OBSERVATOIRE GÉOPOLITIQUE DU RELIGIEUX

ENGAGING INTERRELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING AGENCIES AND POLICY MAKERS IN RESPONDING TO CONFLICTS: BEYOND THE RHETORIC

by Mohammed ABU-NIMER

Professor of Peace and Conflict Resolution at American University
Washington DC, USA
Senior Advisor at the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID)

February 2017

IRIS

INSTITUT DE RELATIONS
INTERNATIONALES
ET STRATÉGIQUES

The recent polarization in many parts of the world has motivated policy makers and religious institutions to begin taking more seriously the potential constructive role that religion and its various agencies can take in responding to violent extremism, and in contributing to building stronger social cohesion in divided societies. Various agencies in the European Union, United Nations, and intergovernmental donors such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID); the Department for International Development (DFID); Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA); etc. have begun engaging in partnerships with organizations (such as the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID)) who can assist them in engaging local religious agencies in their programing. Obviously faith-based development and humanitarian relief organizations have been working in the area of promoting diversity, pluralism, and peacebuilding for at least two decades.

Thus, these communities of practice have moved from denying and avoiding the inclusion of religious leaders and institutions to exploring the relevancy and feasibility of engaging religious leaders in their operations. There are a number of lessons that can be learned thus far from the experience in advocating for a greater engagement of religious leaders with both policy makers and development and relief practitioners, as well as their agencies.

1. There is a lack of understanding of the need for engaging religious agencies due to the fact that most organizations operate within secular or non-religious governance frameworks, their officers and managers have not been trained to be aware of the need to engage religious leaders in the community. Thus, when they design their programs, they tend to engage or build partnerships with secular civil society groups and professionals who share the same secular ideological assumptions of promoting diversity, human rights, and sustainable development with them.

2. A fundamental resistance to engage religious leaders remains an obstacle. Such tendencies exist especially among those policy and development practitioners who are themselves secular and believe that religion and religious institutions either should be confined to their primary function of providing theological and spiritual services to communities and that any engagement beyond these parameters constitutes a violation of the principle of separation of church and state. Thus, religion and faith-based organizations are not relevant for any other function beside theological issues within the church, mosque, temple, or synagogue.

3. Lack of capacity in utilizing tools to engage religious agencies: the field of interreligious peacebuilding has only recently begun to conceptually theorize its practices. Scholars and practitioners like David Little (*Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution*); R. Scott Appleby (*The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* (2000)); John Paul Lederach (*Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (1997-USIP)); Mohammed Abu-Nimer (*Reconciliation, Justice and Coexistence: Theory and Practice* (2001) and *Nonviolence and Peacebuilding in Islamic Context: Bridging Ideals and Reality* (2003)); Marc Gopin (*Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking* (2000)), *Holy*

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War, Holy Peace, How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East (2002)); etc. Despite efforts, such as those listed above as well as others, to conceptualize the practices of interreligious peacebuilding, significant gaps continue to exist in the field, especially in its capacity to articulate the theoretical and disciplinary foundation of the field. The majority of the literature relies on anecdotal and abstract conceptualization rather than empirical and systematic methodological research to build grounded theories of interreligious peacebuilding.

A similar challenge characterizes the tools that interreligious and religious practitioners and agencies offer to policy makers and development and relief agencies on how to integrate such tools in their operation. In many training workshops, practitioners say: "I am now convinced that I need to engage with religious leaders in the community to be effective in delivering the project, but how do I do this?" However, the trainer and the tools that they bring to the table are themselves not necessarily fully equipped to reflect the methodological uniqueness of interreligious peacebuilding. In fact, in many cases, the trainer or the interreligious peacebuilder offer the same tools that any secular peacebuilding agency would share.

Such lack of concrete peacebuilding tools to deal with religion and religious actors becomes a critical challenge when dealing with many officers and policy programmers who lack basic religious literacy. This causes them to be tense and apprehensive when asked to approach or engage any religious agency.

Our tasks and challenges in this domain are to build tools that reflect the uniqueness of interreligious peacebuilding as opposed to secular peacebuilding frameworks and tools. Some of these unique elements include:

1. Taking into account the core reliance on spirituality and integrating spirituality in the program design and in the framing of the intervention. For example, when we invite religious leaders to work on a specific project related to health or girls' and women's education, we should not shy away from integrating an intentional space for prayer.
2. Intentionally providing a space for religious actors to utilize their religious rituals and sacred texts to enhance the comprehension, motivation, or application of the program in their communities.
3. Managing the uniqueness and complexity of religious stakeholders. In much interreligious peacebuilding, this constitutes a challenge for the practitioner and the community. Lack of understanding and proper management of the intra-religious dynamics can often obstruct the implementation of many of the programs in any given community.
4. The depth of interreligious peacebuilding's sensitivity for each participant and his/her religious identity. Since religious identity relates to the core being of the person and his or her calling and meaning in life, any mistake or mischaracterization of the person's identity can have a serious reaction among the participants. The existence of the sacred and profane or prohibited in many religious practices adds to the above sensitivity and reduces the space or margin of error for each of the participants and practitioners, especially if they belong to different faith groups. For example, a Muslim group reacted strongly when found

out that their Christian host and the organizing agency served pork in their lunch and dinner breaks. They threatened to withdraw from the workshop if the issue was not addressed immediately.

5. Keeping in mind the organizational structure of religious institutions. The hierarchal and authoritative nature of many religious institutions can be a unique feature that often affects the capacity of the participants and partners from fully engaging with the policy makers and development agencies without the full endorsement of their highest authorities.

6. Helping religious actors and institutions to see themselves in a broader role. Similar to the above challenge among policy makers and development agencies, often traditional and conservative religious agencies continue to see their role as confined to providing religious and spiritual guidance to their followers, therefore they tend to avoid engaging in their communities social, political, or "earthly affairs."

The above features require practitioners of interreligious peacebuilding to be specifically equipped with specific tools that allow them to access religious communities and facilitate their engagement with other partners to build peace and harmony within and among their diverse constituencies.

Interreligious Fellowships at KAICIID, for example, are part of a special program – the KAICIID International Fellow Programme – that illustrates the need in the field of interreligious peacebuilding to enhance religious institutions' capacities to systematically integrate such themes in their institutions. For a full year, the selected group of 25 fellows learn together and each explores his/her own religious identity and boundaries. Through this process they jointly discover their own individual biases and misperceptions of each other's faith. They also sharpen existing skills, as well as gain new interreligious peacebuilding skills. In an interreligious dialogue process, the fellows share their concerns and fears about publicly cooperating with others from different faith groups, especially on controversial issues. Many of them launch new initiatives in their communities to promote respect for interreligious diversity and coexistence. Despite the impressive success in launching over 70 new and diverse initiatives in over than 22 different countries, like other peacebuilding programs, the challenge remains how to make such programs part of the institutional fabric of each of the five major religions represented in the Fellows Programme).

A similar challenge also exists in policy making circles (the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), African Union (AU), various governments agencies, etc.) as to whether the recent intense increase in policy makers' interest in engaging religious agencies to support their fight against violent extremism will become an institutional commitment to work with the religious agencies on other issues. The skeptics among interreligious peacebuilding practitioners warn against the instrumentalization of interreligious peacebuilding by policy makers. They caution against situations in which the engagement of religious leaders is utilized mainly to serve policy makers' narrow political interests, while isolating religious leaders from other policy issues, instead of building long-term partnerships that can contribute to the transformation of the troubled and complicated

relationships between secular and religious stakeholders and their respective institutions.

Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize the importance of the recent mutual collaboration and outreach to interreligious and intrareligious agencies of peace and dialogue by policy makers (reflected in the numerous conferences, training workshops, research projects being held or launched every month around the globe in concerted efforts to counter violent extremism and prevent violence in the name of religion). This can indeed develop into an historical shift in the national and global strategies of responding to social, economic, and political problems, especially if interreligious peacebuilding agencies are capable of sustaining their efforts and engaging wider audiences beyond their already committed followers. ■

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By Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Professor of Peace and Conflict Resolution at American University Washing ton DC, USA, Senior Advisor at the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID)

Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer, of the International Peace and Conflict Resolution program, served as Director of the Peacebuilding and Development Institute, at American University, Washington DC. He has conducted interreligious conflict resolution training and interfaith dialogue workshops in conflict areas around the world, including Palestine, Israel, Egypt, Northern Ireland, the Philippines (Mindanao), and Sri Lanka. In addition to his articles and publications, Professor Abu-Nimer is the co-founder and co-editor of the Journal of Peacebuilding and Development. He is also the founder and president of Salam Institute for Peace and Justice. Professor Abu-Nimer serves as Senior Advisor to KAICIID.