

CHAPTER 10

Inter-Religious Dialogue and Peacebuilding

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In the matter of religion, people eagerly fasten their eyes on the difference between their own creed and yours; whilst the charm of the study is in finding the agreements and identities in all the religions of humanity.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Introduction

Just a year before the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, on August 29, 2000, Kofi Annan addressed over a thousand religious leaders who had gathered for the Millennium Peace Summit of World Religious and Spiritual Leaders in the same city. The goal of this summit was to identify ways that worldwide religious and spiritual communities can work together as inter-religious allies with the United Nations on specific peace, poverty, and environmental initiatives. In his address, Annan recognized that “religion has often been yoked to nationalism, stoking the flames of violent conflict and setting group against group,” and urged these religious leaders to set an example of inter-religious cooperation and dialogue (UN Information Service 2000). This event was a turning point in the recent history of world politics as it recognized religion as a viable tool for conflict transformation and religious leaders as important agents of peacebuilding at a time when religion is associated with violence and conflict (Little and Appleby 2004: 3).

This chapter argues that inter-religious dialogue has an important role to play in peacebuilding, especially in ethno-religious identity conflicts. Until quite recently, the field of conflict resolution did not pay sufficient attention to religious traditions as sources for resolving conflicts, and many secularists contended that it was naïve to see inter-religious dialogue as a path for resolving religiously fueled conflicts (Abu Nimer et al. 2007: xi). Influenced by the philosophical and methodological traditions of the

Enlightenment, conflict resolution has viewed religion as an irrational and unquantifiable phenomenon that cannot be studied from the point of view of reason, and has expected the importance of religion to fade away as modernization and reason triumph. However, Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire could not be further away from the truth when they predicted that religion would be eliminated from politics, and that religious superstitions and authoritarian religious order would be swept away (Appleby 1994: 7–9). Evidently, religion continues to play a significant role in political life in places as diverse as the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and southeast Asia.

Many current-day conflicts involve parties that are defined along ethno-religious lines. Religion is often a divisive factor in these conflicts, used and abused to justify violence and war. Consequently, religious fervor is associated with terrorism and violence in the minds of many today. Yet, as Arthur Schneier (2002: 105) observes, religion is rarely the cause of the conflict itself: economic or political competition over resources or unmet basic human needs such as security, identity, and food, among others, tend to be at the heart of many conflicts.

Virtually all religions incorporate values and principles promoting peace and justice, and many faith-based actors have successfully played critical roles in resolving conflicts. Different mechanisms have been employed to resolve religiously motivated conflicts including mediation, observation, education, training, advocacy, and inter-religious dialogue (Bouta et al. 2005; Sampson 1997). Each of these mechanisms has the potential to make a significant contribution to building peace in conflict-torn societies. This chapter focuses only on inter-religious dialogue as a significant peacebuilding tool.

Conceptual Framework: The Relevance of Inter-Religious Dialogue to Peacebuilding

Defining ethno-religious conflicts

The majority of conflicts in the world today are identity conflicts, in which identity is defined according to ethno-religious lines, or where religious traditions are used to justify violence and depict negative enemy images. Referred to as “ethno-religious conflicts,” these conflicts often take place among communities that live in close proximity, and whose histories are filled with hostility, resentment, trauma, and violence (Kadayifci-Orellana 2009). In these communities, religion is a key identity marker, an integral aspect of social and cultural life, and an important source of division. At times, some religious and political leaders do not hesitate to use religious myths, symbols, and texts to fuel intolerance, hatred, create enemy images, and justify violence towards the “other,” thus perpetuating a culture of violence.

Defined by Johan Galtung (1996: 11) as those religious, ideological, or linguistic symbols that legitimize direct or structural violence, cultural violence contributes to the continuation of the conflict by teaching, preaching, or condoning those acts that dehumanize and satanize the opponent, justifying discrimination, and inciting hatred. Religious texts, images, and symbols hold reservoirs of meaning that shape identities,

and address the need for a sense of social, geographical, cosmological, temporal, or metaphysical locatedness (Seul 1999: 558). Religious norms and values often help to form the core of one's identity. Powerful religious rituals and symbols often give expression to collective needs and desires. Religion provides meaning to the life and death of the faithful and offers a language and symbolism through which human beings interpret reality, and through which we gain comfort for trauma and injuries. Religion answers some of the most profound questions regarding right and wrong, life and death, and good and evil (Kadayifci-Orellana 2009). Hence, religious feelings can mobilize people more efficiently than any other element of identity. Because of this unique power to mobilize populations towards spiritual and political goals, religious traditions have often been abused to legitimize violence, define group identity, and legitimate particular ethnic and national objectives.

Religion and peacebuilding

Transforming these violent conflicts requires first replacing cultural violence with cultural peace by tapping into religious, cultural, and national symbols, values, myths, and images that promote reconciliation, coexistence, and peace. Because traditional conflict resolution tools fall short of addressing and resolving ethno-religious identity conflicts, scholars and practitioners are developing new approaches and tools to address these complex and intractable conflicts. Often referred to as "peacebuilding," these new approaches are focusing on building and repairing relationships as well as addressing the root causes of conflicts.

Defined as a "whole host of activities and modalities of intervention designed to bring about a state of peaceful relations by conflicting parties" (Bercovitch and Kadayifci 2002: 22), peacebuilding is a complex and dynamic process of changing relationships, perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, interests, and underlying structures that encourage and perpetuate violent conflicts. Engaging multiple levels of society (i.e. high, mid and grass-roots), peacebuilding involves addressing the root causes of the conflict through long-term economic and social justice provisions, the reform of political structures of governance, strengthening the rule of law, and healing through reconciliation. It also refers to mechanisms and structures that can prevent a conflict, terminate it, transform it, or resolve it.

Changing behaviors and attitudes by rebuilding trust is an important aspect of peacebuilding. In deep-rooted conflicts "the parties are not simply disputing over material interests but are suffering from deeply damaged social relationships" (Notter 1995: 8). Trust "facilitates creative or integrative bargaining and cooperative solutions to the many conflicts that arise between interdependent and interacting parties" (Lindskold 1978: 777). Building trust requires clarifying misunderstandings, removing negative perceptions and stereotypes, and transforming enemy images.

When religious images, texts, and symbols are used to plant the seeds of mistrust and suspicion between groups through demonization and dehumanization, only the same religious tradition can provide the antidote. Each religious tradition holds a variety of moral and spiritual resources that can facilitate rebuilding trust, transform

perceptions, and inspire a sense of engagement and commitment to the peacebuilding process (Abu-Nimer 2001: 686). Religious rituals, values, and principles can facilitate healing and trauma management (Green and Honwana 1999; Nolte-Schamm 2006). Religious texts and prophetic stories can provide examples of peacemaking, forgiveness, and compassion that can lead to a change of attitudes and behaviors.

The field of conflict resolution is increasingly focusing on religious peacebuilding, described by David Little and Scott Appleby (2004: 5) as a range of activities performed by religious actors for the purpose of resolving and transforming deadly conflict, with the goal of building social, religious, and political institutions characterized by an ethos of tolerance and nonviolence. Religious peacebuilding involves faith-based actors and religious resources such as texts, images, and myths to reduce violence, inspire peace, and build trust. One particular tool of religious peacebuilding is inter-religious dialogue.

Defining dialogue and peacebuilding

Focusing on the dynamic interpersonal and intercommunal aspects of conflict, a conflict transformation approach to peacebuilding views peace as centered and rooted in the quality of relationships. This approach aims to reduce violence and increase justice in human relations through developing a capacity for constructive, direct, face-to-face interaction, while at the same time supporting systemic and structural changes (Lederach 2003: 20). Resolving ethno-religious conflicts requires first an understanding of how religious traditions and identities contribute to a culture of violence. Second, it highlights religious values, traditions, texts, and myths that focus on justice, tolerance, coexistence, and peace to rebuild trust. Lederach (2003: 21) suggests that “a fundamental way to promote constructive change on all these levels is dialogue.”

Dessel et al. (2006: 303) defines dialogue as a “public process designed to involve individuals and groups in an exploration of societal issues such as politics, racism, religion, and culture that are often flashpoints for polarization and social conflict.” Dialogue involves both formal and informal discussions as well as shared educational initiatives, music performances, or art exhibitions, among other projects. In order to capture this broader meaning of dialogue, Abu-Nimer et al. (2007: 8) define it as a “safe process of interaction to verbally and non-verbally exchange ideas, thoughts, questions, information, and impressions between people from different backgrounds (race, class, gender, culture, religion and so on).” Dialogue clarifies misunderstandings and illuminates areas of both convergence and divergence through mutual sharing and listening (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007: 8). As such, it helps rebuild trust and provides a space for healing and reconciliation.

Defining inter-religious dialogue

Inspired by their religious traditions to work for peace locally and globally, many religious leaders and faith-based organizations have worked with other faith communities

towards peace and justice during the past decades. What is new, however, is the consideration and use of inter-religious dialogue in the wider field of conflict resolution. With the rampant increase of ethno-religious identity conflicts, it has become virtually indispensable for the field to tap into this understudied peacebuilding tool.

David Smock (2002: 6) aptly emphasizes that “a dialogue is not a debate.” Debate implies an intention to win the argument, to prove one side right, or to change the views of the opponent. Dialogue does not aim to eliminate differences of opinion and conviction, but to gain an understanding and acceptance of those differences (Shafiq and Abu-Nimer 2007). Inter-religious dialogue aims at enrichment, trust, respect, and the creation of a sense of “us/we” through increased understanding. It involves “a continuing process of learning and re-education” (Braybrooke 1993: 108) through honest, open, active communication.

Inter-religious dialogue does not aim at undermining belief, either. On the contrary, an inter-religious dialogue is more constructive when people who participate are firmly grounded in their own religious traditions, allowing them to take seriously the practices and beliefs of others (Cilliers 2002: 49). At times, the dialogue process can deepen and strengthen one’s own religious identity; Boys et al. (1995: 265) affirm that “the power of encountering the deep faith of a religious person from another tradition has the potential of unleashing a search for one’s own spiritual roots and yearnings” (see also Kozlovic 2003).

Inter-religious dialogue taps into the spiritual resources of the religious traditions, creating opportunities for connecting participants at a deeper spiritual level. Using spirituality as a main source of commitment to social change is what distinguishes inter-religious dialogue from other forms of dialogue (Abu-Nimer 2002: 16). Religion facilitates transformation because it tracks the deepest connections between the self, the other, and the universe. Hence, incorporating spirituality into other communication technologies makes possible “new modes of relationship, new social, economic and political structures, and thus new ways of understanding the human situation under God” (Sacks 2002: 136). This view is supported by Stalov who observes, “[w]hen we engage in deep positive interaction with each other about faith, we overcome prejudices and fears and replace them with mutual understanding, respect, trust and friendship” (2007: 131).

Inter-religious dialogue encounters often include religious symbolism and rituals. “Rituals are special contexts conducive to the symbolic transformation of identity and the framing of conflict toward sustainable, coexisting relationships”; they are “a way to celebrate and encourage transformation” (Schirch 2001: 154). Rituals can effectively communicate complex feelings and emotions in symbolic ways. Believers connect to their religious tradition and observe their values and beliefs through rituals and religious symbols (Abu-Nimer 2002: 18). During inter-religious dialogue encounters, participants get an opportunity to observe and experience the rituals of another tradition, or participants may also cocreate their own rituals. Sharing symbols and rituals opens a window to the deeper emotional and spiritual realities of those involved in conflict (Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana 2009: 197) and can enthuse community action, bring support for the wider peace process, and generally transform a negative and malignant conflict into a more positive one. Religious leaders’ involvement in and

endorsement of inter-religious dialogue in international conflicts can also help to inspire belief, faith, and perseverance.

Especially in long standing and deep rooted conflicts, where parties have suffered significant pain and lost loved ones, it is often quite difficult for parties to acknowledge wrong-doings and ask for forgiveness. It is equally difficult for parties to let go of deep wounds and forgive the “other.” Religious texts and scriptures often richly articulate values central to reconciliation and peacebuilding, including compassion, forgiveness, and accountability, among others. Rooting these values within the parameters of sacred texts provides legitimacy. Participants of inter-religious dialogue often introduce verses and passages on the designated theme or topic from their religious texts and invite other participants to have a conversation about that text. These values and texts inspire and provide guidance to the participants, especially when difficult issues are being discussed, and provide a level of “certainty” and “truth” (Abu-Nimer 2002: 19). As such, they facilitate the transformation of perceptions and help to rebuild relationships.

An important element of inter-religious dialogue is the use of religious language and vocabulary. It is important to remember that each religious tradition holds what Abu-Nimer (2002) calls a “secondary” language and a “primary” language. A “secondary” religious language emphasizes what is common between different traditions, such as tolerance, peace, and dialogue; while a “primary” language distinguishes that unique tradition from other traditions through notions such as the Holy Trinity, Jihad, the Chosen People, etc. Although it is important to address both of these aspects of religious language in inter-religious dialogue, focusing on primary language before necessary trust is built between parties can undermine the effectiveness of the process.

Objectives of inter-religious dialogue

Within the context of peacebuilding, most dialogues aim to facilitate a change from narrow, exclusionist, antagonistic, prejudiced attitudes and perceptions, to a more tolerant and open-minded attitude (Abu-Nimer 2001: 686). Inter-religious dialogue increases awareness about how to improve human interactions on multiple levels (locally, regionally, or globally) by recognizing the importance of integrating religious identities into inter-group dialogue (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009: 13). Inter-religious dialogue fosters the (re)building of trust relations and enhances social cohesion by tapping into the numinous world of strongly experienced religious emotion. Based on the contention that violent conflict is often a consequence of mutual ignorance and the absence of meaningful interaction between parties, inter-religious dialogue aims to foster mutual learning, clarify misperceptions, and provide opportunities for constructive contact with the “other.” Religious understandings become the lens through which parties recognize the irreducible dignity of all human beings, including the specific conflictual “other.”

Inter-religious dialogue may bring diverse groups to break down stereotypes and images; inspire hope; build trust for dealing with tough issues; create a sense of social

inclusivity; develop models of constructive engagement; transform the conflict; or solve a specific issue facing the faith communities involved. Inter-religious dialogue can be organized to share grievances, facilitate transformation of relationships, highlight similarities and differences, encourage apology and/or forgiveness, and encourage mediation. It may involve a training component on a specific area, such as conflict resolution. Whatever the particular objective, establishing and communicating a clear purpose to participants is central.

Formats of inter-religious dialogue

Based on the objectives set by the facilitators, inter-religious dialogue can take different forms. Cognitive dialogues are centered on exchange of information and aim to provide a learning opportunity about the faith of the “other.” Affective dialogues focus on building relationships and concentrate on sharing stories, experiences, feelings, and thoughts. Collaborative dialogues emphasize working together to address common concerns (Abu Nimer et al. 2007: 16), such as HIV/AIDS, water sanitation, or climate change. Educational initiatives or training programs that aim to break down stereotypes through lectures, panels, and sermons at religious sites can also be considered inter-religious dialogue.

Dialogue includes more than the formal gathering of religious leaders. Spontaneous, casual interactions and gestures by religious leaders, such as sharing a meal or even shaking hands, can be quite significant (Abu-Nimer 2001: 686). Joint concerts, art exhibitions, or other performances such as plays or dances can bring communities together in a positive environment and help rehumanize the other through expressing and sharing emotions. Joint prayers or standing side by side during a funeral can also transmit important symbolic messages of peace as well as joint celebration of religious holidays.

Levels of inter-religious dialogue

Inter-religious dialogue can take place at different levels. These include: high, mid and grass-roots levels. Each of these levels have their own strengths and limitations.

High-level inter-religious dialogue Inter-religious dialogue can take place at high leadership level, which involves religious authorities such as the Pope, the Dalai Lama, or the Chief Rabbi. As Garfinkel (2004: 2) indicates, various high-level inter-religious dialogues have taken place over the last decades to speak collectively as advocates of peace, including the Alexandria Dialogue, which led to the Alexandria Declaration. High-level religious leaders have a significant degree of authority, legitimacy, and credibility, so that their actions can send a strong message. However, these leaders often lack the necessary time to commit themselves to long-term inter-religious dialogues. In addition, their involvement tends to attract a lot of media attention, which can undermine initial dialogue efforts. Also, due to their social location as communal representatives,

they may be hindered from talking openly and sincerely. For these reasons they are more effective as legitimizers of the inter-religious dialogue process.

Mid-level inter-religious dialogue In a press conference, the Dalai Lama expressed the wish to see followers of different religious traditions interact in four distinct ways: meetings between religious leaders; pilgrimages to one another's religious sites; meetings between religious practitioners, such as monastics, regarding contemplative life; and seminars and dialogues between scholars (Mack 1997). Mid-level leaders include clergy as well as scholars, professionals, business people, and artists, among others. Although they are not as visible as the high-level leadership, they have access to both high- and grass-roots levels. As such they can influence both the grass-roots level and connect with high-level religious and political leadership. They also have relatively more time and resources to devote to inter-religious dialogue. For these reasons, middle range leaders are often the best candidates for inter-religious dialogue.

Grass-roots level inter-religious dialogue Recognizing the importance of perceptions of the "other" at the community level, conflict transformation theory argues that in order to build sustainable peace, it is necessary to build relations first at the grass-roots level. Inter-religious dialogue at a grass-roots level includes cross-community dialogues to foster reconciliation. Participants of these dialogues, including youth groups, women's organizations, and other local organizations, come together across religious divisions to promote cross-community interaction and to develop participants into agents of reconciliation. Although building constructive relations at this level does not guarantee the resolution of conflict, it may contribute to healing and repairing of relationships, especially during the postconflict reconstruction phase. Furthermore, in democratic societies, top-level leaderships are often susceptible to the needs and demands of their constituencies. Therefore, a change among the attitudes of the population in general towards the "other" and to the conflict can lead to substantive political policy changes. So, while transforming perceptions and attitudes at the grass-roots is not an easy task, inter-religious dialogue at this level is critical to establishing lasting peace.

Conditions For Effective Inter-Religious Dialogue

It is important to note that inter-religious dialogue cannot be effective in every conflict or in every community, nor is it an alternative to official peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts. It is a complementary track that incorporates important, but often neglected, social groups: faith-based actors such as religious leaders and institutions, as well as religiously inspired individuals and nongovernmental organizations.

The effectiveness of inter-religious dialogue depends on the presence of various conditions. These include the identity of the parties and nature of the dispute, the articulation of a clear purpose, careful selection of participants, a safe environment, the balance of power, a focus on both similarities and differences, the development of collaborative tasks, intra-faith meetings prior to the inter-religious encounter, and follow-up engagements.

Identity of the parties and nature of the dispute

In order to be effective and successful, the inter-religious dialogue process must be perceived as legitimate by the participating communities. If the legitimacy of the process is questioned, IDF peacebuilding efforts will most likely fail, and this legitimacy largely depends upon the identity of the parties and the nature of the dispute (Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana 2009: 194).

Faith-based actors have a unique advantage in ethno-religious conflicts where religion plays a key role in the social life and identity of the conflicted parties (Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana 2009). Particularly when religious leaders themselves foment violence, using religious texts to incite hatred and intolerance, it becomes critical to engage religious peacebuilding resources to form commissions or councils, or to engage a religious group recognized by all parties as impartial, fair, and legitimate (see Kadayifci-Orellana 2009).

When the religious identities of the parties are an important dimension of the conflict, and when religious values and principles are viewed as main sources of legitimacy, religious actors can legitimately tap into religious resources such as texts, images, stories, myths, and prophetic examples to highlight values of tolerance, compassion, coexistence, and peace – resources that secular leaders often cannot access.

Clear purpose

For inter-religious dialogue to be successful, it must have clearly articulated purposes and objectives, including ultimate resolution of the conflict, solving particular problems between the communities, addressing common issues such as HIV-AIDS, rebuilding relationships, breaking down stereotypes, developing methods to effectively handle grievances, reconciling differences, and healing wounds. The objectives of the dialogue must be realistic, for unrealistic expectations can extend harm by leading to frustration and disappointment among both participants and organizers. These goals must be communicated clearly, too. Having clear and realizable objectives makes assessment possible and achieving objectives creates a sense of success, inspires hope, and develops trust. Facilitators and organizers must also carefully design and think through the dialogue process, understanding and incorporating participants' concerns through predialogue research and analysis. This will help facilitators to set realistic goals, empower the parties, and create a sense of shared ownership and responsibility.

Selection of parties

In order to build trust in a fragile environment, facilitators must make sure inter-religious dialogue participants are balanced in terms of their qualifications, numbers, education, and influence. The hierarchical position and social locations of the participants must be comparable, too. Inter-religious dialogue is often a long-term process, requiring a commitment to meet regularly over an extended period of time. Inviting

well-versed clergy from one religious tradition, for example, while inviting lay-persons from the other, would create an imbalanced situation in terms of religious authority and confidence. Middle-range leaders such as clergy, educators, journalists, and business people, on the other hand, are often open, available, and capable of influence both up and down the social ladder (Steele 2002: 76). Inviting hardliners is another complicated issue. Even though resolving any conflict must eventually engage hardliners who can spoil the process, engaging them too early, immaturely, or without necessary preparation can sabotage the inter-religious dialogue process. Facilitators must understand the context, decide on the objectives of the workshop, and assess the possible synergy of potential participants very carefully. In this process, facilitators play a critical role. Facilitators bring parties together in a safe space and facilitate dialogue by a thorough process that encourages and cultivates empathy, reflection, and clarification of misunderstandings and stereotypes. They are responsible for constructively channeling the emotions of the parties (Schirch 2001: 154).

Balance of power

Selecting participants is closely linked to addressing balance-of-power issues. It is often the case in conflict situations that parties do not have equal power. Members of majority groups may have access to political, economic, and social resources that the minority might not. Structural injustices may inhibit freedom of expression, or participation in social and political life. Power asymmetry may also “express itself in the nature of the encounter, its language, structure, and cultural ethos” (Gopin 2002: 43). These power imbalances must be addressed carefully by choosing a neutral space where both parties feel comfortable; by paying attention to social and political realities; and by empowering the weaker party. In addition, the importance of flexibility cannot be overemphasized: although it is important to prepare carefully, and to have an agenda, flexibility and adaptation are critical factors for the success of inter-religious dialogue in contributing to conflict resolution. Facilitators should be aware that each group brings with it different knowledge and background. Different exercises, pace, or tempo might be required. Overly structured workshops often fail to address these different dynamics and create a sense of pressure and frustration. Facilitators must be sensitive, providing cofacilitation while also including facilitators from the religious communities themselves who can translate terms and concepts into language that is meaningful and familiar to the participants.

Creating a safe and secure environment

The success of inter-religious dialogue depends on open and sincere communication between participants, including recognizing stereotypes and wrong-doings, addressing negative self- and other-perceptions and emotions, and nurturing a willingness to learn and change. Inter-religious encounters are not easy for participants who often have suffered personally and lost dear ones during the conflict. Many participants are filled with resentment. Some of them may even be traumatized. There is often deep mistrust

and apprehension. As noted by Cobb (1990: 3), even the most committed participants of dialogue may feel as if they are betraying their communities.

In this context, opening up and listening sympathetically can be extremely difficult for the participants. As Gopin observes, most enemies cannot or will not articulate their true feelings. "Either it is beyond their present capacity or what they really feel is too shameful. Examples of things too difficult to articulate may include deep envy, or shame at the collective humiliation of one's group, or an intense desire to humiliate, or to take revenge, or to see the enemy suffer" (Gopin 2002: 34). This could lead to "silence," which is also an integral aspect of dialogues, as "silence – *what is not said* – is intimately tied to the meaning of *what is said*" (Kellet 2007: 77). Lack of effective and clear communication, expressed either as silence, resistance, or anger and frustration, can become a major problem. Overcoming such a block requires building trust among the participants and facilitators.

There are various ways to ensure that safety. Keeping the dialogue rooted in specific issues, and not on individual participants, facilitators can encourage participants to share personal stories, loss, and hurt. Communicating painful memories, sharing experiences of suffering and trauma, and reflecting together on the possibility of healing can be a bonding experience (Steele 2002: 78). By rechanneling the frustrations and anger of the participants, facilitators can encourage mutual empathy and active listening techniques, while giving voice to all parties in a balanced manner. Especially at times of deep crisis and anger, religious texts, values, and prophetic examples can help to break the deadlock and invite participants to reflection. Religious rituals and texts help in this process by providing a sense of God's caring presence and acceptance. However, it is important to take care in choosing texts and rituals that will not offend or alienate participants.

Providing appropriate exercises, dividing into small groups, or giving a small break to allow participants to speak outside of the pressure of larger group interactions, can all help to assist in creating a safe space. Facilitators should pay attention to the specific needs of the participants, and address them appropriately. They should also pay attention to gestures and body-languages, which can reveal more than words. Developing an understanding of cross-cultural/religious gestures and body language can be extremely helpful in these contexts. Therefore, in addition to being trained in dialogue and negotiation, facilitators of inter-religious dialogues must be trained in the detection of other gestures of reconciliation – actions and deeds that often mean much more, and are trusted more, than words. Such training will allow facilitators to recognize and address symbolic and nonverbal opportunities, and to invent strategies to consciously align or engage the culturally and religiously familiar conciliatory paths of adversary groups (Gopin 2002: 37).

In addition to creating a psychologically and emotionally safe space, it is also important to ensure the physical safety of the participants. Often enough in conflict zones talking to the enemy is considered collaboration, a betrayal of one's own community and values. Hardliners can incite attacks on participants. If that is the case, organizers of the dialogue process must ensure the secrecy and confidentiality of the meeting, and take all the necessary precautions to provide their physical safety. Otherwise, even the slightest incident can derail the process and can do more harm than good.

Examination of similarities and differences

The examination of similarities and differences is one of the basic principles of inter-religious dialogue (Abu-Nimer 2002: 22). Religious traditions often have similar values, principles, and even practices. They envision peace and harmony, and highlight compassion, justice, love, caring for the needy, mercy, and divine benevolence as core principles. Focusing on these similarities and universal values – or secondary language (Abu-Nimer 2002: 20) – can help build bridges between communities and clarify misunderstandings. This is particularly helpful in the first stages of inter-religious dialogue, but for inter-religious dialogue to be effective in transforming the relationship it is also necessary to address differences and points of contention between the parties. If “similarity” becomes the main theme of the inter-religious dialogue, and is used to avoid dealing with inherent differences, “the dialogue may create an artificial harmony – one that does not convey the complexity of the inherent interreligious contradictions and differences . . .” (Abu-Nimer 2002: 23). Rather than serving to address the issues that cause misunderstanding in the first place, such an artificial harmony might lead to a sense of being misled, and could ferment a deepened mistrust, especially if participants encounter “religious others” who act contrary to that harmony. For that reason it is necessary to introduce the primary languages of the participants, explain the way they are understood, and discuss different interpretations and opinions about these terms within the respective religious communities.

Properly timing the introduction of primary languages can be tricky. Focusing up front on primary languages may divide the participants from one another. Focusing first on the similarities between religious traditions can help participants to draw connections between them and to create an atmosphere of trust. This helps, in turn, to create constructive communication between the participants, using a set of “generic terms” which may serve to avoid confusion over theological points (Smith 1981: 181). But such terms will not help participants develop a better understanding of each other’s traditions without addressing the differences between them. Primary language, on the other hand, can be introduced once participants have developed mutual trust. If these differences create a charged environment and lead to frustration and arguments, facilitators can retract back to emphasizing similarities, and allow participants to work on building the comfort level to discuss difference. Facilitators should keep the pulse of the group to determine whether the level of trust and safety is conducive to discussing more contentious issues. In order to facilitate maximum understanding of the differences rooted in the primary languages, facilitators need to have a working knowledge of the faith traditions involved.

Collaborative task

Another critical component for effective inter-religious dialogue is the development of a collaborative task. Especially for the minority group, the end product of inter-religious dialogue is of great importance. As stressed by Abu-Nimer (2002: 23), “for the religious

majority, insight and empathy may often be sufficient. But members of the religious minority tend to demand more than 'talk' and 'insights.'" Collaborative tasks create opportunities for religious communities to work together in a safe environment. Successful task-outcomes can address a significant need in the society, contribute to credibility and trust between communities, and help develop the minority community. It can also foster more interest in working with the "religious other" in general. Continuing these collaborative tasks is especially vital during times of crisis, to solidify trust and solidarity between the participants.

Nevertheless, implementing projects requires a local presence (Steele 2002: 85), time, and often financial resources. Religious leaders who have access to a vast pool of believers, and who often have international institutional support, maintain an advantage as they can reach out both to their own congregation and to religious leaders from other faith traditions. However, they are also sometimes faced with significant challenges, such as competing interpretations of motivation and intent, and campaigns of slander that depict them as traitors, etc.

Collaborative tasks may include organizing local events for the communities, environmental projects such providing safe drinking water, health projects such as establishing clinics and providing medicine, or reconstructing sites destroyed during riots or violence. The success of these efforts may contribute to inter-communal credibility, build trust, and increase wider interest in the process of resolving conflict.

Intra-faith meetings

Another critical aspect for any successful inter-religious dialogue is the organization of intra-faith meetings prior to the inter-religious dialogue. Each religious tradition hosts an array of different interpretations, understandings, and approaches. Participants in inter-religious dialogue from a single tradition or community may hold different understandings of sacred texts, religious images, and exemplars. Internal divisions are not often addressed during inter-religious dialogues, and these differences can lead to misunderstandings between and within the groups that participate in the process. Clarifying both differences and points of intra-faith agreement before inter-religious dialogue will contribute significantly to the success of the process. Organizing an intra-faith dialogue ensures that members of each religious group understand and appreciate the differences and similarities in their collective religious experience, and provides support to members who are indeed taking high risks by participating in the process (Abu-Nimer 2002: 26).

Follow-up

Although participants may experience a change in attitudes and perceptions for a while, once they go back to their communities they are faced with the challenges of conflict, violence, and a bombardment of negative messages. Often called the re-entry problem, this postdialogue situation can be quite detrimental to the ongoing process of

conflict resolution. As participants are faced with enormous social pressures to change their views, or are treated as traitors, they become understandably discouraged.

One important way to address the problem of re-integration into and between communities following inter-religious dialogue is to organize follow-up measures, such as meetings or joint actions. It is also important to construct support systems to share the challenges of returning to the participants' respective communities and develop strategies to cope with them.

Limits and challenges of inter-religious dialogue

Many challenges, faced by both scholar-practitioners and religious leaders, make inter-religious dialogue an extremely difficult endeavor. These challenges also reflect some of the limitations of inter-religious dialogue.

Convincing participants First of all, it is not easy to convince religious leaders to commit to a dialogue process. During times of conflict, mutual distrust makes any interaction with the "other" suspicious. "Inter-religious dialogue becomes almost impossible if the 'religious other' is considered a demonic force" (Mack 1997: 149), making it extremely difficult to convince invitees to join the dialogue process. Providing security to participants and their families, especially after the process, is sometimes quite difficult for inter-religious dialogue organizers.

Competing interpretations Each religious tradition includes different interpretations and understandings, which may at times contradict each other. Based on these different interpretations, different religious leaders might recommend different courses of action. While some may encourage nonviolent methods of conflict resolution and reconciliation, others may argue in favor of continuation of conflict, and self-sacrifice for the sake of God. Those who hold extremist interpretations may attempt to spoil the process. Facilitators must be aware of these competing interpretations, and take care to involve authoritative participants who can skillfully address relevant issues and questions.

Engaging hardliners Peacebuilding yearns to alter the attitudes and behaviors of those hardliners who oppose interaction and dialogue. However, it is a major challenge for organizers to include them in the process, and if they are included, their capacity to sabotage the process must be limited. Nevertheless, it is through more open-minded leaders, who are respected in their communities and who have ties to these extremist elements, that these more intransigent sections of the community can be influenced. Again, an intra-faith or intra-community dialogue can help to prepare and integrate a wider range of religious actors.

Time and financial challenges Inter-religious dialogue is a long and costly process. Participants in effective dialogues often meet for several days at a time over a period of a few years. Overcoming deep-rooted hostilities and building trust and strong relationship is

a hard and long process. The journey is not without obstacles: events on the ground, such as terrorist attacks, torture, and other human rights abuses, can undermine fragile relationships, and the process can break down at any time. Securing long-term financial support is also quite a challenge for the organizers, as funders give priority to immediate-term crisis situations, and would like to see results. However, demonstrating the effectiveness of long-term initiatives and complex initiatives such as inter-religious dialogue is a challenge. Losing financial support can also end the process prematurely, and create a sense of failure, betrayal, and disappointment among participants.

Gender disparity Another limitation of inter-religious dialogue is a consistent disparity in the gender of participants. In most religious traditions, official religious leadership consists mainly of men. Quite often, women are excluded from religious education, or cannot be ordained officially. Although many women hold unofficial leadership positions, these forms of leadership are generally underrepresented in religious peacemaking and inter-religious dialogue. Yet many women religious leaders are actively reaching out across religious divides, working both officially and unofficially in the area of inter-religious dialogue. These initiatives are often *ad hoc* and informal, but are no less important than more formal processes. In order to include women's perspectives and women's voices in inter-religious dialogue, it is important both to broaden our conceptions of religious leadership, and to ensure greater women's participation in formal inter-religious dialogue as well.

Conclusion

No peacebuilding effort is without challenges. Addressing conflicts where religious precepts, texts, or doctrines are used to justify violence requires us to rethink our approaches to peacebuilding and conflict resolution. It requires us to develop intervention strategies that emphasize religious sources of tolerance, compassion, and cooperation, and empower religious leaders as agents of peace. This chapter argued that making use of religious and spiritual resources such as sacred texts, rituals, stories, myths, and values can be extremely beneficial in helping religious actors to address ethno-religious conflicts. Here, it is important to re-emphasize that inter-religious dialogue is *not* an alternative to other conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts, such as official negotiations, mediation with the involvement of third-parties, or secular conflict resolution tools such as problem-solving workshops. However, while inter-religious dialogue is only one of many resources for conflict resolution, it is a very important one. As Marc Gopin (2002: 34) points out, dialogue is merely a step in the peacemaking process, and cannot be thought of as the answer to the entire conflict itself.

This chapter also analyzed conditions for inter-religious dialogue to be effective and explored its limitations. It argued that despite many challenges, there are various advantages in employing inter-religious dialogue, and that it is a particularly critical peacebuilding tool "if the opposing groups are differentiated by religious identity" (Smock 2002: 127). Inter-religious dialogue can be of great value in ameliorating conflict and advancing reconciliation even when religion is not the central cause of the

conflict, for it draws on profound spiritual and emotional resources that allow a deeper human connection between opposing parties.

Inter-religious dialogue involves segments of society that are often ignored by secular approaches to conflict resolution, or are excluded by power politics and peace negotiations. Faith-based groups have unique credibility in communities where religious leaders and institutions play an important role. These actors often have access to a wide pool of people through their local congregations and international connections. Having access to both high-level leadership as well as grass-roots community members, religious leaders are in a unique position to communicate the needs and frustrations of both groups, and are well positioned to implement agreements. Engaging religious resources as part of the broader conflict-resolution process offers the possibility of changing attitudes and perceptions regarding the “other,” which is as important as signing a peace agreement.

Negative images of the opponent often fuel conflict and make it possible to hurt and kill the opponent. These negative enemy images are often a result of misinformation, or lack of information. Learning about religious similarities and differences may clarify misunderstandings, reducing radicalism and the possibility of religious manipulation. Such learning helps to rehumanize the “other” and develop solidarity, and may even contribute to joint action to transform the conflict.

This chapter also argued that inter-religious dialogue helps participants to access reservoirs of meanings and practices that enrich the range of available meanings, interpretations, motivations, and strategies. It provides prophetic and moral authority. Inter-religious dialogue also marshals institutional resources and helps to articulate new roles for the religiously motivated. It especially focuses on grass-roots actors to establish cooperation, understanding, and methods of dealing with difference aimed at respecting the “other.” With its focus on relationships and spirituality, inter-religious dialogue also helps participants connect at a deeper level than secular approaches to conflict resolution, and offers powerful tools for rehumanizing the “other.” In any ethno-religious conflict, inter-religious dialogue is an essential complementary tool of long-term peacebuilding.

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