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The Contribution of Interfaith Dialogue Towards a Culture of Peace

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Dialogue among the adherents of the major world religions has always taken place, especially, but not only, among the Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Excellent examples of this may be found in the midst of shared histories where we are more often presented with a record of conflicts. The high points must be enormously rich and creative interactions that took place in medieval Islamic Spain and Southern Italy and at various times in places as far apart as: Central Asia, Baghdad, Delhi, Cairo and in the Ottoman Empire.

But as a movement with its institutions and full-time professionals, its networks of activists, inter-religious dialogue is primarily a phenomenon of the 20th century. It is the pressures of this century, which have demanded that we mobilize the resources of the great religions for dialogue and peace, purposes that have oftentimes historically seemed marginal. In India, the realization, that a reasonably unified independence would only be achieved if the religions could work together, provided a significant impetus towards the cooperation of religious leaders and institutions.

The horrors of Nazi genocide in Europe spurred post-war generations towards a radical view of traditional Christian attitudes towards Judaism. From regional tragedies, like the wars in Lebanon and in former Yugoslavia, have come determined efforts across the social spectrum to disarm religious hatreds. The resurgence of political radicalism, motivated by religion and expressed in religious terms in the last couple of decades, has spread renewed awareness and experience of destructive inter-religious relations among people on all continents.

Above all, the necessity of responding to the processes of globalization and the threats of ecological disaster has brought about a fast-growing realization that religions have relevance only to the extent they can work together for humanity and put aside the contentions of the past. Globalization and migration mean that no community can any longer live in isolation from others. Even in countries where there is only one religion, religious pluralism enters through migration, travel, trade, and the media, including the Internet.

It is in reaction to such processes that movements for inter-religious dialogue have gained growing support. After 1945, Jewish-Christian dialogue found space in a variety of forums, some of which grew into independent agencies and NGOs, or were incorporated into existing religious institutions both nationally and internationally. The settlement of Muslim immigrants in Europe led, in some cases, to the development of a Jewish-Christian-Muslim (JCM) movement with regular programs and events, now in place for several decades.

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During the 1960's and 70's, the World Council of Churches and the Vatican embarked on major moves towards inter-religious dialogue, moves that have made their mark extensively on the whole Christian Church and thence on the societies in which the Churches are located. Virtually every main national and international Muslim organization, as well as many prominent Muslim leaders and scholars, have unequivocally expressed their support for the principle of dialogue and have also actively engaged in moving such dialogue forward. It was noteworthy that virtually every speaker of the 10th Annual General Islamic Conference hosted by the Egyptian Ministry

of Religious Affairs in July 1998, spoke of the priority of a dialogue with the Christian West in the coming century. And, in the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP), all the major world religions have been well represented, with the Buddhists and Hindus playing as active a role as have the Abrahamic faiths.

However, the positive aspect is only part of the picture; and, to assume that the way forward is easy, would be as naïve as it would be to assume that anything like the majority of religious adherents, have been convinced. People of religion are readily tempted into presenting religion as offering solutions in spite of all the historical and contemporary evidence that religions are perhaps often a source of conflict. Or, if not the cause, they are easily mobilized into destructive participation when a conflict starts brewing out of social, economic or political causes. Lebanon, Yugoslavia, the Caucasus and the Indian subcontinent are immediately obvious and recent examples.

The problem arises because adherents of religions, people of faith, are also members of communities with shared material interests and emotional identities, which in some circumstances, can be perceived to be literally matters of life and death *and* are often matters that determine comfort and security. Of course, the religious professionals—the priests, rabbis, imams and theologians—are also members of such communities and share these interests and fears. In places where we have recently seen religious conflict, it is therefore hardly surprising that religious institutions have sometimes become actively involved on one or the other side.

This problem sheds light on two areas regarding dialogue among the religions. Firstly, one begins to understand why so many regard it as a threat. People and institutions whose position relies on their recognized right to speak authoritatively in areas of religious teaching and practice see their positions under challenge, and communities feel inherited certainties being taken away. Secondly, this very situation accounts for the sense of urgency being expressed by supporters of religious dialogue.

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In past centuries, religious exclusiveness caused enough suffering locally. Today, however, clashes between religions have global repercussions.

So how can the task of dialogue make headway, so that religions can become the effective forces for peace which so many of their adherents proclaim them to be? In my view, the task has to be achieved along two parallel interactive tracks with the one overriding goal, namely, that of taking religion as a cause of conflict out of political and communal relations and reinserting it as a factor for reconciliation and communal development. Both tracks must be pursued simultaneously at all levels, from the street to the palace, so to speak, with universities, religious institutions and the media having particular roles to play along that spectrum.

The first track has to do with the urgency of defusing current and potential community conflicts. Here a number of different projects take place and can be multiplied and developed. In some countries local interfaith groups are making a noticeable contribution, while in others inter-religious involvement in development has shown the potential for success. Political action against discrimination in employment and access to education, health and social welfare, etc., are other routes by which people of different religious commitments have come together around a shared sense of justice.

Urgency requires that the media—printed and electronic—be persuaded to look beyond the immediately sensational. We have spent decades in the condemning of the media for their sensationalism, and for their lack of responsibility and dependence upon one or the other center of power and in the making of recommendations for improvement of their behavior. This is easy, precisely because the media so often *are* guilty as charged. We seem to have achieved virtually nothing by condemnation and recommendation. Some of us have sought to recognize and cooperate: recognize those newspapers, journalists or program makers who actually want to act with a degree of responsibility and impartiality; cooperate with them by involving them in our work, engaging them in conversation, helping them to understand what they