

Introduction

Interfaith and interreligious relations have progressed steadily and impressively in the last one hundred years or so. In some ways advances remain confined to a narrow community of interfaith activists. Surely some of the language and attitudes have filtered down to the grass roots where it is not at all uncommon to hear voices of tolerance and respect across religious lines, often even more eloquent, plain, and comprehensible than the nuanced contortions of interfaith professionals. (In defense of the professional, they do have to acknowledge greater complexity than the average man or woman on the street.) While it is possible to attribute changes in religious attitudes at the grass roots toward the more broad and liberal successes of the interfaith movement, one must also factor in the possibility that massive and far-reaching trends toward secularization world-wide have contributed equally. It may be the case that for many, religion has become a matter of little or no consequence. As a result, they might sound enlightened in their breadth and embrace of all belief, rather than merely ignorant about religion, or generally disinterested in it.

It is important to note also that from a *fundamental* perspective, interfaith progress has remained superficial in many ways. Interfaith visionaries have failed to challenge the deepest lines of division among religions, leaving historical and theological disunion intact. As a result contest and combat among the major religions persist. Religious battles and religious imperialism still rage beneath the surface and behind the scenes even among those established religions well-represented in interfaith circles. Institutions protecting and perpetrating an agenda based on power simply behave in this way. The religious establishment is no exception. Just because the commodity in question happens to be religion, it does not mean that the leaders of these “corporations” are religious.

In addition to the interfaith project pulling up short and leaving secretly perpetrated religious strife alive and well, two other persistent problems in the world make it difficult for interfaith progress

to elicit feelings of hope. One is the intensification and expansion of militant extremism in many religious traditions, and the other is the ever-presence of militarism and conflict in human affairs as a whole. These together make it difficult for lay people to feel encouraged about interfaith progress. People are likely to dismiss the significance of interfaith progress if it cannot speak to the preeminent religious challenge of the day (militant extremism), and furthermore is seemingly unrelated to the pressing matter of war and escalating violence in the world. By present count, there are 32 violent conflicts in the world today ranging from violent insurgencies to full blown war between nations. A layperson learning of interfaith progress and perhaps of the great many interfaith projects and initiatives large and small might well be underwhelmed and question the value of the effort.

It is still widely held that many or most conflicts involve religious narrowness and hatreds. The insistence by “experts” that religious components of war and conflict are really a *misuse* of religion often does very little to alter the view that religions contribute to (or even create) conflict and violence. Those who are willing to accept such subtle distinctions about what “really” is religion and what is not, are *still* likely to remain disinterested in reports about better inter-religious relations if they cannot find a relationship between these alleged improvements and the unyielding expansion of violence and terror in the human experience. The world remains ablaze in horror and conflict, and much of the worst of it is done in the *name* of religion, however errant these religious views are purported to be.

This real or perceived disconnect between the world of interfaith activity and the pressing problems of our time guides the selection of articles for this present issue of *Dialogue and Alliance*. The matter of the failing to penetrate the hard edge of real religious division, especially among the major power brokers in the religious world will be addressed in future issues. This time we look at how the world of interfaith can break out of the confines of its increasingly sequestered community and language world and grow to become a vigorous player with clear relevance for those religious issues and conflict areas which naturally occupy everyone’s attention. Again, these questions are: can interfaith advances have a clear impact on

militancy and extremism in religion, and can it have an impact on war and conflict in general?

This issue is divided into two parts, each designed to address these issues of religious militancy and extremism, and warfare and conflict at large. The first part continues our recent focus on the Middle East, especially Israel and Palestine, and the second half focuses on how religion and interreligious projects can collaborate more effectively with political and secular partners in the pursuit of peace.

The Middle East section starts off with observations from Walid Sadik, one-time member of the Israeli Knesset. The special contribution from Sadik is his perspective as an Israeli and a Palestinian. From this vantage point, he presents accurate and sympathetic understanding of both sides. As he says, he “can testify to the existence of deep ignorance, mistrust, and lack of sympathy from one side to the other.” He speaks of the “huge psychological barrier,” the “deadlock.” Mr. Sadik takes us through a number of clear and insightful observations and proposals for breaking the deadlock. They range from internal matters of spirit and attitudes of negotiators, to external matters relating to children’s education and other practical concerns. It is a valuable paper for students and activists of the Middle East.

Imam Aquil writes on the Middle East question from a vantage point more exclusively coupled with the religious traditions of the region. Aquil integrates a broad range of scriptures from the religions of the book and extends these to introduce direct applications to contemporary and practical reality in the Holy Land. This article is imaginative and helpful insofar as it intuits and communicates an inherent interdependence of these great religions spiritually, in piety, and in practical application to the pursuit of peace in the Holy Land.

The paper of Mrs. Oya Talat, first lady of Turkish Cyprus is a penetrating and impassioned look at Israeli-Palestinian relations. So many aspects of her unique vantage point are what cause this paper to stand out from the voluminous corpus of Middle East reflection. It must be said plainly that the viewpoint of woman (mother, wife, sister, daughter) writing explicitly and consciously as woman on

the wars men fight carries a much needed power of indictment in its analysis. Additionally, Talat speaks from a leadership position grounded in an intractable, historical, conflict and stand-off bearing many similarities to that of the Holy Land (namely Cyprus). Both the similarities to the Holy Land and the geographic proximity, strongly inform her observations and reflections. Tragically, so much of scholarly reflection on the Middle East steers clear of the emotion and passion required to more accurately grasp the situation. Thankfully Talat moves away from the artificial distance that renders so much analysis sterile, emotionally barren, and thus lacking in insight. Talat's own biography and sacrificial and courageous devotion to peace results in her presenting a number of valuable and practical recommendations. Talat cites at length two press documents that I feel are too one-sided, fail to comprehend the full picture regarding the relationship between Israel and Palestine, and lack the balance and dialogical tenor preferred for the pages of this publication.

The fourth paper in this section is a must-read, a paper which alone makes the annual subscription price to *Dialogue and Alliance* "worth the price of admission." Bennet and Kunkel have crafted a careful, thorough, and systematic inquiry into what is probably the single most pressing doctrinal issue in the religious world today. The presentation is exalted by the presence of both theological, doctrinal, *and* historical contexts for understanding. We are proud to bring this article forth and fully expect it to contribute prominently in that contemporary debate which must find resolution if we hope to see a peaceful world emerge.

The second section of this issue contains papers which discuss the relationship between the interfaith establishment and those secular institutions (including governments) without which talk of peace remains idle chatter.

The first paper is by Marcus Braybrooke, universally accepted as a pioneer, a founding father, and a sound and reliable historian of the interfaith movement. Histories of the 20th and 21st centuries will include both the writing and the path-breaking vision and work of Mr. Braybrooke. In this brief paper, in elegant, readable prose Braybrooke provides a clear, incisive, and illuminating tour across

the surface of modern interfaith history. The key categories around which this history is designed are; (1) the United Nations and (2) the concept of Globalization. By choosing to recount the 50 year history of interreligious endeavor as related to the United Nations and the trend toward Globalization, Braybrooke implicitly elevates the relationship between the spiritual and the secular requisites for peace. Braybrooke shows the history of efforts which, in essence, tend to bridge this spiritual-secular divide, and offers discerning recommendations for progress in this arena.

Leonor Tomero's paper is quite poignant, and in many ways seizes the juncture which links secular and spiritual human affairs. She writes on religious freedom which is often mistaken to be a field distinct from interfaith. Careful reflection on the concept and field of religious freedom, however, reveals an important part of it to be that subset of interfaith which deals directly with questions of politics and the state. The term religious freedom commonly brings to mind questions pertaining to the free exercise of religion vis a vis political policy, and the actions of the state. What people fail to consider, however, is that in almost all cases, issues pertaining to religious freedom involve a majority (or established) religion, and minority religions. If you count atheism and secular humanism as forms of faith, then all questions of religious freedom involve interfaith dynamics. The small but incredibly important distinction is that in the case of religious freedom, the faiths in dialogue bring into the equation state power. In far too many cases, majority religions use state power to act in ways that violate basic interfaith tenets of mutual respect and collaboration under God for the good of all. (This habit of suppressing minority religions by large powerful religions is also done by proxy when newly-emerging nations get pressured by powerful international religious bodies on how to establish their religious laws.)

Tomero argues powerfully that religious freedom (and, by implication, the interfaith ideal) is the single most important human freedom. She argues that all hopes for justice, prosperity, and equitable social, economic, educational, and other standards rest preeminently and irrevocably in religious freedom. Tyranny, violence, and repressive state apparatuses are the direct result of, and dependent upon a

central religious and political act which denies freedom of religion. Again, this matter is approached most commonly as a function of state “church” relations. A glance just beneath the surface, however, reveals that it this freedom or lack thereof is grounded in religious and ideological warfare when a dominant religion or belief system exploits control of state power and uses it for religious battle and imperialism. For a clear and compelling account of the cardinal requisite for religious freedom as the cornerstone of peace and freedom, Tomero’s article is vital.

My own article, “Peace and the Future of Politics,” analyzes the reality of peace-oriented, political leaders from a religious and NGO perspective, and offers a series of concrete proposals to both groups as to how these communities can intensify their cooperation and enhance their effectiveness for the realization of shared ideals. The paper in its initial drafts generated interest from leaders in many sectors.

Richard Schebera has written a careful piece arguing in the context of Christian debate in favor of adding World Religions to the core religious curriculum. It is an interesting argument, which serves as a good reminder for us all. Schebera points out the many valuable benefits interfaith dialogue provides, not only for social and peace prospects but, importantly, for enriching the sweet and glorious ministrations given us by our respective “mother-faiths,” Christianity in Schebera’s case. His argument must continue to be made as long as narrow and parochial blueprints for legitimate religious behavior and education patterns persist.

I am proud of this issue. There are a number of very important articles here, which abet our efforts for peace. We are deeply grateful for your continued support. We are proud that the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) has selected *Dialogue and Alliance* for its Serials collection, which is available online. It was selected amongst the top ten of 650 publications in the field of Religion and Theology by an ecumenical clergy focus group. We wish to pause in light of that to honor the many editors and contributors who made this possible. Please recommend us to your friends, libraries, and institutions, and please send us your work for publication.