

Inter-faith Dialogue's role in International Meditation

Beginning a dialogue with someone stems from a genuine desire to learn about the other person or the recognition that there is a need for open communication. Inter-faith Dialogue (ID) is a topic of striking interest and one which merits increasingly more attention in today's world. As history has repeatedly demonstrated, religion has often been used to fuel hatred and prejudice between peoples. In many situation religious differences may not have been the primary reason for conflict, but they have all too often contributed to and been used as a scapegoat for discord. ID recognizes that there is a clear need to bring the peoples of the world together to learn about and understand one another. It attempts to change the paradigm that religions are based purely on the exclusion of others and aims to unite those of different faiths in a dialogue. Dr. David Smock, the director of the Program on Religion and Peacemaking at the U.S. Institute of Peace states "ID is a uniquely religious approach to peacemaking, and is particularly suited to countries torn by religious conflict"¹. This lack of understanding is what can lead to miscommunication between people or perhaps a mistrust of others. Without this mutual trust, understanding and respect it will become increasingly difficult for people to live together in harmony. What is evident is that there is an underlying need and desire for a pluralistic society which acknowledges and values the differences between all

¹ Dr. David Smock. "Religion and International Peacemaking" The 2000 Perlmutter Lecture on Ethnic Conflict from the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

peoples. In ^{my speech} ~~this paper~~ I shall explore the need for Interfaith Dialogue as well as the how it can act as a catalyst for international mediation and problem solving.

Need for Interfaith Dialogue

It would an understatement to say that interfaith dialogue is necessary in today's world. All over the planet we hear repeated stories of conflicts between peoples of different religions and cultures. One telling sign of these disputes was posited in Samuel Huntington's book The Clash of Civilizations in which he described a monumental conflict between Christianity and Islam. The book predicted that the two "cultures" which both have a Judeo-Christian root would not be able to coexist in the same geographic area and would ultimately erupt in some massive religious war on a seemingly global scale. The book is an apocalyptic account of how religion is often used to make sweeping generalizations about certain peoples, cultures and religions. What this book presuppose is that on some ethereal level Christianity and Islam are not capable of coexisting. This is completely disproved by history because we know in fact people of both religions had lived in peace for thousands of years. This book underestimates the ability of peoples of both religions to come together and discuss their differences.

ID can be an effective starting point for some religious conflicts. There are obvious differences between religions but by using ID as a vehicle for understanding many key differences can be address and discussed in a non-threatening atmosphere which can encourage understanding. One key aspect of

ID which was posited by Sir Sigmund Sternberg, winner of the Templeton Foundation Prize for Progress in Religion, was that “true dialogue is as much about listening as talking - and when you listen you will hear a lot of pain. Dialogue is meant to assuage that pain, even to heal it. Interfaith dialogue, though, reaches beyond the physical pain. It touches the soul.” ID attempts to reach out to people of all faith and goes beyond the conflicts that they are currently facing. Given the recent rise in religious tensions in many parts of the world, there is an urgent need for this type of dialogue.

How Interfaith Dialogue can aid with International Mediation

Interfaith Dialogue is one way in which the key conflicts between people of different religions can be used as a starting point for deeper discussions. Many of the problems between peoples of different faiths have to do with seeing the other group or groups as outsiders. Since there is little knowledge about the other group of people this leads to fear or perhaps unwarranted contempt for the others but in fact is really based on a severe lack of knowledge. By using the channel of ID we can help people to build bridges between faiths and learn about one another. By uncloaking is mystery, people will have the opportunity to see what actually exists in their neighbor's life. Rather than viewing it as an actually “Clash of Civilizations”, we can see it for what it is, subtle differences between peoples who previously had lived in harmony for thousands of years.

One of the success stories of ID is the international mediation and peacemaking performed by Sant'Egidio, a Catholic organization based in Rome.

Some of the conflicts in which Sant'Egidio was involved include Kosovo, Algeria, Burundi and the Congo. Its most notable success comes from its role as the key facilitator in the peace agreement that ended the Mozambique civil war in 1992. Dr. Smock mentions that "Many elements of its approach to peacemaking are not explicitly religious, but its religious motivation is always evident. As a Christian foundation, Sant'Egidio believes that peacemaking is an essential part of its mission, requiring of it patience and commitment to long-term engagement." By using the vehicle of ID, this Christian organization is reaching out to other faiths to help promote peace in many areas of the world. What also should be mentioned about Sant'Egidio is that the regions in which it is pursuing peace and international mediation are very troubled areas of the world. The organization is making great efforts to perform such duties in such difficult parts of the world.

Another important aspect of ID is that it can lead to international mediation on an individual as well as an inter-group or global scale. Professor Muhammad Abu-Nimer asserts that it has; "deeper spiritual connection; it becomes the main source for the individual's commitment to social change, peace work and taking risk to confront one's evil." Professor Abu-Nimer believes that it is this connection on a deeper level that makes an ID encounter so different from a secular or inter-ethnic encounter. It "affirms his position that a deep sense of motivation that originates from religious identity".

Additionally, ID could be used on a larger scale to bridge the divide between individuals. Rabbi Gopin mentions that "It would be powerful indeed if groups of Arabs and Jews, perhaps aided by sympathetic Western Christians—

who also have a key role in causing and healing this tragic conflict— would begin, in detail, to mourn what was lost. They must begin to visit the dead together, to bury them together in symbolic ways, to memorialize lost lives and lost homes. One cannot really escape the morass of deadly conflict and discover life again after death without this kind of healing of memory."² The resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one of the most pressing in the world, truly must come from both sides and both could potentially arrive at a solution by engaging in continued dialogue.

One Solution Yet not the only Solution

One important aspect of interfaith dialogue that must be stressed is that it can act as a partial solution yet should not be confused with being the only solution. Many of the disputes between different religions have to do with distrust or dislike of people of other religions. While Interfaith Dialogue can assist in tearing down these false images and help to build trust between peoples, it is far from the political or social solutions needed in many parts of the world. It would be foolish to disguise this forum, which is an opportunity to understand different people, as a panacea for the deeper issues. This movement merely encourages the mutual respect between peoples of all faiths. With this established level of respect, people can proceed to the next level and truly understand the needs of others. Interfaith Dialogue sets the ground work and can act as a catalyst for further action.

² Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa "Promoting Interfaith Dialogue: Best Practices" from Interfaith Media Centre (MCDF), Kaduna, Nigeria.

Another aspect of ID which also should be mentioned is its relative usefulness. Unfortunately, ID organization will need a lot of support if they are going to be successful. The existing organizations in zones of conflict are often too weak to launch demanding initiatives. As Dr. Smock mentions "Moreover, religious organizations do not command the diplomatic or military leverage that official diplomacy, whether bilateral or multilateral, can provide"³ So while ID can be used to assist with some problems, it is not the only solution.

Conclusion

In conclusion we can see that there is a pressing need for ID in the world today. With the monumental problems that have been introduced, it is clear that there needs to be an established common ground which will allow people to develop a common respect for one another. ID allows for that channel of communication to be opened between different peoples. By using it as a starting point, respect can develop and then that can lead to a more empathetic understanding of the others' plight. While we are quite hopeful of the prospect of using ID as a tool to open communication it is merely one channel which can be used to help work on the deeper political and social problems facing different peoples. We should stress that living together in harmony is one of the primary goal of ID and its organizations are working toward this goal in its missions throughout the world.

³Dr. David Smock