

Introduction

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WITH REGRETTABLE FREQUENCY, religion is a factor in international conflict. Rarely is religion the principal cause of conflict, even when the opposing groups, such as Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, are differentiated by religious identities. 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. Hans Küng has asserted that the “most fanatical and cruelest political struggles are those that have been colored, inspired, and legitimized by religion.”¹

During the fall of 2001 there unfolded what appeared to be a clear clash of religiously based civilizations. The presumed perpetrators of the events of September 11 declared that the Muslim world was at war with the worlds of Christianity and Judaism. As the *Economist* described it, “Making artful use of history, theology and current geopolitics, [Osama bin Laden] has, in effect, urged all the world’s billion-odd Muslims to bury their internal differences and consider themselves at war with all the world’s Christians and Jews. In his efforts to galvanize and unite fellow Muslims, he has made a careful choice of the message,” focusing on the conflict over holy sites in Israel/Palestine, labeling the entire Western world as “Crusaders,” and reminding Muslims of past glories in what is now Spain when the Muslims were in control, before being displaced by Christians.²

In response Western leaders tried to make clear that the fight against terrorism is not a campaign by Christians and Jews against Muslims and Islam. Christians and Jews in the West scrambled to

comprehend why a portion of the Muslim world support the radical rhetoric of bin Laden and, in turn, why the West is so deeply hated and distrusted by bin Laden and his supporters.

In a column in the *New York Times* in November 2001, Thomas Friedman wrote, “If 9/11 was indeed the onset of World War III, we have to understand what this war is about. We’re not fighting to eradicate ‘terrorism.’ Terrorism is just a tool. We’re fighting to defeat an ideology: religious totalitarianism.” Friedman quoted Rabbi David Hartman: “The opposite of religious totalitarianism is an ideology of pluralism—an ideology that embraces religious diversity and the idea that my faith can be nurtured without claiming exclusive truth.”³

Many Christians and Jews, readily admitting their ignorance of Islam, sought to understand Islam better and wondered how radical Islamist rhetoric fit with more mainstream Islamic theology and ideology. Some were prepared to take this radical rhetoric as symptomatic of a widespread pathology within Islam that made Muslims generally suspect as purveyors of hatred and terrorist acts.

Christians and Jews with a more balanced perspective on Islam and the Muslim world recognized an immediate need to engage the Muslim world more successfully than they had done in the past. Interfaith dialogue became fashionable in many U.S. churches, synagogues, and mosques. These efforts sought to increase mutual understanding and to reduce the likelihood of widespread interfaith animosity and conflict. Organizations such as the United States Institute of Peace, the World Conference on Religion and Peace, and the Community of Sant’Egidio have identified an urgent need to convene Christians, Muslims, and Jews internationally to help defuse tension and forestall wider religious conflict.

The United States Institute of Peace has advocated vigorous dialogue among religious leaders from the United States and Europe (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim) and from the Islamic world. The multiple purposes of this dialogue are to

- ◆ produce greater understanding of the varieties of Islamic thought;
- ◆ support moderate Islamic scholars who are prepared to delegitimize terrorism;

- ◆ help ensure that U.S. action against terrorism is not directed against Islam and Muslims in an undifferentiated manner;
- ◆ provide a vehicle for religious leaders in the Middle East to advocate an end to violence and to reach a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict;
- ◆ engage influential religious leaders in the constructive development of policies relating to international peacemaking; and
- ◆ escape mutual demonization.

While religiously motivated terrorism has provided the most compelling impetus for interfaith dialogue, the momentum toward greater attention to interfaith dialogue was building well before the fall of 2001. Although the prestige of the participants and the press coverage were out of proportion to the effectiveness of the event, the UN Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in August 2000 gave international interfaith dialogue considerable public attention. The principal background paper to the summit stated: "The particular challenges of the Summit are several. . . . Leaders of different traditions, worldview, and patterns of belief are invited to confront common problems that no one religious community can solve, or even meaningfully address, on its own. In addition, leaders are invited to share honestly and sympathetically with one another the impediments and hardships that conspire to thwart all pure forms of religious endeavor. Still again, amicable discourse requires working out a mode of deliberation that begins to replace sufferance and coexistence with respect and interaction, and not only among the traditions, but within them as well."⁴ This background paper cited several topics of special concern for the summit, namely, treatment of religious minorities, conflicting interpretations of religious freedom, force and nonviolence, religion and human rights, religion and public life, and coping with the aftermath of violence. It asserted: "At a summit designed to change, rather than simply lament, existing patterns of violence and intolerance, religious and spiritual leaders may be encouraged to do more than affirm pious platitudes about how much they and their respective traditions favor peace.

On such an occasion, new thinking is called for which involves honesty and self-criticism, as well as expressions of appreciation, regarding the traditions represented.”⁵

At its most basic, interfaith dialogue is a simple concept: persons of different faiths meeting to have a conversation. But the character of the conversation and the purpose of having the conversation are not simple to describe or categorize since they cover a variety of types. Leonard Swidler describes interfaith dialogue as a conversation among people of different faiths on a common subject, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that he or she can change and grow: “But dialogue is *not* debate. In dialogue each partner must listen to the other as openly and sympathetically as s/he can in an attempt to understand the other’s position as precisely and, as it were, as much from within, as possible. Such an attitude automatically includes the assumption that at any point we might find the partner’s position so persuasive that . . . we would have to change.”⁶ Swidler asserts that interreligious dialogue operates in three areas: “the practical, where we collaborate to help humanity; the depth or ‘spiritual’ dimension, where we attempt to experience the partner’s religion or ideology ‘from within’; the cognitive, where we seek understanding [of] the truth.”⁷

When interfaith dialogue is used to contribute to international peacebuilding—the focus of this book—the emphasis is on the first of Swidler’s categories, helping humanity. But experiencing the partner’s religion can contribute to the peacebuilding process as well. Interfaith dialogue is often practiced in situations of peace because there are issues even in a peaceful context that can helpfully be addressed. Prejudice by members of one religious community toward those of another and religious discrimination toward members of religious minorities can be subjects of dialogue, as can other issues that generate tension, such as one religious community proselytizing and seeking converts within another religious community. Even more urgent is interfaith dialogue in situations of armed conflict, particularly when religion is one of the sources of conflict or when those in conflict are differentiated by religious identity. Most of the cases included in this book are of this kind.

Diana Eck asserts that interfaith dialogue can be the basis for the creation of one world. “One world cannot be built on the foundation of

competition and polarization between the superpowers. One world cannot be built on the foundation of science, technology and the media. One world cannot be built on Christian, Muslim, Jewish or Sikh triumphalism. One world cannot be built on the foundation of mutual fear and suspicion. . . . Laying the foundations for one world is the most important task of our time. These foundations are not negotiated statements and agreements. These foundations are, rather, in the stockpiling of trust through dialogue and the creation of relationships that can sustain both agreements and disagreements.”⁸

Based on his experience in the Balkans, Paul Mojzes states that “one could argue that religious leaders are able to find inspiration in their holy scripture and other traditions and writings to work with one another even when the relationship between politicians and the population is strained to the utmost and distrust prevails in society.” He goes on to note that in situations of armed conflict it is a mistake to wait for the conflict to end before interreligious dialogue is initiated.⁹ In calling for Muslims to join with Jews and Christians in “the frustrating and exhilarating process of dialogue,” Israeli author Yossi Klein Halevi describes interfaith dialogue as “the true spiritual adventure of our time.”¹⁰

Dialogue sessions that do not have a clearly defined purpose are almost inevitably doomed to ineffectiveness. Targeted dialogue can take a variety of forms and serve a variety of purposes, including these:

- ◆ High-level religious leaders can be convened to speak collectively as advocates for peace. The focus is joint action on behalf of peace. This can be particularly effective where religious divisions are among the sources of societal division and conflict. R. Scott Appleby has termed this approach the “elite leadership model.”¹¹
- ◆ Elite interfaith bodies can also engage in mediation between combatants to try to reach peace agreements, as was the case with the Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone and a comparable group in northern Uganda. These efforts are often most effective when they employ religious precepts and rituals in the mediation process.

- ◆ At the other extreme are grassroots efforts that bring participants together across religious divisions to provide a mechanism for cross-community dialogue and to nurture the development of participants into agents of reconciliation. Such forums often provide opportunities for sharing grievances and articulating the suffering of communities in conflict.¹² These sessions may also identify the peacebuilding resources inherent within each faith tradition. A variation on this approach focuses on transforming relationships among participants, often with an emphasis on prayer and repentance for sins committed. The admission of guilt by members of one group for past wrongs committed against the other religious group can provide a powerful basis for healing.
- ◆ Another approach is to highlight the theological and scriptural similarities among religious groups in conflict, as well as to seek to ameliorate the hostility that may be engendered by theological differences. A variation on this approach is for groups of different faiths to jointly study the sacred texts of each religion as a means to deepen understanding of one another's beliefs. Similarly, interfaith groups can share their religious rituals to enhance mutual understanding.
- ◆ Dialogue can be organized while conflict is ongoing, as a step toward ending the conflict, or in the postconflict period, as a contribution toward reconciliation.
- ◆ Training in conflict resolution for an interreligious group can serve as a vehicle for interfaith dialogue.
- ◆ Some writers note the severe limitations of dialogue that is confined to words and talk. They argue that deeds of reconciliation, particularly shared deeds among enemies, reaching across religious boundaries, are usually much more effective than merely engaging in interreligious conversation.

The main assertion of this book is that interfaith dialogue can be used as an effective tool to advance peacebuilding, but anyone who has engaged in interfaith dialogue in situations of serious conflict recognizes how difficult it is to organize and conduct meaningful interfaith

dialogue. The fact that we have encountered many instances of interfaith sessions degenerating into shouting matches has prompted the writing of this book with recommendations on how to make interfaith sessions productive. Participants may not even approach the process with a deep knowledge of the theology and history of their own faith community. More significant, they are likely to carry into the process a set of preconceptions and prejudices regarding the beliefs and practices of the other religious community in the dialogue. When differences in religious belief and practice generate differences in convictions about how a society should be structured, the potential obstacles to effective dialogue multiply. And when the two religious groups have been on opposite sides of an armed conflict, even when religion has not been the principal basis for conflict, participants confront a history of hostility, injuries inflicted, and varying combinations of anger, hatred, and guilt that seriously compound the complexity of the dialogue process. If participants are expected to move beyond the past to joint planning for the future, the process is further complicated.

The experiences related in this book are largely confined to those orchestrated by U.S.-based organizations. This reflects the mandate of the United States Institute of Peace rather than a belief that the best interfaith dialogue has its origins in the United States. A great deal of creative work in this field is undertaken by organizations based outside the United States. The purpose of the Institute's Religion and Peacemaking Initiative is to assist religious organizations based in the United States to become more effective international peacemakers. This book has been conceived as one means of contributing to that end, hence the focus on U.S. organizations.

The fact that this book focuses exclusively on interfaith dialogue does not imply that interfaith dialogue is the only means by which religious organizations can contribute to peace. Faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other religious organizations very effectively contribute to peace through conducting training on conflict resolution, mediating between parties in conflict, engaging in conflict prevention, promoting nonviolent methodologies, organizing postconflict reconciliation, and devising various other approaches to conflict resolution as part of their relief and development programs.¹³

Interfaith dialogue is thus an important but not the sole strategy that religious organizations can employ to advance peace.

The chapters in this book are divided into three parts. The first three chapters provide broad analytic assessments of interfaith dialogue, including its limitations. Mohammed Abu-Nimer, building primarily on his experience in the Middle East, focuses on the unique features of interfaith dialogue as opposed to other peacebuilding strategies. He also assesses the various types of interfaith dialogue and sets out some of the requirements for effective interfaith sessions. Marc Gopin focuses on the limitations of dialogue that is confined to talk. He argues for the shared study of sacred texts and symbolic acts of apology, undertaken on a reciprocal basis. Jaco Cilliers draws from his experience in places such as South Africa, Bosnia, and the Philippines and asserts that dialogue must address the justice issues that underlie the conflict.

Part II consists of three case studies in specific zones of conflict. Ronald Young discusses dialogue on the Middle East among American Jews, Christians, and Muslims. He points out that the dialogue process forces Christians, Jews, and Muslims to confront some of their deepest fears and most persistent prejudices about one another. David Steele relates his experiences in Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, and Kosovo. He asserts the value of dialogue among the middle ranges of religious leadership, engaging both clergy and lay leaders. Through his efforts to organize postwar reconciliation in the Balkans he has concluded that storytelling and the mutual admission of sin committed during the conflict have the greatest impact. Joseph Liechty addresses interfaith dialogue in Northern Ireland and advocates a methodology, which he terms mitigation, that can be used to ameliorate religious conflict when theological differences feed intergroup tensions.

Part III contains two chapters that analyze the experiences of particular organizations. Arthur Schneier discusses dialogues organized by the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, which follows the elite leadership model. In such places as the Balkans the foundation has convened religious leaders to issue joint declarations for peace and to institutionalize interreligious bodies. Charles Gibbs describes what has been learned by the United Religions Initiative in its dialogue work, convening interreli-

gious cooperation circles whose purpose is deep spiritual sharing and the organization of joint projects, often peacemaking projects.

The concluding chapter draws together a number of lessons from the experiences presented in the preceding chapters, lessons that underscore the great potential of interfaith dialogue and suggest how it can be more effectively realized.

NOTES

1. Hans Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1986), 442.
2. "Never the Twain Shall Peacefully Meet?" *Economist*, November 17, 2001.
3. Thomas L. Friedman, "The Real War," *New York Times*, November 27, 2001, A21.
4. David Little et al., "Religion, World Order, and Peace" (paper presented at the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, New York, August 2000), 2.
5. *Ibid.*, 4.
6. Leonard Swidler, *Theoria-Praxis: How Jews, Christians, and Muslims Can Together Move from Theory to Practice* (Leuven, Belgium: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1998), 24.
7. *Ibid.*, 28.
8. Diana Eck, in *Minutes, Sixth Meeting of the Working Group of Dialogue with People of Living Faiths* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985), 20–30.
9. Paul Mojzes, "The Role of Religious Leaders in Times of Conflict in Multinational and Multireligious Societies" (unpublished manuscripts, November 2001).
10. Yossi Klein Halevi, "A Coming Together We Must Take on Faith," *Washington Post*, December 23, 2001, B3.
11. R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 223.
12. See *ibid.*, 188.
13. See *Faith-Based NGOs and International Peacebuilding*, United States Institute of Peace Special Report (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, October 22, 2001).

