

2017

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Recommended Citation

Ramadhan, Shamsia (2017) "Interreligious Action as a Force for Peace," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, 54-62.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol1/iss1/5

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Interreligious Action as a Force for Peace

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Every religion displays an inclination toward peace through its leaders and thinkers. This can be seen by the number of religious actors who have played a role in resolving conflicts in different parts of the world. Catholic religious leaders have played a leading role in mediating conflicts in Africa, Asia and Latin America. An Iman and a pastor from Nigeria inspire communities to forgive and foster co-existence. There are many other examples. Although there is evidence of religious commitment to peace, the reverse also is true (see Toft et al., 2011). While some believers innovatively use religious resources in promoting peace, others engage in atrocious activities that have led to religious bigotry in the world. Violent attacks by groups such as Al Shabaab and Boko Haram attest to how religion can motivate individuals to engage in violence and cause division in society. This article intends to highlight joint initiatives for peace by religious groups that are more relevant today than ever. The author, drawing on her experience with interreligious action projects for peace in Africa, will outline what is necessary for interreligious action to contribute to peace and social cohesion in society.ⁱ

Introduction

Globally, there is an increase of violent incidents carried out by groups that justify their acts of violence using religion. There has also been communal conflict with religious undertones. This prompted peace builders to focus on religion as a force for peace. As a response, Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) are increasingly involved in peace and security initiatives at the community, national, regional and global levels. Religious leaders have also led national peace and reconciliation initiatives and have been appointed to head anti-corruption efforts. And increasingly, charity organizations are acknowledging the value of faith organizations in addressing issues at the community level owing to their expansive presence at that level. Organizations globally such as the United Nations (UN) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) have used joint religious platforms to reach populations on disease prevention and vaccination campaigns. Religious actors are powerful actors in society, particularly in the communities where they serve. And FBOs have a reputation of being persuasive.

The practice of religious involvement in peace started with religious institutions internally engaging in peacebuilding and developing approaches based on religious values. For example, Catholic peacebuilding and Islamic peacebuilding are two examples of religious peacebuilding that have been utilized in different locations in response to initiatives targeting communities belonging to those religious groups. The practice continues to evolve to correspond to needs in the society; an increasingly popular approach is to engage in joint peacebuilding initiatives in multi-religious contexts.

Why interreligious peacebuilding?

As the world experiences religiously motivated violence by numerous groups globally, the assumption that religion and religious identity is irrelevant in contemporary socio-political organization left policy makers who excluded religion from policymaking without an idea of

how to deal with the violence that has religious undertones (Toft, et al., 2011; Van Tonergen et al. 2005). The current global reality is contrary to the theory that religion will become private and disappear from the public domain and therefore irrelevant in policy discussions. The reality is that religious identity is alive and dynamic in the public sphere with the potential to be used for good and evil. Therefore, since religion is sometimes a major factor in contemporary violence, it behooves policy makers to consider it as important not only to understand how religion can be used to cause suffering but also how it can be used to address some of the challenges.

All religions prescribe ethics that promote social justice and empathy for those in need. Victims of violence fall in the category of those in need; to alleviate their suffering, religion has been a motivation for action, specifically to support reconciliation, social cohesion and peacebuilding efforts. Abrahamic (Jewish, Christian and Islamic) faiths in particular contain clear instructions for justice and peace, yet throughout the human history, religion has been a major contributor to injustices, violence, hatred, and intolerance. This duality of possibilities in religion must be analyzed and understood.

The opportunities and challenges of interreligious peacebuilding

Religious institutions and individuals draw their inspiration from religious values to engage in actions that help communities, such as the empowerment and social organization of the community for a dignified life. All religions have values, norms, and characteristics that guarantee the well-being of the individual and humanity at large. These values and norms include individual and community rights as well as access to basic services such as education, water, and health, and motivate religious actors to engage with groups embroiled in conflict. The networks that religious actors can access at different levels (local, national, regional and international) often provide opportunities for them to engage and understand the different perspectives on issues that may lie at the center of the conflict and to come up with solutions. Religious actors have resources that enable them address the challenges. Unique to religious groups is spirituality, which they bring to the initiatives with their other resources.

The first motivation for faith based actors comes from their respective religious teachings that guide their purpose and practice for working and helping those in need. They then come together with the intention of getting to know each other and in the process, they find similarities and identify differences. The similarities present the opportunity for collaboration; the differences point to the fact of their diversity. In their interaction they will have distinct differences; their collaboration will have both points of convergence and divergence. If they are to work together, they need to acknowledge that at times there will be different views, and for them to engage in long-term activities such as peacebuilding, the differences need to be properly managed. If differences are not properly managed, interfaith encounters will likely be contested, depriving FBOs of an opportunity to engage in long-term peace projects. With this reality, it is critical that a candid and constructive dialogue takes place within the religious groups that lays the ground for engagement of the other religious group(s) in joint initiatives.

In this era of religiously motivated violence, it is important to note that perpetrators of the violence are members of the community that is made up of people of different faiths. The possible use of religion for violence or peace provides the context in which the perpetrators of

violence are able to nurture their ideas, plan and execute their action, and use different means to garner support from the populace. This is not to support violence but noting that there are structural and cultural factors at the micro, meso and macro levels that shape the narratives and actions of those engaging in violence. Research on causes of violent extremism has identified an interplay between “push and pull factors”. The pull factors are religious teachings that are romanticized and used to create an ideology that is appealing. The ideology is integrated with realities in the society to form narratives. Examples include the narrative about every Muslims’ duty to support the establishment of the *Caliphate*; disapproval of western values, saying that they are contrary to Islamic principles; the rhetoric that the West seeks to destroy Islam by introducing western values in Muslim societies, and so on. Such narratives are used to mobilize group support. The push factors are structural issues which form grievances used to develop the narratives used to mobilize support. These include social injustices; discrimination; alienation; social exclusion; disappointment with the political class, and so on (Denoeux and Carter, 2005). Thus, religious actors that want to participate in interreligious peacebuilding must accept that religious traditions are sources for the promotion of the path of peace or the path of conflict. Accepting the fact that there are religious values that can be used to cause harm in the society will make the religious actors proactive to ensure that religious values are not used to disturb peace in the society.

Religious values, institutions and structures in interreligious action in Africa

The role of religious actors in development and public service provision in society places them as key stakeholders and strategic allies in peacebuilding. With an increase of violence with religious undertones since 9/11, multi-religious communities throughout the world have had an increase of overt displays of religious hostilities. These tensions are an opportunity for peace and particularly for exploring how different faith groups can engage in joint community activities that will address these and other challenges. Looking at religion through a conflict sensitivity lens, we see that religion is a social institution that can be both a “divider” and “connector”. Even with the increase in conflict, religion often remains a connector in many ways. In many developing communities, religious institutions are the primary providers of public services such as health and education through health centers and learning institutions under their management. In multi-religious contexts, even with the security challenges caused by violence that has religious undertones, the community continues to interact in these shared spaces. The connector functions of these spaces make religion in all its aspects – values, structures, resources -- conducive to peacebuilding. As a divider, religion is used by perpetrators to engage in violence targeting religious individuals and structures belonging to other faiths, resulting in intolerance, fear, suspicion and profiling based on religious affiliation.

Religious groups are particularly effective in bringing about behavioral change through their ability to link human development interventions to faith values and practices. For example, in the Catholic Relief Service (CRS) Capacity for Inter-Religious Community Action (CIRCA) program (Ramadhan 2017), FBOs in Nigeria, Niger, Egypt, Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya worked together to promote social cohesion and peace among Muslim and Christian populations. Through joint initiatives Muslim and Christian FBOs engaged in activities that integrated development and peacebuilding. These joint initiatives, called “connector projects,” created platforms for Muslim and Christian community members to work together on addressing common community needs, such as digging and managing bore holes for water, and

collaboratively establishing and managing microfinance projects for small business enterprises (Ramadhan 2017). The various projects were designed in a way to ensure there was close interaction between Muslim and Christian FBOs which led to the FBOs developing a relationship with an organization of the “other”. The partners then engage in interreligious action with the intention of promoting peace and social cohesion.

The challenges that spurred interreligious action in the six countries is religiously motivated violence that resulted in deep-seated divisions, lack of mutual trust, fear based on religious differences and collective trauma suffered during the violent incidents. For example, in Egypt there have been sporadic attacks on minority Christians where scores of people have been killed and churches destroyed. Although there is no explicit religious division, the attacks have led to the deterioration of relations between people of different faiths. In Niger, a Muslim-majority country, Christians have also been attacked and their structures destroyed. Religious leaders are also concerned with radicalization that is a spillover from neighboring Nigeria where a militant group continues to perpetrate violence drawing inspiration from religion. In Kenya, attacks by Al Shabaab, a militant group operating from neighboring Somalia, has engaged in attacks targeting Christians, which has led to religious divisions.

These incidents have led faith actors to engage in joint initiatives, particularly in multi-religious communities, to promote social cohesion and peacebuilding. The previously noted CRS projects began by establishing a partnership at the institutional level, allowing the Muslim and Christian actors to find common ground and identify their differences. There were joint training sessions that helped Christians and Muslims learn about each other’s religious beliefs about peace and justice, and which beliefs were similar, and which were different. They also were trained in how to organize and work together, and how to identify and implement connector projects. Establishing their common goals and objectives acted as catalyst to explore avenues for potential partnership and was an essential first step towards effective cooperation. The FBOs were engaged in a process where they became open and explicit about the values of each organization. Each organization articulated their values and identified common ground and areas of mutual benefit, which formed the basis of their partnership. In areas where there was not obvious overlap, those values were seen as exclusive to the faith group; this process helped the organizations to better know each other. An understanding of the “other’s” values that are different helped develop trust and respect. With clear values, it becomes easy for the faith actors to engage with each other and gives the faith groups the clout to go out to the community as one.

In many societies, the population comprises of individuals from various faith groups who live in the same geographical location. Interaction between members of the different faith groups is inevitable because there are shared communal structures such as schools, health centers, markets and so on. Religious diversity is a reality in many societies (although the percentages of members of the various religious groups vary; one religious community might be a minority and the other a majority). Relationships and interdependence between individuals who inhabit the same geographic location is important and create opportunities for the members of different faith groups to interact and establish constructive relationships. Religious diversity and the importance of peaceful co-existence led to the formation of interreligious peacebuilding initiatives.

In the CRS projects in the six countries mentioned above, FBOs adopted multi-dimensional approaches to peacebuilding and the promotion of human dignity and well-being, taking into account the religious beliefs in the community as well as social, economic and political issues. In the targeted communities religion was a constitutive element of the community members' identity and this linked them with their respective religious organizations and separated the different faith communities living in the same location. However, all the members of the communities experienced the same development challenges which, despite the differences in religion, were opportunities that could be used for promoting peace. A common community challenge was identified as a rallying point to create a platform where community members from different faiths interacted with each other. In this participatory process, the community members' primary concern was a common need and they engaged in a process that identified problems, proposed solutions and then jointly agreed to manage a community project that addressed their common challenge. The challenge was the entry point that facilitated a platform that communities used to better understand the religious other. The religious leaders highlighted the common religious values that helped the communities work together to address the problems.

Gauging the number of active believers in the various regions' religious communities was not easy; the easier option was to identify majority or minority religious communities. Many community members, even though they may not regularly observe religious practices, identified with a religious group. Among the Muslims, there was a clear demarcation of interaction between women and men in public, which interreligious actors had to take into consideration when designing community projects. For inter-religious actors, religion was a source of spirituality and moral guidance that guides their interaction with the community.

Unpacking interreligious peacebuilding

When FBOs understand their common religious beliefs, they can understand how the beliefs are interpreted and formed into rules and customs that are practiced by communities. The FBOs should also know that, in some cases, practices that appear to be core to a religious faith are in fact cultural practices that have not been derived from religion but are nonetheless handed down over generations. These beliefs and customs form the fabric of society and guide people's behavior. For example, in Niger and Nigeria, the FBOs had to develop activities that respected the cultural and religious values of the community, and they engaged male and female groups separately. The FBOs engaged in a dialogue process with community and religious leaders to understand the gender roles and socio-religious regulations on male-female interaction as a precondition for their interreligious development agenda. That gave them an opportunity to demystify misconceptions of gender, specifically of women in Islam. The FBOs appreciated that culture and religion are intertwined in a complex way, and one cannot expect the disentanglement to happen quickly. However, for their interreligious initiative to have an impact, relationships of trust must be built, and appropriate community and religious authorities must be engaged while recognizing that those authorities will differ from case to case. For change to happen, there must be continuous dialogue beyond project implementation and faith groups should be involved in the creation of customized solutions. In a multi-religious context, interreligious action should integrate local values, usually a blend of culture and religion, into the development initiative, framing and messaging the project for community ownership and sustainability.

Interreligious Action as a Force for Peace

The primary focus for religious groups is concern for the spiritual, emotional and social wellbeing of people. Through their routine involvement with the community, religious actors gain the trust, influence and community leadership needed for development and peace initiatives. Additionally, religious actors engage communities for long periods of time, living in the community, which often differs from other civil society organizations.

Based on the six interreligious CRS country projects noted above, we can identify the following best practices for interreligious peacebuilding:

1. **Start with an individual:** The key lesson learned from the interreligious action projects is that the process begins with a personal change of heart that occurs from information shared. The participants in the interreligious action projects were participants in discursive training, which provided them with the skills to engage in multi-religious contexts.
2. **Engage different stakeholders, coordinate and communicate:** Faced with the enormity of the task of dealing with the violence and consequences of sectarian violence, it is necessary to operate at many levels at the same time. Although an intrinsic part of civil society, faith communities are not natural partners with other civil society organizations (CSOs). The FBOs must engage both internally and externally.
3. **Encourage creative thinking and innovation:** To address the causes of violent extremism and other forms of religiously motivated violence, there is a need to develop strategies that will deal with all the underlying causes of violence -- cultural and structural. This requires creative thinking and innovation.
4. **Build the capacities of religious actors:** There is usually little or no capacity building for FBOs in peacebuilding and conflict prevention. FBOs have not accumulated this body of knowledge of good practices in this critical area that religious leaders are increasingly being called upon to take up; training is needed.
5. **Plan for the long term:** Any interreligious action process is going to be long term. Effective engagement in these joint initiatives requires patience and the time first to create a common understanding, and then set up the required infrastructure needed to engage the community.

The complexity of interreligious peacebuilding: Dealing with religious sensitivities

The strengths that religious leaders and their respective institutions bring to the peacebuilding process include: reliable institutions, shared values and practices, a history of addressing injustices and the capacity to garner support at local, national, regional and global levels (Denoeux and Carter, 2005). There are benefits and complexities that require careful consideration in order for the joint initiatives to have an impact. In a conflict context, the interreligious peacebuilding process begins with mobilizing like-minded religious actors to engage in joint community initiatives with the community, focusing on a common community need. Not all religious groups are open to collaboration with others who are not from their faith group. The need that affects the community regardless of religious affiliation becomes the

attraction that creates a platform for interaction and the religious leaders use religious resources as a catalyst for change. The process of interreligious action also involves the faith actors coming together and publicly showing their unity of purpose to the community. Together, faith organizations agree to collaborate and forge an alliance that includes identifying common religious values on justice and peace. This alliance is purposeful and it is a long-term engagement, which means that the faith based organizations must also examine how to deal with differences that would undermine the partnership.

The changing global environment has expanded the agenda of interreligious engagement from an emphasis on information and intellectual discussion to addressing religious and communal tensions, emphasizing the need for joint ventures despite differences. It is generally agreed that violent conflicts are not necessarily religious in nature, even if some religious actors are involved; that religious differences are not in themselves necessarily a cause of conflict and violence; and that religious groups do not necessarily use violence in conflicts. However, religious identity and religious teachings have been used to spur violence.

Although religion is cited as a factor in some conflicts, it can also help resolve conflict and deal with tension. This “ambivalent role of religion” is useful in understanding how religion can be applied to promote peace and social cohesion, particularly in multi-religious contexts. Violence in the name of religion may be local, regional or global. Although currently Islam is the religion that is associated most frequently with religiously motivated violence, such violence is not exclusive to individuals who profess the Islamic faith; rather the individual who is intolerant can find within their sacred texts motivation to engage in violence (Fadl, 2002).

Religious institutions may themselves take up the initiative to address challenges in society, or external actors may acknowledge the potential and influence that religious institutions have and utilize them to bring change in society. Religious institutions engaged in peacebuilding use a people-driven, bottom-up process that is participatory and inclusive so that the people influence decisions based on the context (Huda and Marshall, 2013). Religious actors have engaged in a range of activities, including political advocacy, education, health, intra and interreligious dialogue, mediation, observation of election processes, and leading transitional justice initiatives (Toft, et al., 2011). While religious actors have characteristics that help them in peacebuilding, such as strong faith based motivation; long-term commitment in communities and presence on the ground; and moral and spiritual authority, a prominent weakness of religious actors includes the missionary nature of religion, particularly Christianity and Islam, that causes fear of proselytization.

To be effective, interreligious action needs to address the deeper issues in the society. For lasting impact, joint religious action requires analytical skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will enable them build on the distinct, as well as common, resources at their disposal.

Conclusion

Religious actors are critical actors in society and because of their religious identity and their long history of community engagement they are strategically positioned to deal with religious-motivated hostilities, which requires that they are prepared to work together. Religious organizations worldwide are active in the communities they serve and this gives them an

opportunity of joint interreligious action. The joint initiatives give FBOs an opportunity to address the conflict between people of different faiths. The multi-religious community's common need becomes the communal rallying point and acts as a connector to help the community deal with their differences. The coming together of different faith groups in an environment where insecurity is caused by religious groups is a challenge for the proponents of interreligious action.

In any conflict situation, the challenge is usually how to constructively manage the differences between groups. In interreligious action, it is important for partners to focus on common values and practices, which is the glue that cements the relationship, but more importantly partners must explore ways of dealing with differences. Any interreligious initiative will be confronted with the challenge of differences, a threat for interreligious collaboration, particularly in an environment where individuals do not have sufficient religious knowledge about the religious other but also about their own religion. In many contexts where interreligious initiatives are implemented, there also are cultural sensitivities that some mistake to be religious dogma. The growth in knowledge of one's own religion as well as in knowledge of the other's religion is necessary for interreligious relations.

Joint religious engagement can be a profoundly transforming experience for religious actors and their communities and often leads to a deepening of relationships. Individuals who participate in inter-religious engagement do so not as individuals but as members of a faith group. As representatives of their respective religious groups, they seek cooperation with people of other faith groups on a practical project to address common community challenges. Interreligious peacebuilding involves the commitment of individuals to represent their respective faith groups and together with others to explore and understand the complexity of religious pluralism. Collectively they recognize that people of all faiths have a concern for the society and at the same time remain honest about the real religious differences that can never be changed. Interreligious engagement should be founded on common values and common interests; this will motivate communities to constructively deal with differences, based on mutual interest and respect for each other. It should lead to a better understanding and decrease tensions between members of religious groups and the sincere cooperation between religious actors focusing on the common good for all in the long-term.

Endnotes

¹Catholic Relief Services has programs involving faith actors in joint initiatives in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Africa, and the Philippines. See Bamat, et al. (Eds), 2017.

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