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Interreligious Peacebuilding: An Emerging Field of Research and Practice

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nternational Relations scholars, politicians, religious institutions and religious leaders can no longer debate whether religion is relevant to global or national governance issues and they can no longer afford to ignore the roles and functions of religious identity in many violent and nonviolent conflict areas in the world today. From European to South Asian societies, the headlines are related to the potentially destructive role that religion can play in everyday policy making. Those cases include, but are not limited to, the self-declared Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); the civil war in the Central African Republic in which religious identity was thrown into the midst of the political conflict; and the ongoing conflict in Myanmar where religious identity is utilized to justify certain governmental policies.

The issue that practitioners (policy makers, religious institutions and religious leaders) are really struggling to effectively address is how to understand the interreligious dynamics of conflicts and constructively link this to future policies. The response of policy makers in Europe to the ongoing global refugee crisis represents an important case of the need for further linkages between religious leaders and policy makers. Given that the majority of the refugees are Muslims, how are secular European policy makers going to develop an approach to manage or mediate the inherent difference of cultural and religious Islamic ways of living and do so without stereotyping or inciting violence and exclusion towards refuges? An even more challenging task is facing policy makers in the Muslim world, especially those in the Middle East where religious and sectarian identities have been systematically manipulated to justify political and even inter- and intra-communal violence with brutal

effects. Unlike the European reality, in the Middle East, delinking religious identity and institutions from governmental policies and from justifying wars and certain governance frameworks is the primary needed change. In this context, politicians continuously enlist religious leaders in pursuing their own interests.

President Barack Obama meets with the Dalai Lama in the Map Room of the White House, Feb. 21, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza) This official White House photograph is being made available only for publication by news organizations and/or for personal use printing by the subject(s) of the photograph. The photograph may not be manipulated in any way and may not be used in commercial or political materials, advertisements, emails, products, promotions that in any way suggests approval or endorsement of the President, the First Family, or the White House.
President Barack Obama meets with the Dalai Lama in the Map Room of the White House, Feb. 21, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

Despite their problems grasping the issues, there is a growing agreement amongst policy makers and researchers that engaging religious leaders and institutions in peacebuilding on all levels is crucial to bringing the message of tolerance, pluralism and peaceful resolution of conflicts to communities. However, the research on such tools and techniques is still limited. Most studies continue to focus on the theological bases of peace and harmony in different faith groups (See Abu-Nimer's 2007 book, *Unity in Diversity*). There are few studies on the mechanism and tools (design, processes, and evaluation of success) of interreligious peacebuilding which will allow policy makers to engage religious leaders and their institutions in a systematic process of mediation, negotiation, or problem solving to respond to a concrete social or political problem. As result of this shortage in experiences, many interreligious peacebuilding activities resort to the traditional and old models of symbolic and

ceremonial representation of religious leaders in policy making circles. For example, a prime minster invites Abrahamic faith leaders to bless his/her new policy towards refugees in a certain area. In most cases such blessings take place outside of areas of worship and in the public secular space. The lack of systematic engagement of religious agencies in such peace processes and the instrumentalization of such agencies in a symbolic way only at the end of the process reduces the capacity of religious peacemakers in their own communities.

This approach of limited (time and resources) and symbolic engagement with religious identity (via leaders, symbols, rituals, etc.) has been around for centuries: a ceremonial role but not genuine engagement as a serious stakeholder in the conflict (using the cross or holy books as part of the ceremony to celebrate a peace agreement in a conflict situation like Northern Ireland, Palestine-Israel, Mindanao Philippines, etc.). In fact, a similar approach is taken by those who use religion to justify their war plans and violence in general (such as the use of religion for justification of violence in the wars in Bosnia in the 1990s, conflict in Northern Ireland, etc). The selective and partisan hijacking of certain religious values to explain the need to exclude, discriminate, dehumanize the "different other." In both cases, there is an instrumentalization of the religious identity but not deep and nuanced engagement.

In current interreligious peacebuilding practices there are genuine efforts to move beyond this instrumentalization and bring a more holistic and integrative approach to engage religious leaders and institutions (See the recent 2015 report on CVE). Such trends can be vied in the most recent revisions of the American White House Summit responding to countering violent extremism

(CVE) in which a strong call for a community based approach is an integral part of the CVE efforts; the KAICIID campaign, "United Against Violence in the Name of Religion"; Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (launched by Finn Church Aid, Religions for Peace, KAICIID, USIP, OIC, etc.).

The Main Challenges Ahead

In spite of such efforts, there are still number of core challenges and potential pitfalls that face the field of interreligious peacebuilding in its development as a recognized field of researchers and practice, these include the following:

- First, there is the western post Industrial Revolution framework that endorses the cultural assumption (some argue myth) that religion and faith can and should be left outside of public spheres. Thus, bringing faith into academic institutions becomes a major struggle and threatens the foundation of its knowledge generating paradigm. This assumption that dealing with religion and faith is a private matter that ought to be compartmentalized to the Sociology of Religion or Theological Studies has obstructed many international relations and political scientists from systematically exploring the complex relations between religion and peace and war.
- Second is the assumption that conflicts and their causes reside primarily with material resources and not religion (identity or ideology). Such assumptions can lead many researchers and practitioners to dismiss or underestimate the role that religious identity and ideology can play in both triggering and sustaining conflict, as well as peace. There is no doubt that religion plays a complex and to some extent unique role in many conflict dynamics and outcomes. However, many aspects of this role are similar to other identity-based conflicts in which the stakeholder's identity is deployed

in the process of conflict escalation and de-escalation. Ethnicity, culture, race, gender, and sexual orientation are identities that have also been linked to conflict and violence, often through aggressive parties employing dehumanizing framing of an 'other', and there are many studies in both social science and the humanities that have explored the links between these identities and conflict and peace (see *From Identity-Based Conflict to Identity-Based Cooperation,* edited by Jay Rothman; and Ashmore, Jussim and Wilder of Rutgers University's Department of Psychology's publication: *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*). The study of interreligious peacebuilding can draw on this wealth of research on conflict and identity and develop its own analytical frameworks and practices (R. Scott Appleby addresses religious identity and documents many of these the conflicts in his book, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion Violence and Reconciliation*).

- Third, resources and support by professional organizations, donors, religious leaders and institutions are limited due to the above perceptions and biases. Thus many interreligious analysts and practitioners are rarely invited to the table as recognized and credible actor or agency who can contribute to the processes of peace or policy managements.

- The fourth challenge is understanding that religious peacebuilding is not the ultimate solution for all social and political problems in any given society, since religious identity and its manipulation is rarely the main cause of the violence in any conflict situation. In such cases, we should relate to interreligious peacebuilding agencies as serving a complementary role in a wider range of peacebuilding efforts carried out by many other peace agencies (such as media, educators, business sector, civil society, etc.) (See Abu-Nimer)

Conclusion

Despite the above challenges, the field of religious peacebuilding has been growing and gradually recognized by policy makers and donors as an important agency to engage with. Also, it is important to recognize that interreligious peacebuilders have been able to create significant progress in relief, development and aid. Faith based Organizations (FBOs) have illustrated that through interreligious cooperation they can significantly contribute to eradication of malaria in West Africa, provide relief to Tsunami victims in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, and fight hunger and poverty around the world in many local communities; and NIFA, a Nigerian interfaith organization that launched a campaign to eradicate malaria; also see the recent International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), a network for linking development and religion, which was launched by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Nevertheless, the field of interreligious peacebuilding still has a long road ahead in terms of its research and study agenda, especially in producing empirical research that articulates the detailed processes, conditions and dynamics in every conflict and that lead certain communities to be easily mobilized through their religious identities (symbols, rituals, and institutions) to endorse violence or peace.

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