

# *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*



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and Peacebuilding*

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

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1200 17th Street NW, Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20036-3011

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First published 2002

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**

Interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding / David R. Smock, editor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-929223-35-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Religions—Relations. 2. Peace—Religious aspects—Christianity.

I. Smock, David R.

BL410.I548 2002

291.1'72—dc21

2002024265

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## Foreword

Despite the malign intentions of the terrorists directing the attacks of September 11, 2001, the world today is not wracked by war between Muslims, on the one side, and Christians and Jews, on the other side. Nor, despite the stated objectives of Osama bin Laden, is the world convulsed by a “clash of civilizations.” If anything, conflicts within the Islamic world seem more likely. So far at least, peoples of very different faiths, and the governments that represent them, have largely rejected the idea that their religion and culture compel them to struggle for supremacy over, or defense against, other religions and other cultures. Few in the Islamic world greeted with joy the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C.; most were appalled or fearful that Muslims would be singled out for blame. Sympathy for the victims of Osama’s violence and support for efforts to eradicate the al Qaeda terrorist network have come from all continents and faith traditions.

Yet, while *global* religious war has not erupted, *more localized* conflict between adherents of different religions remains as pervasive, and as bloody, as ever. As David Smock notes at the outset of this slim but challenging and ultimately encouraging volume, “With regrettable frequency, religion is a factor in international conflict. Rarely is religion the principal cause of conflict, even when the opposing groups . . . are differentiated by religious identity. But religion is nevertheless a contributing factor to conflict in places as widely scattered as Northern Ireland, the Middle East, the Balkans, Sudan, Indonesia, and Kashmir.” It is both sad and instructive to note that while the events of September 11 have made this book especially timely, it would have been just as relevant at almost any point in recent years. The history of the association between religion and conflict, both civil and international, is very long, but the ending of the Cold War and the consequent upsurge in “identity conflicts”—waged between groups defined by factors such as ethnicity, race, and religion—has given new emphasis to that association. Nothing and no one is immune from the effects of this closer relationship. NATO, for example, a profoundly secular

organization whose member-states encompass several religions, fought the first war in its fifty-year history to protect Muslims who were being evicted from Kosovo by Orthodox Serbs!

There is, however, a bright light amid the human and material devastation wrought by these identity conflicts. While religion can and does contribute to violent conflict, it also can be a powerful factor in the struggle for peace and reconciliation. Religion can be a positive influence in numerous ways. Theologically, for instance, all three of the Abrahamic faiths set store in mercy and forgiveness, qualities that are indispensable in seeking a resolution to long-standing and deeply entrenched conflicts. Their clergy, especially in strife-torn regions, usually carry great authority and are present at all levels of society, thus enabling them to be unusually effective advocates of dialogue and reconciliation. Furthermore, for all their differences, there is much that people of faith have in common—not the least of which, of course, is spirituality itself. The recognition of a shared concern to develop “honest, loving, and holistic relationships with God and neighbor” (to quote from Charles Gibbs’s chapter in this book) can form the basis for the rebuilding of constructive relationships destroyed by violence.

The peacemaking potential of religion can be powerfully expressed in unilateral actions by one or another of the sides in a conflict. However, as *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* clearly demonstrates, when two or more faiths come together to explore or promote the possibility of peace, the effects can be especially potent. The contributors to this volume focus on the increasingly common practice of dialogue between adherents of different faiths who are concerned to restore peace to their fractured communities. Such interfaith dialogue can take a wide variety of forms, ranging from joint appeals by high-level religious leaders for an end to fighting, to attempts to develop mutual understanding and the recognition of shared values and interests, to grassroots efforts to encourage repentance and promote reconciliation.

As the reader will discover, interfaith dialogue is a difficult, often painful, endeavor. It brings no guarantee of success. The authors—who are not only scholars but also practitioners of interfaith dialogue—acknowledge the limitations of this approach, identify its shortcomings, and point out that it should not be attempted without careful preparation and a clearly defined purpose. But they also illuminate its possibilities and

illustrate its achievements. Interfaith dialogue can enhance mutual awareness, foster joint activities, and even transform relationships between members of warring groups.

If we are to capitalize on religion's ability to ameliorate or reconcile the very conflicts that it has helped to inspire, we must heed both the caveats and the endorsements. We must not let ourselves be carried away by unrealistic expectations or dismayed by unavoidable failures. David Smock and his fellow authors have approached this volume with just such an outlook. Worried by "the fact that we have encountered many instances of interfaith sessions degenerating into shouting matches," they have been inspired to write a "book with recommendations on how to make interfaith sessions productive."

The same concern to learn and disseminate the lessons of what works—and what does not—in the field of faith-based peacemaking underpins all the projects supported by the Religion and Peacemaking Initiative of the United States Institute of Peace. In addition to producing this book, the initiative has organized public workshops that have examined Islamic, Catholic, Jewish, and Mennonite approaches to peacemaking, as well as peacemaking by faith-based NGOs. The initiative also has ongoing field projects in Macedonia and Bosnia, and offers information and counsel to faith-based organizations about opportunities for peacemaking.

The workshops have yielded three published reports (*Islamic Perspectives on Peace and Violence*, *Faith-Based NGOs and International Peacebuilding*, and *Catholic Contributions to International Peace*) that complement a range other publications by the United States Institute of Peace. For instance, the Institute's earlier initiative on Religion, Ethics, and Human Rights led to books on Ukraine, Sri Lanka, and Islamic activism. The Institute's Grant Program and Jennings Randolph fellowship program have also supported studies that examine conflicts in which religion plays an important role (for instance, Ted Robert Gurr's *Peoples versus States* and John Darby's *The Effects of Violence on Peace Processes*) and that analyze innovative efforts to resolve those conflicts (for example, John Paul Lederach's *Building Peace* and John Wallach's *The Enemy Has a Face*).

As the Institute's various projects attest, faith-based peacemaking efforts are playing an increasingly significant role on the international stage. We at the Institute hope that books such as *Interfaith Dialogue and*

*Peacebuilding* will help to make those efforts more effective. The events of September 11 and the subsequent international response have not generated a worldwide war of religion, but they have underlined the dangers of allowing zealots to yoke religious passions to political causes, and the advantages of harnessing religious commitment to the cause of peace.

RICHARD H. SOLOMON, PRESIDENT  
UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE

## *Acknowledgments*

I am grateful to Dan Snodderly, Nigel Quinney, David Little, Scott Appleby, John Paul Lederach, and my wife, Lois Stovall, for their review of the manuscript and the helpful revisions they suggested. I am also indebted to my program assistant, Renata Stuebner.



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