

Unity in Diversity

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INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

MOHAMMED ABU-NIMER, AMAL KHOURY, AND EMILY WELTY



UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE PRESS
Washington, D.C.

The views expressed in this book are those of the authors alone. They do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace.

UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE
1200 17th Street NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20036-3011

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First published 2007

Printed in the United States of America

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standards for Information Science—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Abu-Nimer, Mohammed, 1962-

Unity in diversity : interfaith dialogue in the Middle East / Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Amal Khoury, and Emily Welty.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-60127-013-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-60127-013-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Middle East--Religion. 2. Religions--Relations. I. Khoury, Amal. II. Welty, Emily. III. Title.

BL1600.A28 2007

201'.50956--dc22

2007020273

*We dedicate this book to all Muslims, Jews, Christians,
and others who have devoted their precious lives
to the pursuit of peace and justice
and who continue to sacrifice in many different ways
for all of us.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people who contributed to this project over the last two years. Although our list of appreciation is not comprehensive, we would still like to thank a few of those who joined us on the journey to complete this book.

We are grateful for the financial support of the United States Institute of Peace, especially David Smock, director of the Religion and Peacemaking Program, for his patience and consistent encouragement. David has been a strong force behind many of the successful interfaith projects in the Middle East. This research would have been impossible without his leadership and commitment to creating a sustainable interfaith peacebuilding field in the Middle East. We are truly appreciative of his support. Also, Qamar-ul Huda, program officer for the Institute's Religion and Peacemaking Program, and our editor, Michael Carr, were most helpful in seeing this manuscript through to publication.

Several other institutions contributed to this project by association as well as with funds. Our sincere thanks to the American University's School of International Service, under the leadership of Dean Louis Goodman, as well as to Professor Said Abdul Aziz, director of the International Peace and Conflict Resolution Program. Both have offered their help in various ways throughout this project. This project began its first phase in 2003, when Mohammed Abu-Nimer was a Religion and Peace Fellow at the Kroc Institute at Notre Dame University. Scott Appleby, the director, offered both moral support and encouragement to pursue this project. His work on religion and peace has been an inspiring path for many in the field.

The United Religions Initiative (URI) was a central partner in this project, too. Its administrative and financial management of the grant from the Institute of Peace was crucial to the completion of the project. We are most grateful to Barbara Hartford for her excellent facilitation of this grant and for providing us with many local contacts from URI in the Middle East, too. Her encouragement and attention to detail were valuable resources for our team. Also, without URI staff and ground support, this project would have not been completed. We are also grateful to our editor, Atieno Fisher, for taking the time to thoroughly review the manuscript. Her content and style comments helped us tremendously.

Obviously our most valuable contributors to this project are the local researchers in these communities who have endured the most difficulties and faced many logistical and intellectual challenges throughout this process. We are most grateful and appreciative of their work and the risks they have taken to gather the information and provide us with enough data to write these chapters. Thank you, Rana Hussein, Jordan; Mohammed Mossad and Yasmine El Rifai, Egypt; Aref Hussein, Palestine; and Kamal Kezel and Amal Abu

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Zidan, Jerusalem. We also would like to thank Mohammed Abu-Nimer's research assistants Tazreena Sajjad and Adel Ghazzel.

Finally, we are most obliged to all interviewees and organizations who opened their doors and sacrificed their time to share their views openly with us and with our local researchers. We hope that this research will bring more visibility and recognition to their valuable contribution to building a culture of peace and nonviolence in their societies.

FOREWORD

The skeptics come in at least two varieties. Secularists find it naive that anyone could actually see interfaith dialogue (IFD) as a way forward in the morass of religiously fueled intolerance and hatred that is the Middle East. Religions, they say, are a—perhaps *the*—major source of intolerance, conflict, and deadly violence in the post-Cold War world, whose dark side is overpoweringly on display in the societies the authors have selected to study: Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan. For exhibit A, one could point out the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, al Qaeda; for exhibit B, Gush Emunim, the radical Jewish “Bloc of the Faithful,” who established illegal settlements in the West Bank. And for exhibit C, we have any number of crusading, messianic Americans, plotting behind the scenes, provoking Christian sentiments against Muslims, and bankrolling Israeli expansionism. Indeed, one could argue that anyone who proposes religion as the way out of this mess is scarcely less addled than the religious fanatics themselves!

And opponents of dialogue scoff with equal scorn, calling dialogue the refuge of the weak and irrelevant. They see those who lead or participate in such efforts as having no clout with the powerful, and talking across religious and cultural barriers as a noble exercise but nothing more. Even were the IFD practitioners to lead their respective “tribes” toward sustainable peace, dialogue’s opponents point out, it would take very little—a rash of suicide bombings, a hate crime, the desecration of a sacred site—to wipe out years of so-called progress. And when the “fact in the field” is something as momentous as the war in Iraq, for example, the political vulnerability of religions and their would-be peacemakers is cruelly exposed.

Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Amal Khoury, and Emily Welty have heard it all before, and they remain unconvinced. Indeed, *Unity in Diversity* is their eloquent rebuttal to the so-called conventional wisdom regarding religion and dialogue. The authors of this groundbreaking comparative study of interfaith actors and initiatives in five conflict-ridden societies of the Middle East conclude, modestly but significantly, that interfaith dialogue is an underdeveloped but potentially powerful instrument in the peacebuilder’s mediation and transformation tool kit.

How did they come to such a conclusion? Without assuming beforehand that IFD would prove viable, the authors interviewed practitioners in their disparate cultural and political settings and organizational contexts. In so doing, they noted and lamented the frustrations associated with interfaith dialogue, especially the marginalization of faith-based processes by secular politicians or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Even when reporting cases where religious actors made progress, Abu-Nimer and his colleagues wisely caution that IFD alone, taken in isolation from political and economic

“Track One” diplomacy, does not provide the antidote to the complex and overdetermined conflicts bedeviling the Middle East.

Yet these intrepid researchers were able to identify patterns of effective religious interaction and develop plausible explanations for the successful cases. Several themes suggested or developed by their methodologically precise study deserve attention:

1. *“Dialogue” is a set of practices, not limited to elites or to formal means of communication, which aims to foster long-term relationships based in mutual respect and caring. Dialogue is thus virtually a form of religious discipline.*

Engagement with the “other” is the heart and soul of dialogue; it seeks to “know the other,” not only or even primarily by exchanging official political or doctrinal pronouncements, but by listening and attending to the “meaning beyond the words.” Middle Easterners, in fact, seem to specialize in communicating by multiple means, especially via the religious gesture and religious language, which speak of, and to, deeper meaning. Religious practices, such as prayer, hospitality, forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation, express reverence for the human person. These practices, in fact, are the cultural currency of the Middle East. They give homage to the God of Abraham by paying respect to His children.

Religious symbol and ritual, in short, are a form of discourse, a self-communication that plumbs the depths of human communities. It is this dimension of human freedom that must be engaged if deadly conflict is to be deemed intolerable, if peace is to be sustained. Far from being superficial, religious discourse brings competing sides to the heart of the issues dividing their peoples, and addresses those issues via symbols and rituals charged with cultural and psychological resonance.

2. *Precisely because of religion’s access to the full depth of human relations, faith-based diplomacy is an effective means of democratizing and popularizing otherwise state- and elite-centered peace negotiations, settlements, and processes.*

The literature on conflict resolution demonstrates that it is impossible to “resolve” a civil war or other long-term violent conflict that has caused profound suffering and displacement of peoples. Such conflicts must be gradually *transformed*, a process that unfolds beyond the solution of specific economic or political problems. The process must occur, moreover, not only among politicians and rulers but among working people and the poor—among, that is, the so-called grassroots.

Rooting negotiations between warring parties in cross-cultural, cross-religious collaboration establishes the conditions for a genuine peace process. Interfaith dialogue, the authors argue, is an effective way of building the popular support and “buy-in” that are essential to the successful implementation of a peace accord. Fruitfully, they describe the efforts of religious actors who possess the vision and courage to celebrate the internal pluralism of their

own religious tradition and to welcome the diversity of religions in the larger society. Such leaders are capable of tapping what John Paul Lederach calls “the moral imagination” of populations victimized by the war. Enlarged by this moral vision, people are capable of risking the trust needed to embrace the “other.”

3. The “best practices” of IFD both counteract the negative dimensions of religion and dialogue and evoke the considerable peacebuilding capacity present at the moral and spiritual core of religious traditions.

Whereas religious extremists arrogate to themselves the authority to interpret the complex and multivocal religious tradition, effective IFD participants “speak only for themselves,” write Abu-Nimer, Khoury, and Welty. The participants’ own experiences of the consoling and healing balm of faith, or of the efficacy of forgiveness and reconciliation, testify compellingly to the transformative power of the religious tradition and practice.

Neither do IFD participants presume to embody or comprehend the entire tradition; rather, they respect its complexity and invite their coreligionists across a spectrum of religious interpretation to join the conversation.

Moreover, the IFD exemplars presented in these pages do not interpret “dialogue” as an attempt to sort through and reshape particular religious doctrines in order find common ground or “universals” to which all religions can give assent. Rather, the common ground established by dialogue is the mutual recognition of the irreducible dignity of each person, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, or religious background. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely the religious imagination that opens one’s eyes to the transcendent dignity of human beings, whatever their path to the sacred.

Interfaith dialogue, in short, is not about reducing the complex, ambiguous, multivocal religious tradition to a lowest common denominator. To the contrary, it welcomes first-order religious discourse and acknowledges the particularity and integrity of each faith tradition. Only when standing before the other on this solid ground of “untranslated” first-order religious discourse do religious actors, ironically, exhibit the confidence and courage to employ second-order language and thus to transcend their particular religious idiom in mutual action for peace.

Far from being irrelevant to the politics of social change, religious peacebuilders are capable of acting as power brokers. Moral agents and prophets, they are shrewd diagnosticians of a society’s strengths and weaknesses. Indeed, religious organizations often replace or complement the state in the crucial task of providing education, health care, emergency relief, and other social services. The authors counsel practitioners of interfaith dialogue to heed their keen sociopolitical instincts when structuring the cross-religious dialogue. An imbalance of power can shatter the delicate dynamics of political and social cooperation among faith communities. Accordingly, the core participants of IFD—religious laity and local clergy drawn from the midlevel range of social

and political leadership—“must pay careful attention to the location, timing, participant selection, and other dynamics of the dialogue design.”

Not least among the putative weaknesses of IFD addressed in this study is the interfaith community’s fragility, seen most dramatically in its vulnerability to external events (e.g., the war in Iraq, local riots, inequalities that spark intercommunal violence, and so on). The useful concluding chapters propose models for effective interfaith dialogue—patterns of communication and collaboration that can evolve into a lasting social foundation. Each of the societies studied in this volume, with varying degrees of success, has begun to build such a foundation; Abu-Nimer, Khoury, and Welty come loaded with blueprints for foundations that will endure the spasms of violence and the dualism fostered by extremists who seek to divide peoples along religious, ethnic, and class lines.

In this respect, as elsewhere throughout the volume, the authors skillfully weave together description (of IFD in the five settings), analysis, evaluation, and recommendation. The feat makes *Unity in Diversity* a groundbreaking study—the first of a series, one hopes, of systematic, scientifically sound tests and demonstrations of the limited but essential role that interfaith dialogue does and can play in the peaceful transformation of deeply rooted conflicts.

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