanity, suffering, and possibility that polarization hides. Peacebuilding therefore cannot stop at addressing violence or objecting to injustice. It must also involve the constructive work of imagining alternatives and new possibilities for peace.

Responding to the changing realities of twenty-first-century war, Shelly Rambo also argues that inherited theological approaches are insufficient and that new modes of engagement are needed, especially through traumatic, interreligious, and aesthetic dimensions.³⁵ If digital polarization narrows perception and hardens interpretive worlds, moral imagination works in the opposite direction. It opens persons and communities to possibilities of relation, responsibility, and repair that are not yet visible within the polarized field.

4.2. *Public Trust*

Within that, moral imagination should be joined to practices that rebuild public trust. Trust, as Moore stated previously, is not simply an abstract belief in institutions or official declarations.³⁶ It is formed through repeated ways of speaking, listening, gathering, remembering, and remaining accountable to one another. *The Journey* makes this practical through its relational covenant, where participants are asked to speak with respect, speak honestly, speak only for themselves, speak in a way that encourages dialogue, listen with respect, listen for understanding, hold differences together,

³⁴ Moore, "Imagine Peace," 201.

³⁵ Shelly Rambo, "Changing the Conversation: Theologizing War in the Twenty-First Century," *Theology Today* (Ephrata, Pa.) (London, England) 69, no. 4 (2013): 441–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573612463035>.

³⁶ Moore, "Imagine Peace," 204.

and remain open to transformation.³⁷ These practices show that public trust is not restored by demanding agreement, but by forming a shared space in which disagreement can be expressed without destroying relation.

Public trust is therefore relational before it is institutional. It is formed through the repeated practices, symbols, and gestures by which communities learn how to remain with one another in uncertainty and conflict. Marcia McFee describes this formative process through ritual. She treats ritual as a practice for navigating broken relationships and uncertain futures. She argues that ritual is needed in liminal spaces because conflict places people “betwixt and between,” where old relationships are broken but new relationships have not yet appeared.³⁸ Ritual gives structure for moving through this threshold.

The effect of ritual or repeated practices can also be seen from the opposite perspective. In social media polarization, repeated practices of posting, sharing, mocking, exposing, and reacting form habits of suspicion and hostility. In pandemic debates, repeated appeals to different sources of authority, scientific institutions, online influencers, or alternative media creates competing trust-structures. In this case, public trust collapsed because communities repeatedly learned to receive different authorities, stories, and bodies as either credible or dangerous. Shared grief could become a practice of solidarity, but under polarized conditions it could also become a ritual of suspicion and hostile identity.

This is important for public trust because trust does not collapse only at the level of ideas or theory. It is formed or deformed through repeated patterns. Repeated practices, Mcfee believes, create “schemas” through which people and communities perceive the world and their place within it. Because repeated schemas become more accessible and emotionally powerful, they can

³⁷ Hixon and Porter, *The Journey*, 15–7.

³⁸ Marcia McFee, “Ritual Formation: Liturgical Practices and the Practice of Peacebuilding,” in *Conflict and Communion: Reconciliation and Restorative Justice at Christ’s Table*, ed. Thomas W. Porter (Discipleship Resources, 2006), 68.

eventually become second nature.³⁹ Therefore, when communities repeatedly practice fear, suspicion, and hostility, mistrust becomes habitual. When they repeatedly practice silence, listening for understanding, speaking the truth in love, trust can gradually become possible again.

William J. Everett's "ritual rehearsal" develops a point close to Mcfee' schemas. He argues that if people rehearse, rituals of subordination, silencing, command, or retribution in daily life, they will enact those forms in justice-seeking settings. If they rehearse participation, conversational inquiry, and negotiation, they will bring those into formal processes of justice.⁴⁰ Public trust is thus structured through repeated social rehearsal. Communities become capable of restorative justice when they have already learned, through ordinary practices, how to listen, speak, and remain accountable to one another.

4.3. *JustPeace*

Moral imagination and public trust can finally be directed toward JustPeace through such transformative practices. As stated in the introduction, JustPeace is not simply the absence of violence or the temporary management of disagreement. For Porter, JustPeace is a culture, a way of living together, and a relational horizon in which justice, restored relationships, truthful engagement, and transformed persons and communities belong together. His guiding question is how persons and communities may break cycles of injury, retribution, and violence and learn to be well together. Put differently, JustPeace means creating "a different way of living together."⁴¹

Porter therefore turns toward conversation, dialogue, mediation, restorative justice, and healed relationships as practices through which conflict can become constructive rather than destructive. Within this, silence, listening for understanding, and speaking the truth in love can be understood as JustPeace practices

³⁹ McFee, "Ritual Formation: Liturgical Practices and the Practice of Peacebuilding," 70.

⁴⁰ William J. Everett, "Ritual Wisdom and Restorative Justice," *Hamline Journal of Public Law & Policy* 25, no. 2 (2004): 353.

⁴¹ Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 131.

since they reorient persons and communities toward attention, perception, and relation.

Porter's treatment of the Last Supper shows what JustPeace means in practice. In this discussion, "the Table" refers to the Table of Holy Communion, but Porter uses it more broadly as a theological and practical symbol of conflict transformation. This Table functions as a JustPeace an expression of JustPeace in several ways. First, it is a sacred space for healing and reconciliation. Porter describes it as a place where people open themselves communally to God's healing and reconciling love. It is a "Table of relational healing, restorative justice, and reconciliation."⁴² Second, it is a place of interconnection and accountability. At the Table, people recognize that they need one another and are accountable to God, to each other, and to the wider creation.⁴³ Third, it is a place where conflict is brought rather than avoided. For Porter, the Table is not a private or religious space. It is where real conflict can be named and engaged. For him, the Table can become transformative when people recognize it as "a place to name and engage our conflicts and practice reconciliation."⁴⁴

For Porter, the Table is a model for JustPeace. It shows what JustPeace looks like in practice. People gather, name conflict, listen, face harm, receive forgiveness, seek accountability, and move toward restored relation. It is not just a religious object, but a model for a different way of living together.

This is where silence, listening for understanding and speaking the truth in love become concrete JustPeace practices. The Table creates a sacred and non-reactive space in which conflicted persons can listen to one another's stories, experience one another's joys and sorrows, and pursue reconciliation together. In this sense, silence makes space for conflict to be approached without immediate accusation, defense, or punishment and listening for understanding keeps the other from being reduced to an enemy or a threat. That is how they create a relational space in which truth can be spoken and received.

⁴² Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 132.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

Jesus naming conflict at the Table clarifies that betrayal, denial, abandonment, and structural reversal are not hidden, because justice, truth, and transformation require addressing the conflict. Yet this naming is not directed toward punishment, humiliation, or wounding. Jesus names the conflict and then gives bread and wine. Porter describes this movement as a shift from blaming to naming, from punishment to accountability, and from retribution to forgiveness. Giving bread does not erase consequences or accountability. Rather, it changes the spirit in which conflict is named, opening the possibility of real accountability rather than defensive reaction.⁴⁵

Thus, silence makes space for non-reactive naming, listening for understanding keeps naming from becoming accusation, and speaking the truth in love allows harm and responsibility to be addressed without destroying relation. In this way, spiritual practices become JustPeace practices because they form persons and communities capable of naming conflict, receiving one another, facing accountability, and moving toward healing.

Porter's image of breaking down the walls and coming to the Table shows the public direction of this reframing or reorientation. It means that the Table is not only a private Christian ritual inside the church. Porter uses this image of breaking down the walls to say that the reconciling work symbolized by the Table should move beyond the church's boundaries into the wider community and world. In his image, Porter seeks a church known publicly as a place where people can bring hurt, conflict, and broken relationships. Conflicts are named, but not in a spirit of punishment. They are named so people can move toward "a good place together." The Table becomes a center for restoration, healing, reconciliation, and public discernment about "the major issues of the day."⁴⁶

With JustPeace, Porter is not concerned primarily with inner peace or private spirituality. He imagines a community so deeply transformed by practices of reconciliation that it becomes a place where people learn to face harm, receive one another, speak truthfully, and be well together.

⁴⁵ Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 140.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 143–4.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that spiritual practice can contribute to conflict transformation by reorienting the ways persons and communities perceive, live out, and respond to conflict under contemporary conditions of polarization. The argument began from the observation that many conflicts today cannot be understood only through classical categories such as land, security, resources, institutions, sovereignty, or political authority. These realities remain important, but they no longer exhaust the nature of conflict. Digital environments, fractured trust, competing sources of authority, and moralized group identities have transformed conflict into an epistemic, moral, and relational crisis. People do not merely disagree about what should be done. They increasingly disagree about what has happened, who can be trusted, what counts as evidence, whose suffering matters, and whether the other remains part of a shared moral world. Conflict therefore becomes destructive not only because individuals and groups oppose one another, but because the shared ground within which disagreement could be meaningful begins to collapse.

The examples of social media polarization, pandemic debates, and the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye showed how this collapse takes shape. Social media intensifies speed, certainty, visibility, humiliation, and affective reaction. It trains attention to search for danger, betrayal, and moral failure. Pandemic debates revealed that public disagreement was also a crisis of trust. Within that, different communities relied on different authorities, institutions, media sources, religious interpretations, scientific claims, and personal intuitions. The earthquake aftermath showed that even shared grief can quickly become competitive interpretation when mourning, truth, and accountability are absorbed into polarized identity performance. In each case, the problem was not disagreement itself. The problem was the deformation of the conditions through which disagreement, mourning, truth-seeking, and accountability could be held together.

For this reason, this study proposed spiritual practice as a practice of reorientation. Spiritual practice was not treated as a private escape from conflict or as a guaranteed instrument of peace. Nor was spirituality romanticized. Religion and spirituality can

become sources of conflict when they absolutize identity, intensify moral superiority, or transform difference into hostility. The question, then, was how spiritual practice can be understood in a way that acknowledges this danger while still recognizing its transformative potential. Porter's account of conflict transformation provided the central bridge, because he understands conflict transformation not merely as a technical method for resolving disputes, but as a spiritual, relational, and communal way of life directed toward JustPeace.

The practices examined in this study were presented as transformative because they reshape how persons enter conflict. Silence interrupts the speed of reaction. It creates a space between stimulus and response, allowing the self to notice fear, anger, superiority, loyalty, and the desire to control before these become expression or action. Listening for understanding reopens relation. It resists the reduction of the other to a position, threat, or enemy, and it allows both the speaker and listener to perceive reality differently. Speaking the truth in love gives expression a responsible structure. It does not avoid harm or disagreement, but asks how truth can be spoken without humiliation, domination, or the destruction of relation. These practices do not remove conflict, but they alter the way conflict is carried.

The movement from spiritual practice to moral imagination was therefore necessary. If polarization narrows perception, moral imagination reopens it. Lederach's account of moral imagination showed that peacebuilding requires the capacity to imagine possibilities rooted in the real world but not exhausted by its visible conditions. Battle's Ubuntu theology deepened this point by showing that personhood itself is relational. Moore further clarified that peacebuilding cannot stop at criticizing violence or injustice. Therefore, it must also imagine alternatives. Rambo's approach supported this by insisting that inherited approaches are insufficient in the face of new forms of war, trauma, and interreligious complexity. Moral imagination, then, is an effective capacity to perceive more than what polarization makes visible. It allows persons and communities to see relationality and possibility where polarized perception sees only guilt, threat, and opposition.

If imagination remains private, it cannot rebuild common life. This is why this study turned to public trust. Public trust was presented as relational before it is institutional. It is not restored simply through declarations, official claims, or abstract appeals to unity. Trust is formed through repeated practices, symbols, rituals, and gestures by which communities learn how to speak, listen, agree, disagree, and remain accountable to one another. McFee's account of ritual formation showed how repeated practices create schemas through which people perceive the world and their place within it. Everett's account of ritual rehearsal made the same point in relation to restorative justice. Public trust is a practiced reality. It is formed or deformed through what communities repeatedly do.

This insight is crucial for the paper's broader claim. Spiritual practices are not merely individual virtues. When repeated, shared, and lived out, they become forms of public life. Silence becomes a communal capacity to resist immediate accusation and reactive judgment. Listening becomes a way of holding conflict without reducing the other to an enemy. Speaking the truth in love becomes a disciplined way of naming harm, facing responsibility, and sustaining relation. These practices matter because conflict is reinforced by habits. If hostility, suspicion, humiliation, and moral closure are repeatedly practiced, they become socially normal. If attention, listening, truthful speech, accountability, and repair are repeatedly practiced, a different kind of common life becomes possible.

The final movement of the paper brought these practices into Porter's vision of JustPeace. JustPeace is not simply peace after conflict, nor the absence of violence, nor the temporary management of disagreement. It is a culture, a way of living together, and a relational horizon in which justice, restored relationships, truthful engagement, accountability, and transformed persons and communities belong together. Porter's treatment of the Last Supper and the Table showed this in concrete theological and practical form. The reframing or reorientation from blaming to naming, from punishment to accountability, and from retribution to forgiveness through the Table analogy clarifies how spiritual practices become JustPeace practices. JustPeace shows that the aim of spiritual practice is not simply personal serenity, emotional regulation, or

private reconciliation. The aim is the formation of persons and communities capable of living conflict differently.

The study therefore contributes to contemporary discussions of conflict and peace by refusing two reductions. First, it refuses to reduce conflict to secular power dynamics alone. Power, institutions, law, security, borders, and formal agreements matter, but conflict also takes shape through habits of perception, speech, imagination, trust, and relation. Second, it refuses to reduce spiritual practice to inward piety or private moral improvement. Spiritual practices have public significance when they reorient persons and communities capable of resisting polarization, maintaining truthful relation, and rebuilding the conditions of common life. The point is that conflict transformation requires the transformation of those who enter conflict.

Under conditions of digital polarization, this transformation is urgent. When attention is trained toward threat, silence slows reaction. When the other is reduced to a position or enemy, listening reopens relation. When speech becomes performance, accusation, or humiliation, speaking the truth in love restores the possibility of accountable expression. When polarization narrows imagination, moral imagination opens possibilities beyond dualistic categories. When mistrust becomes habitual, repeated practices of listening, truthfulness, ritual, and accountability slowly rebuild the conditions of public trust. When peace is reduced to the absence of violence, JustPeace recalls that peace requires justice, truth, restored relation, and transformed life.

It is never enough to design better procedures, create institutional statements, or call for unity after crisis. Communities need practices that train them to remain with conflict without immediately converting it into enmity. They need rituals and habits that make listening, truth-telling, accountability, and repair possible. They need forms of imagination that allow them to perceive the humanity of the other without denying harm or responsibility. They need public spaces where disagreement does not require the destruction of shared reality.

The conclusion, then, does not claim that spiritual practice guarantees peace. It also does not accept that polarization is the

final condition of contemporary life. Conflict remains inevitable, and in many cases necessary, because difference, injustice, injury, and responsibility cannot be erased. But conflict need not always be governed by fear, humiliation, suspicion, and moral closure. The practices of silence, listening for understanding, and speaking the truth in love show that conflict can be entered differently. Moral imagination and public trust show that this difference can move beyond the individual toward transformation. For Porter and us, JustPeace means a culture in which persons and communities learn to face conflict truthfully, remain accountable to one another, and seek a different way of living together.

References

- Battle, Michael. *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*. Pilgrim Press, 1997.
- Dukes, E. Franklin, Marina A. Pischish, and John B. Stephens. *Reaching for Higher Ground in Conflict Resolution: Tools for Powerful Groups and Communities*. Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- Everett, William J. "Ritual Wisdom and Restorative Justice." *Hamline Journal of Public Law & Policy* 25, no. 2 (2004): 347–54.
- Hixon, Stephanie, and Thomas W. Porter. *The Journey: Forgiveness, Restorative Justice and Reconciliation*. Women's Division, The General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 2011.
- Kraybill, Ronald S. *Restoring Those Who Help Others: Spirituality and Self-Care for Those in Danger of Burnout*. Good Books, 2008.
- Kraybill, Ronald S., Alice F. Evans, and Robert A. Evans. *Peace Skills: A Manual for Community Mediators*. 1st ed. Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- Lederach, John Paul. *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- McFee, Marcia. "Ritual Formation: Liturgical Practices and the Practice of Peacebuilding." In *Conflict and Communion: Reconciliation and Restorative Justice at Christ's Table*, edited by Thomas W. Porter. Discipleship Resources, 2006.
- Moore, Mary Elizabeth Mullino. "Imagine Peace: Knowing the Real, Imagining the Impossible." In *Handbook of Process*

- Theology*, edited by Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman. Chalice, 2006.
- Porter, Thomas W. *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation: Creating a Culture of JustPeace*. Upper Room Books, 2010.
- Rambo, Shelly. "Changing the Conversation: Theologizing War in the Twenty-First Century." *Theology Today* (Ephrata, Pa.) (London, England) 69, no. 4 (2013): 441–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573612463035>.
- Rambo, Shelly. "Saturday in New Orleans: Rethinking the Holy Spirit in the Aftermath of Trauma." *Review and Expositor* (Berne) (London, England) 105, no. 2 (2008): 229–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003463730810500206>.
- Rogers, Carl R. "A Counselor's Approach." In *Bridges Not Walls: A Book about Interpersonal Communication*, edited by John Stewart. 1973. 8th ed. McGraw-Hill, 2002.
- Svetelj, Tone. "From the Banality of Evil to Spiritual Attention: Emancipation from Hatred and Rehumanization." *MEΘEXIS Journal of Research in Values and Spirituality* 5, no. 2 (2025): 117–40. <https://doi.org/10.71210/mjrvs.9.a.4>.
- Türkeri, Mehmet. *Etik Değer Açısından Eğitim, Siyaset, Kamu, Çalışma Hayatı ve Bilim*. 2nd ed. Lotus, 2017.
- Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Abingdon Press, 1996.