Religious Dialogue as a Contribution to Political Negotiations: A Practitioner's Report

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Religion has increasingly become a factor in international as well as internal conflicts. Religious leaders have gained prominence by contributing to intensification of conflicts, but also as peacemakers. Dialogue between religions and between religious leaders is in some instances seen as constructive contributions in a process toward sustainable peace. The purpose of this article is to explore how dialogue among religious leaders can assist political negotiations and contribute to lasting peace. Such dialogues are not about religious ideas; they are about religious issues which are relevant to political negotiations, and about political issues which have religious implications. Such dialogues can happen as part of political processes, or in the absence of political negotiations. The usefulness of such dialogues should be measured by their political effect. However, since politicians and diplomats often are caught up in their own, limited circles, the usefulness of religious dialogues should also be evaluated by civil society and independent observers.

Religion and Identity

In many political conflicts, religion plays a crucial role when it is linked to ethnic or national identity. Religious categories can be tagged on to groups, or they can be used by the groups themselves. Examples are Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Shias and Sunnis in Iraq, Muslims in the Qingui province in China, or Christians and Muslims in Lebanon. The

conflict in the Holy Land is a conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, but Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are involved as well. Samuel Huntington tried to link his idea of "a clash of civilizations"[1] to presumed and deep-seated religious identities of civilizations. His idea has, however, shown itself to be far too simplistic. "Civilization" is not an easily defined construct, as different "civilizations" may incorporate similar religions. In addition, most conflicts are within civilizations, not between.

National, ethnic, and personal identities are composed of many elements. History, buildings, places, and politics play a role in the mixture. Religion is often one of the key elements, intertwined with all the others. In this world, religion is not a standalone concept. Every religion is also part of a human, national, and ethnic culture and context. They are intertwined in such ways that it is impossible to sort out that which possibly could be of a pure, religious nature; religious identity is always part of a larger identity.

Identities are usually linked to historical narratives which are continuously memorized, reproduced, and celebrated in the lives of nations, peoples, and individuals. They often recount origins, which may include what an outsider might consider to be mythological elements. Whether or not they are historically factual, they are of a constitutional nature in the history of a people.

Religious identities are also present when people define themselves in relation to outsiders. Identities are linked to narratives and places. Political conflicts often involve control and sovereignty over sites whose national and religious significance cannot be separated. Consequently, religion cannot be separated from political negotiations over these sites.

Religion, Governance, and the Public Sphere

Politicians relate to sentiments that are prevalent in civil society. Such sentiments, especially in situations of conflict, are often expressed through religion or with use of religious language. Western politicians, journalists, and scholars often seem surprised by the fact that "religious fundamentalism and religious difference have emerged as crucial factors in international conflict, national security and foreign policy."[2] It is as if they did not notice what Jose Casanova wrote in 1994, "Despite all the structural forces, the legitimate pressures, and the many valid reasons pushing religion in the

modern secular world into the private sphere, religion continues to have and will likely continue to have a public dimension."[3] Religion has always been part of reality in the public sphere; as Hurd writes about the West, "the return of religion is not 'a special atavistic anomaly' but is integral to modern politics itself."[4]

The fact that religion is integral to the public sphere, does not, however, mean that it is easy to map the exact relationship between religion and politics, between governance and religion.

> Religion and politics are not well-defined and stable categories of a broader set of fixed binary divisions between public and private with their origin in the European Enlightenment. Secularist divisions between religion and politics are neither stable nor universal. They are fundamentally contested categories.[5]

Europe has seen a "transformation of the church from a state-oriented to a society-oriented institution,"[6] while the separation of church and state in the United States transformed religion into a "society-oriented institution," though it does exert influence on government. In the Middle East, religion is perceived as "society-oriented," though one must wonder whether religion is "state-oriented," or the state is "religion-oriented," or both. For instance, in several Arab states religious courts deal with issues which in the West would be considered tasks of the state, or a public court system, including marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc. In Israel, the religious judicial system is parallel to the civil one, but has a much more limited role.

Relations between religion, politics, and governance vary; in the United States, religion is not organizationally linked to governing structures, but it has an important role in the public sphere. Religion in West European societies is becoming increasingly detached from governing political structures, though it is the focus of deliberations such as in discussions regarding the fate of refugees and asylum seekers, in shaping the public opinion against the American-led invasion in Iraq, in the debate about development aid, etc.

In Eastern Europe, mainly in countries whose majority belongs to the Orthodox Church, state and church have been drawing closer. One example is the relationship between Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church. Consistently wearing a cross around his neck, Putin is

often photographed in churches and with high clergy. The Russian Orthodox Church, on its side, has started redeveloping and recirculating old ideas about links between church, state, nation, and soil.

In the Middle East, a common denominator between Israel and its neighboring countries is that they all have family laws which give religion and religious courts a strong influence in society. The Islamic states appoint the Sharia judges, and the Israeli government appoints the two Chief Rabbis. The influence of religion and clergy on general government policies varies from country to country, but again, the common denominator is that there are strong groups of religious extremists with considerable political influence.

Pertinent issues that must be addressed when discussing conflicts include the role of religious elements in the narratives of the relevant societies, the significance of holy sites, and the formal and informal relationships between religion and governing bodies.

The Role of Religious Actors Goes beyond Clergy

Religion is an organized enterprise, while religious faith and religious participation are a private matter. Opportunities for participation in religious activities and the transfer of the content of faith from generation to generation are always organized. To secure continuity, institutionalization of religion is inevitable.

The desire and need for religious dialogue and cooperation usually stem from crises, since crises tend to lead to increased religious activity. When people and society experience outside threats, feel insecure, or sense a need for strengthening group identities, there is always an increase in religious activity. It is as if people feel the need for protection by a higher power. This is also why religious leaders have special responsibilities in such situations; religion can be used to exacerbate and deepen conflicts. Therefore, religious leaders must show that religion is not only a refuge, but can also be a source of strength which is needed to take believers on the path to peace. Religious dialogue and cooperation between religious communities are useful instruments in such cases.

Peace negotiation-oriented dialogue does not take place on the individual level. Communities can open up to other communities, and individual members can contribute by establishing friendship, visiting other communities, and

creating groups where encounters can take place. Clergy is important in such cases because of the leadership roles in the faith community. Religious scholars are important because contentious issues need to be dealt with on the basis of knowledge, insight, and professional judgment.

However, the author believes it is necessary to approach religious dialogue with a wider perspective. When religious dialogues seek to be relevant for peace negotiations, ties between political establishments and religious representatives must be strong, and include clergy, scholars, and lay people.

Religious Leaders' Tasks

If religious leaders want a role in efforts to create peace, they must rise above their own beliefs, history, or national politics.

a. Religious leaders must be able to recognize, respect, and appreciate the religious faith of followers of another religion. They are expected to bear witness to what they believe is the truth of their own religion, but they must be capable of listening to the other, even if they regard it as heresy or a false religion. The willingness to listen establishes faith itself as the common ground.
b. Religious leaders must have a perspective beyond their own faith and religion, showing an appreciation to how religion is intertwined with the identity of their people, their tribe, their nation, or their state. By doing so, they acknowledge that both their own religion and the religion of the other can be connected to culture, nationality, or ethnicity. This opens a field where dialogue can facilitate understanding of both oneself and the other.
c. Religious leaders should refrain from claims to superior access to God or the mind of God. An Iranian ayatollah once said that if we were to trust anyone's claims to speak on behalf of God, we would have many gods, since many make such claims. In a religiously charged environment like Iran, that was a political statement. It had, however, profound relevance for situations elsewhere, especially in the Holy Land. Such insight should lead to humility in both the face of God and other believers.
d. Holy Scriptures are dear to believers, and religious leaders are guides in interpreting them. The faithful can find in Holy Scriptures arguments for war, conflict, and no room for other faiths, but the same Scriptures also

teach respect, peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Interpretation of Holy Scriptures means making choices. Religious leaders need to clarify what principles and what clues are needed to read Holy Scriptures in support of peace and justice.

e. In Western Europe, the Americas, and Africa, we are used to separation between religion and state. Religious leaders and scholars have their independence from the state. If and when the state is not dictatorial, this opens a space where religious leaders can act independently and freely speak their mind. But, according to Hurd, "secularist divisions between religion and politics are neither stable nor universal. They are fundamentally contested categories."[7] Different types of divisions and the seeming absence of such do not necessarily imply that there is no freedom of religion, or that political leaders direct the actions of religious leaders. Primarily, it means that the relationship between religion, politics, and civil society is organized differently, formally and/or informally. In many predominantly Muslim countries, religious leaders are closely linked to the political establishment and vice versa. In Judaism, the situation differs; between the Roman occupation and 1948, there was no Jewish state. In the modern state of Israel, the Chief Rabbinate is the Jewish authority and part of the government. The scope of the Chief Rabbis' involvement in politics differs; some speak critically of the government, others are linked to it and hesitate to criticize.

f. Religious leaders can intensify or escalate conflicts by stressing religious elements, claiming partial or exclusive ownership over places, words, symbols, narratives, and history. Particularly in instances where two or three religions have different narratives linked to the same place, one party cannot demand that others accept their account. Nevertheless, they can demand respect for their particular narrative. Competing narratives can be mutually enriching. Instead of delegitimizing the religious attachments of others, it is possible to seek a common vision for issues, places or symbols. Examples of delegitimizing behavior are when a Chief Rabbi asks why Muslims need Jerusalem as a holy city when they already have two others, Mecca and Medina. Or, a Supreme Judge of Sharia Courts says that Jews have no cultural or historical connections to Jerusalem.

They both reveal lack of respect for the other and perpetuate destructive divisions.

g. Religious leaders have a special responsibility for identifying religiously charged elements of a conflict. They should provide theological reasoning as to why and how these elements are charged, and their possible solution. Theology is about the relationship of the divine and the earthly. It must be instrumental in solving problems in respect of the shared belief that all humans are created by the same God and are supposed to live and survive in this world.

h. When religious leaders enter dialogue, internal discipline within the group is important. The following is an example of a pledge which was signed by all participants in the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land;[8]

> *We declare that* (1) the meetings we have held, and wish to hold in the future, of leaders and representatives of the Religious Institutions and Establishments in the Holy Land are of urgent and utmost importance for a better future for our communities, locally and regionally, in order to achieve just peace and coexistence among the peoples of the region; (2) our private meetings have helped us find a formula for mutual dialogue; (3) statements published by us should be objective in order to improve the atmosphere of the dialogue.
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> *Accordingly each one of us declares* (1) my statements emphasize the value of our collective effort and the fact that we are working to improve the atmosphere of dialogue between one another; (2) we shall avoid any public statement that could endanger our ability to work together; (3) collectively, we shall discuss the details of those matters upon which we most deeply disagree in our private meetings and not in public; (4) we shall emphasize the importance of our dialog and the good will between us despite our differences.
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> *Each one of us will exercise the right to* acknowledge that there are issues upon which we disagree, but at the same time assert that we are discussing these issues with mutual respect

> in an effort to reduce disagreement and promote dialogue towards comprehensive, just peace in the region and not declaring disagreement publicly so that we can achieve the aim of the dialogue.
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> *We confirm that each one of us is committed to our endeavor to* meet regularly in order to establish agreement and a shared agenda for discussion and action in the forthcoming months.

This code helped the Council overcome some serious difficulties at the time it was signed, and later made it possible to say that cooperation with some of the participants was no longer possible.

Facilitating Religious Dialogue

Religious dialogue is influenced by governments, bureaucrats, and public opinion, as much as it is directed by religious leaders.

The ability to listen must be transformed into a capacity to interpret what goes on in the dialogue itself. In a dialogue there are always significant differences between participants; some are well trained in theology, used to religious discourse, and have a good command of the language used. Others have scarce theological training, no experience in dialogue, little knowledge of other religions, and are in need of translation. Such differences in skill and training easily create tensions which can make mutual understanding difficult, and are detrimental to progress.

For instance, when one part wishes to freeze talks, the facilitator needs to listen in such a way that he or she can make the concerns of the one party understandable to the other. A freeze is not necessarily a negative development; it might be a necessary break providing the next meeting a good start.

Participation in religious dialogues may arouse a variety of emotions, including humiliation, superiority, anger, and a deep desire for being seen and heard. Some have a sense of humor, some do not. Some need to share a meal to speak, but a common meal is not always easy in interreligious dialogue. Religious sensitivities around food, cutlery, plates, and drinks can all be factors which may ease dialogue or strengthen tensions.

Knowledge of and curiosity about relevant religions are necessary qualifications for a good facilitator. Knowledge is necessary in order to foresee which issues are relevant for, and can be brought up in relation to an actual peace process. Curiosity is important because it demonstrates the personal involvement and engagement of the facilitator. A facilitator is always there as a person, relating to everybody, though he or she is not a religiously neutral person. In fact, no one is. Human beings always belong to or have a background in a religious tradition, whether or not they are believers.

The role of the facilitator must begin with deep respect for partners and their faith. A facilitator will be respected in his or her identity, but will be expected to rise above religious adherence. The same holds true for a facilitator's political viewpoints. What is most important is that a facilitator must be able to value and respect all positions and concerns. That must supersede any religious conviction or personal or political opinion a facilitator might otherwise possess.

Theories of religious dialogue often present roadmaps for how a dialogue can proceed. In real life, such maps are mostly irrelevant. Dialogues in conflict situations seldom proceed according to previously determined schemes. Too many unknown actors and factors are involved. Progress can be agreed, planned, but in the end is unpredictable. A facilitator will usually be tempted to move fast because he or she is an outsider who may have come to the conflict with clear goals in mind. To listen in and see what movements are possible and what may be counterproductive, is the special task of a facilitator. Patience is a virtue.

Closely linked to this, is the fundamental requirement that a facilitator must always be able to voice the concern of the other. When speaking with or to one of the parties, the other parties must be able to trust the facilitator to present their opinions and sentiments.

Someone once commented that a good facilitator must have "a passion for anonymity." While that might not be the final role of a facilitator or the role during dialogue, it is still a valid requirement in terms of general attitude. A facilitator must keep in mind that the participants own the process; a facilitator must be able to take, justly or unjustly, blame for failure, while success is attributed to the actors. Finally, a facilitator should strive to be

unneeded, and should leave the scene once both sides are able to view and convey their counterpart's situation and conditions.

Relevant Issues for Religious Dialogues

When religious dialogue is part of wider efforts for peace, the key issues are not the concept of God, prayer, or redemption. Participants in this kind of religious dialogue are also part of a political conflict. Relevant issues for religious dialogue in conflict situations include the following:

Land. Many religions make connections between the land, the people or the nation, and faith. Connections can be made with reference to history – often with a mythological beginning – or by just stating that the land is given to them by God. The situation in the Holy Land is illustrative of this; both Jews and Muslims maintain that the land was given to them by God. Some Jews maintain that this awards them ownership of the land, the right to govern it, and to determine for others their rights and their place. Other Jews consider the land as given to them, but add that land should be governed by justice and with equal rights for all. Some Muslims claim that since the land was once controlled by Islam, it remains Islamic. Others want equal rights for all.

Holy sites. A site can be holy to one religion but not to another. In other cases, it can be holy to one religion, but is then taken over by another and made into a holy site. Former synagogues and mosques were transformed to churches in Spain; Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was built as a church, and then became a mosque. Now it is a museum. Then there are holy sites which are significant to more than one religion. The religious significance can be similar or different. The most contentious site in the conflict between Jews and Muslims in the Holy Land is the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Other examples are the Ibrahimi Mosque/Abraham's Tomb in Hebron, and Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem.

Access to holy places. This issue is of course linked to the former, but is also related to religious liberty. Illustrative of this are examples from the Holy Land, where some sites are inaccessible because they are on the wrong side of the security fence/wall, as is the case with Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem. Some are only partly accessible because security considerations are used to refuse entry, as is the case when access is limited or denied to

the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, or the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

Concept of the other. Some religions have Holy Scriptures with descriptions of the other, like the Christian Bible and its description of Jews, or the Quran with its descriptions of Jews and Christians. Schoolbooks, newspapers, and other media may contain derogatory descriptions of the other. Religious dialogue has a special responsibility to see to it that their own educational materials treat other religions and believers with respect and dignity. Religious leaders have a special responsibility not to incite, but to speak well of each other and educate their congregation in doing likewise.

Acting together. The urge to action is a common human orientation which demonstrates the seriousness of our words and, in this case, the religious dialogue. Examples of such actions are (1) joint statements or calls to action which demonstrate agreement, but are also bold enough to mention those issues where there is disagreement and where the partners promise to discuss and hopefully deal with them; (2) study projects about schoolbooks, media, or theology. Relevant issues here are the concept of the other and derogatory statements, but also themes like justice and peace; (3) promoting contact between the faithful in the different communities; (4) discussing statements, sermons etc., which are issued by one of the parties and which may be heard or understood to be harmful by other parties in a dialogue; and (5) creating an office that can serve as a secretariat for the dialogue, but also as an informal meetings space for participants.

An established dialogue among religious leaders should seek encounters with those responsible for political negotiations for peace. That will enrich and introduce new elements both to the religious dialogue and to the political negotiations. Ideally this should make both of them more relevant to a process toward a sustainable peace.

Conclusion

Religious dialogue can present religion as a community of believers, who are all created by God; establish a theological foundation of the common humanity, a foundation which is created by God and therefore beyond human tensions; invite partners to identify religious elements which are of relevance to a political conflict, and thereby makes it possible to discuss and

deal with them; open one's own religion to questions from other believers, thereby making it possible to discover new resources for peace in their own religion; deny space for religious incitement, and create space for constructive solutions where the integrity of all, religious or non-religious, can be respected.

In short, religious dialogue can clear the way for political decisions.

Notes

1 Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
2 Elisabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 1.
3 Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 66.
4 Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism,* p. 145.
5 Ibid., p. 146.
6 Casanova, p. 220.
7 Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism.*
8 Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, "Pledge," http://crihl.org/sites/default/files/2007%2001%20CRIHL-%20Pledge_0.pdf.