

Engaging across divides: interfaith dialogue for peace and justice

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'There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.' Dr Hans Küng, 31 March 2005, at the opening of an exhibit on the world's religions at Santa Clara University

In a bright air-conditioned room outside of Polonnoruwa in north-central Sri Lanka, Sarasi, a small Hindu Tamil woman with a long braid of hair falling down the back of her dark pink *kurti*, stood before a diverse group of religious men. Many were Buddhist monks from the Sinhala majority.

Sri Lanka today faces a vulnerable transition, after decades of bloody civil conflict fought between the government and the armed Tamil separatist movement, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The defeat of the LTTE and the end of the fighting occurred only months before the meeting took place. For three days, Sarasi observed these religious figures participate in facilitated interfaith dialogue addressing reconciliation, justice and coexistence in Sri Lanka. Over meals, she herself engaged in conversation with participants on these issues – all of them of central importance and eliciting strong emotions.

Haltingly and softly, Sarasi expressed to the meeting how powerful it was to have witnessed religious figures, revered social actors in Sri Lanka's deeply faithful society, engage across traditional religious and ethnic divides. It matters, Sarasi stated, because religion holds symbolic power in our (Sri Lankan) divides, despite the common ground and mutual respect between our religions. Sarasi spoke of her Hindu community's respect for the Buddha. He is a teacher to us, she asserted.

'In our temples in the North, you will find the Buddha alongside Hindu gods and goddesses. We revere him for his wisdom and his compassion. And yet last year, when a Buddhist statue was erected in the middle of Killinochi [a town inhabited by Tamils and the most recent home-base of the LTTE], we knew that it was a political statement. There are no Buddhists living in Killinochi. This statue's arrival felt like the Sinhala Buddhist community asserting its claim to this town. It sparked suspicion and anger, fuelled mistrust in the government and the intentions of the Sinhalese in the newly captured north of the country.'

Sarasi, crying now, stopped speaking and the room was silent for a beat, before a young monk raised his hand. The monk noted that it hurt his heart that the figure of Buddha could elicit this sort of fear of domination and might be used to express this sort of sentiment. We have to understand this perception, the monk said, and ensure that our religions fuel compassion and respect, not fear and domination.

The exchange was remarkable for its honesty. For the first days of the gathering, the conversation had been tentative – the participants seeking not to offend others, and so avoiding sensitive subjects, exhibiting denial and defensiveness. By the third and fourth days, as this exchange demonstrated, the participants had found the means to speak to each other with honesty, and to respond with compassion and acknowledgement rather than defensiveness, seeking to understand the perspectives and experiences of other communities. The result was a tentative relationship of trust that the group pledged to build on, in order to identify and mobilize around issues of justice.

Interfaith dialogue is increasingly offered as a concrete means to bridge inter-communal divides, build coalitions, and challenge the social-psychological dynamics that can fuel warfare and injustice. Interfaith dialogue can be a particularly useful tool for building awareness among majority communities about the experiences and needs of minorities, and for bringing simmering tensions to the surface and addressing them in a potentially constructive manner. It can also be useful as a means to prevent conflict by strengthening relationships between communities and thereby decreasing the potential for communal divides to become fault-lines of violence. Particularly in places where religion is fuelling inter-communal violence and exclusion, interfaith dialogue, when strategically designed and carefully implemented, can be used alongside other peace- and justice-making techniques to challenge and transform dynamics driving injustice and conflict. Interfaith dialogue can strengthen cultural and institutional commitments to religious, ethnic, racial and communal pluralism. This chapter will seek to highlight the opportunities offered by interfaith dialogue, as well as its limits, as a means to raise awareness about minority rights and as a tool for conflict prevention.

What is meant by interfaith dialogue? Certainly there is a great deal of informal interfaith conversa-

tion that occurs in environments in which those of different faiths can engage with one another in routine and ordinary ways – at work, in the market, at social gatherings and so forth. These everyday encounters across faith-divides are valuable but not equivalent to the practice of interfaith dialogue, as it is used for peace- and justice-making. When employed as a tool or strategic practice, interfaith dialogue refers to facilitated discussions on specific topics held between members of different faith communities, with an expressed objective or objectives.

These objectives can include building mutual understanding and acceptance, correcting stereotypes, and building relationships in order to address common problems. The goal is not to convert, to assert the superiority of one faith or to conflate different religions (diluting them into one common denominator), but to appreciate similarities and differences between religions and for participants to understand how their faith shapes their positions on particular issues. In other words, participants in these dialogues use their religious faith and tradition not only to build relationships, but as doorways into discussions about central social and political concerns driving inter-communal conflict. The purpose is not to debate in the sense that one side seeks to ‘win’ an argument by aggressively challenging or seeking to delegitimize the viewpoint of another, but rather to interact respectfully with the purpose of hearing and understanding the other’s perspective, and so finding ways forward.

In the United States, there was a surge in the popularity of interfaith dialogue following the events of 11 September 2001. This serves as a poignant example of the positive influence of this practice in promoting peaceful and respectful coexistence between religious majority and minority groups living side by side, particularly in moments of social and political tension. The minority Muslim community reached out to other religious communities in the aftermath of the crisis, particularly the majority Christian community, opening up their mosques to visitors, inviting those of other religions to *iftar* dinners during Ramadan, and inviting dialogue as a means to educate communities on Islam. The purpose was to combat popular false interpretations and fears of Islam, and to transcend the isolation of many immigrant communities. This was done in response, in part, to verbal and physical attacks against Islam, Muslims and mosques in the US fol-

lowing 9/11. It was also done out of a sheer desire to articulate an alternative Islam to that espoused by those Muslims who had orchestrated and carried out the events of 9/11. On the part of the participating non-Muslim communities, there was oftentimes a genuine interest in learning more about Islam following the attacks. Copies of the Qur’an flew off the bookshelves, and local churches and synagogues reached out to mosques in their community, seeking to engage and to understand.

According to the Professor of Catholic Thought and Inter-Religious Dialogue at Temple University, Leonard Swidler, interfaith dialogue operates in three areas: ‘the practical, where we collaborate to help humanity; the depth or “spiritual” dimension, where we attempt to experience the partner’s religion or ideology “from within”; [and] the cognitive, where we seek understanding [of] the truth’. Through dialogue and coming to understand one another, religious pluralism may take root that allows religious traditions to coexist and for people of faith not to feel threatened by the religious beliefs of those belonging to other communities. At the heart of this is a presumption that, through sustainable and respectful relationships based on dialogue and engagement, conflicts resulting from or exacerbated by fear, disrespect and misunderstanding between communities are less likely to occur, and, when they do, are less likely to devolve into violence. For example, in his study *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Ashutosh Varshney analysed the inverse correlation between the existence of integrated Muslim–Hindu networks for civic engagement, such as professional organizations, and the degree of inter-ethnic violence in India. It showed that in Indian cities where Muslims and Hindus have opportunities to engage regularly with one another, there is less likelihood of inter-communal violence breaking out in the face of political, economic or social disruptions.

Effective interfaith dialogue moves participants beyond superficial levels of engagement, namely mere platitudes seeking to avoid offending anyone or a series of speeches offered, between which there is little conversation, and into a more profound interaction in which participants can honestly reflect on and struggle together over potentially sensitive and provocative issues. At this level of discussion, participants tackle not only the common views shared between the traditions of different faith com-

munities, but also the different positions that have been reached through ethical and theological or philosophical discernment. Participants are pushed to observe how their behaviour is or is not living up to their ideals, and the effect of their actions on others, which may differ from their intentions. Exclusive and/or competing truth claims are addressed and understood. At this level, participants come to understand not only other faiths, but their own more intimately. Real personal and communal transformation can take place. After all, as Cardinal Francis Arinze has said, ‘Religion is one of the deepest motive forces of human action. Our religious convictions, attitudes, sensitivities and prejudices do influence to a great extent our approach to the questions of the day.’ In other words, when tapping into individuals’ religious beliefs and sentiments, peace-makers work at a level that is highly persuasive with respect to the determination of one’s behaviour and attitudes. When dialogue goes well, allowing participants to engage with other perspectives and reach greater mutual respect and understanding, significant positive change can result.

Beyond the specific expressed goals of individual interfaith dialogues (e.g. environmental care, women’s human rights, etc.), wider and more cumulative dialogues are increasingly espoused by governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic institutions and religious communities, as an important means to promote pluralism, and to decrease bias and bigotry that can lead to hate crimes, violence and discrimination.

The governments of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, among other governments in the Arab world, hosted large international interfaith dialogue meetings in 2009. The two countries also have national institutions mandated to promote interfaith dialogue, including Jordan’s Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies and Saudi Arabia’s Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, which helped facilitate the launch of ‘A Common Word’ initiative, a global Muslim/Christian dialogue. US President Barack Obama spoke favourably of interfaith dialogue in his 2009 speech in Cairo, addressing the Islamic world. The UN General Assembly Resolutions 58/128, 59/23, 60/10 and 61/221 all call for inter-religious dialogue and cooperation as a necessary means to promote a global culture of peace. Other UN fora, including the Tripartite

Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and the Alliance of Civilizations, confirm the worth of interfaith dialogue as a tool for peace-building. Similarly, the Asian-Europe Meeting (ASEM) has incorporated inter-religious dialogue as part of its work and has issued several statements over the past years with recommendations to participant states for actions to promote peaceful religious coexistence. In October 2007, the then Organisation for the Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Chairman-in-Office, Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos, asserted that open dialogue among people of all faiths and cultures is ‘necessary to combat intolerance and discrimination against Muslims’, an issue of current debate in Europe.

This embrace of interfaith dialogue stems from a collective recognition that ignorance and fear can often stymie healthy inter-communal relationships and undermine policies seeking to promote pluralism. Interfaith dialogue, then, can be a means to bolster policies protecting and promoting minority rights and multiculturalism in diverse societies. If pluralism is understood to be an environment in which diverse religions live side by side with mutual respect and open engagement (in contrast to mere religious tolerance, in which a religious community ‘puts up with’ other religions but does not necessarily respect and engage with them, or to strongly secular societies in which religious practice and identity are disrespected or even suppressed), then interfaith dialogue serves to encourage pluralistic environments by facilitating individual contact and relationship-building, allowing participants to transcend doctrinal differences. All may not agree with one another at the conclusion of an interfaith dialogue session, but ideally most participants will understand and appreciate the different viewpoints of others. Most importantly, participants may recognize one another’s dignity and so be subsequently committed to finding ways to live peaceably together and to develop rights-respecting policies that do not infringe on the world view and practices of particular communities (as long as those practices do not cause harm to others). This can go a long way in challenging negative stereotypes and biases held by the participants themselves, and will also, ideally, grant them the ability to recognize and confront negative stereotypes and biases in their communities. This is important in so far as negative stereotyping and bias can create an environment in



Left: The hospital chaplain visits a patient at Nazareth Hospital where Christian, Jewish and Muslim doctors work together. *Robin Hammond/Panos.*

violations are morally legitimized as necessary to achieve a sacred end). Thus, a political dispute is transformed into a religious activity in popular consciousness. In response to these dynamics, scholars such as Appleby acknowledge the ambivalence about violence inherent in many religions, and call for programmes that can tap the sentiment that religion manifests and apply that zeal towards peace-building rather than warfare. To do so, he argues for greater resources in religious education being applied towards moral and philosophical commitments to pro-social values, including peace and tolerance. Through greater understanding of the religious commitments to peace that can be found in all the major faith traditions, Appleby speaks of creating a movement of peace and non-violent resistance committed to these values, motivated by spiritual sentiment, and able to counter violent or unjust religious movements. In so doing, religious leaders can become social critics, advocates of the oppressed and monitors of rising conflict.

Scholar Marc Gopin presents religion's role in conflict as a means by which individuals in a faith community interpret their reality and the struggles they face. Gopin draws on his experience working in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) as a participant in conflict resolution processes that include religious leaders from all sides of the conflict. In the face of extraordinary suffering and insecurity, many individuals use religious beliefs, stories, values and sentiment to understand their situation, define their interests and goals, and mobilize continued energy for their own struggles.

Gopin recognizes that the crux of the greatest conflicts in the modern world is the age-old tension between integration (and globalization) and maintaining uniqueness. He argues that a peaceful religion is one that maintains a solid sense of identity alongside and with respect for other traditions. As such, an element of religious peace-building should entail finding the resources within each religion to promote this form of identity as opposed to an exclusivist and violent religious identity. This leads to the suggestion for peace-makers (both religious and secular) to immerse themselves in the traditions

and world views of those in conflict, in order to discover how to engage and encourage more positive interpretations. This can guide warring communities towards understanding, through the language of religion, how the enemy can be seen afresh, in a manner that will not collapse the entire meaning or structure of one's own faith tradition.

For both Appelby and Gopin, the key to counteracting the destructive role of religion in fuelling violence is found within the religious traditions themselves, rather than through eschewing religion in favour of purely secular practices. Essentially, they postulate that in those places where community members are interpreting their political and social realities in part or in whole through a religious lens, those seeking to promote pro-social behaviour and attitudes will need to speak to them in their own interpretive language. This will not only address them where they are at, but will also counteract and challenge exclusivist and violent interpretations. Luckily, there is a great deal of material within religious traditions that can be drawn upon for conflict prevention, resolution and reconciliation. Religious leaders, teachings, values and institutions can all be marshalled in these efforts. And this is where interfaith dialogue can be used for peace- and justice-making. Interfaith dialogue is not the only, or even the primary, form of religious peace-making (which encompasses such initiatives as religious leaders serving as local and national mediators, or conflict resolution training in religious schools and institutions), but it is perhaps the most well-known and practised.

At those times when political, social or economic tensions arise, dialogue mechanisms allow for conflicts to be addressed, misunderstandings corrected and solutions negotiated, before large-scale violence breaks out. Former Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Bondevik spoke in 2009 at a meeting of the Common Word Initiative, a global Muslim-Christian dialogue project. At this meeting, Bondevik recounted how the cartoons published in Denmark in 2005 that caused outrage amongst Muslim communities were similarly published in Norway. In Norway, however, there had been sustained interfaith dialogue in the years preceding. Bondevik noted that, when the cartoons were published, Christian, Muslim, and other religious and political leaders immediately came together, and responded to the emerging crisis constructively. This may have been part of the reason why the

which violence and oppression of particular groups can take place.

Interfaith dialogue can be used at different levels of society, targeting grassroots communities and local leaders, as well as intermediate or senior-level leadership (clergy, academics, policy-makers, etc.). It can be a one-off event but is best done as a sustained series of dialogues. The dialogues can address theological issues (e.g. the after-life, or the nature of God(s) or Truth), general social and political issues (e.g. what religions teach about human rights or governance), and pertinent shared challenges (e.g. climate change, local/national/global conflicts). Interfaith dialogue can be done for dialogue's sake (to build relationships and mutual understanding), or it can lead to collective action taken to rectify a particular social or political problem.

Interfaith dialogue as a tool for conflict prevention

Unfortunately, it is all too common that religion serves as a factor driving or legitimating violence and injustice against other communities. Exclusivist

predilections course through different faith traditions, claiming that one's own tradition is the only or best means to attain salvation; these can create a foundational basis for superiority that can subsequently be drawn upon to legitimate repressive behaviour towards others. Exclusive claims to salvation are not necessary, however, for religion to be drawn upon to justify violence. Myth, scriptural mandate and religious rhetoric used to legitimate some goal, as well as the violence used to achieve it, are dynamics witnessed in many conflict zones.

In his work, scholar Scott Appleby explores how ethno-nationalist movements seeking self-legitimation and mobilization have used religious resources. Appleby asserts that the suppression of the religious sphere in some regions during the twentieth century made faith vulnerable to usurpation by nationalist forces seeking to exploit religious symbols, language and causes. These violent nationalist forces have mobilized deep-seated religious experience and motivation and applied them to political ends, creating religious commitments to achieving political goals through whatever means necessary (i.e. ethical

controversy did not erupt into the level of crisis witnessed in Denmark, argued Bondevik, where there was less history of interfaith dialogue and therefore fewer avenues for, and less trust between, leaders from the two communities to address the crisis expeditiously before it escalated. Similarly, when the Christian community in Kirkuk, Iraq was attacked in April 2009, participants from an interfaith dialogue session held the previous month led a delegation of Sunni and Shia religious figures, who visited local Christian leaders to express remorse, and to ascertain how to reduce violence in the region and promote religious coexistence. They subsequently brought this experience and the ideas generated back to their own communities to encourage restraint and peaceful relations with Kirkuk's minority Christian community.

Interfaith dialogue and minority rights

The greatest feat interfaith dialogue can achieve is to raise awareness about the perspective and experiences of other groups, particularly minorities. In a society in which one culture or religion predominates, those belonging to it may not have adequate opportunities to connect empathically with persons from minorities and therefore to understand from their perspective the challenges and prejudices they face. Interfaith dialogue can provide this opportunity. With its light framework, ground rules, and the manner in which religion can bring to the fore issues of central importance to individuals and communities, interfaith dialogue can create a space in which to increase majority community awareness about minority concerns. In coming to empathize across traditional lines, participants often find that they have developed greater sensitivity for language and behaviour that are exclusionary, prejudiced or disrespectful, and so are more committed and able to work to eradicate it in their society.

In experiences with interfaith dialogue in Sri Lanka, many participants from all communities have come away remarking on how they have a better appreciation for how other communities have suffered as a result of the conflict, as well as institutional and social discrimination. 'I have had very little opportunity to engage with Buddhist monks in my life,' wrote one minority participant in an evaluation, following a three-day interfaith dialogue session in December 2009 that brought together 35

religious leaders from the majority Sinhala Buddhist and minority Tamil Hindu, Christian (encompassing both Sinhala and Tamil ethnicities) and Muslim communities from the south and east of the island. Because of the decades of conflict, many of these participants had not had many opportunities for meaningful interaction across their identity divides. This is especially true concerning Tamils in the north. He continued:

'As a result of these three days, I feel they have really come to hear me and to understand and appreciate my community's perspective. We cannot secure minority rights without the Sinhala, and without the support of Sinhala monks in particular. Now I begin to feel it is possible. And as for me, I now realize my belief that all Buddhist monks are anti-Tamil is not true.'

Interfaith dialogue can promote attitudinal changes. Through gaining new perspectives and information, participants' understandings change. And through experiencing in a safe environment a constructive encounter with someone from a different community, a participant's emotional response to other communities can change. These attitudinal changes are bolstered by the religious nature of the dialogues. When participants discuss their religious beliefs and spiritual experiences, they are likely to speak from a deeply rooted place, from the heart. By engaging at this level, as mentioned earlier, personal transformation is more likely to result, and so commitments to pursuing social justice and peace-making activities will be more deeply rooted.

Many religious traditions have values and teachings that can justify prejudice against other religious traditions and their followers. Interfaith dialogue can explore these teachings honestly, and consider them in light of other teachings and with respect to their implications in particular contexts. Use of interfaith dialogue in Israel and the OPT has helped participants understand how particular teachings, such as about 'chosen people', play out in that particular multi-religious context, and even critically evaluate their own traditions.

Moreover, interfaith dialogue can be used to find religious corollaries to human rights. All religious traditions have values, philosophical and theological teachings, and stories that correspond not only to individual human rights, such as the right to life or freedom of belief, but also to the philosophical

underpinnings of human rights regarding inherent individual dignity. When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) or minority rights principles are examined alongside religious teachings, participants may recognize the sources of these legal proclamations within their own cultures and traditions, and critically examine where there may be tensions between international law and religious beliefs. When conducted among grassroots communities, interfaith dialogue can in this way popularize human rights norms in the wider community, extending the work of creating norms of inter-communal respect beyond elite state officials, lawyers or diplomats.

Finally, interfaith dialogue serves the cause of minority rights by strengthening awareness of and appreciation for religious, ethnic, tribal and cultural diversity within a given society. When the practices and beliefs of minority communities within a society are not well-known, they can be viewed with suspicion and fear. At an interfaith dialogue session in northern Iraq in October 2008, a religious leader from the Yezidi community spent a great deal of energy trying to counteract persistent and historical misunderstandings about Yezidi practitioners worshipping the devil. These rumours, the participant suspected, had spurred some of the discrimination and violence the Yezidi community had faced in Iraq. At the very least, it had reduced the sympathy of those from other communities and their willingness to defend Yezidis and protect their religious tradition's integrity. The participant described the basic theological foundations of the Yezidi faith, responding to others' questions, clarifying misunderstandings and remarking on the long history of the Yezidi community in Mesopotamia. These sorts of encounters can go a long way towards helping communities gain appreciation for cultural and religious diversity in their midst.

Methodologies of successful interfaith dialogue

Talking about religion, particularly in environments in which religion has propelled conflict and violence, can be a very challenging and sensitive task. If conducted without care, interfaith dialogue can, in fact, worsen rather than ameliorate interfaith relations by bringing to the surface, but not resolving, tensions between communities. Thus it is important to

consider how to design, prepare for, and conduct an interfaith dialogue session so as to ensure its success.

- *Establish ground-rules.* Prior to delving into the dialogue itself, participants should establish a set of ground-rules that will create an atmosphere in which all feel safe to speak openly, and which encourages active and respectful listening to one another.
- *Use secondary or inclusive language.* Facilitators should model and encourage participants to use language that does not demean other religious or cultural traditions. Minority or marginalized communities, in particular, will be very sensitive to scriptural quotations that even subtly criticize other traditions. For example, in the aforementioned interfaith dialogue session in northern Iraq, a passage from the Qur'an was quoted several times by Muslims that encouraged love and respect towards others. In quoting this passage, the Muslim participants were seeking to affirm this value. However, there was a secondary message in this passage that described Islam as the 'culmination' of other faiths. When this passage was quoted, the non-Muslims in the room were made increasingly uncomfortable by this passage's secondary meaning. Finally, a participant from one of the minority religious traditions exploded in anger after this passage was repeated, much to the surprise of many of the Muslim participants. Fortunately, this moment was a ripe opportunity to build greater mutual understanding and empathy when addressed sensitively by experienced facilitators.
- *Sustainability.* One dialogue session alone will not lead to the sort of individual and communal transformation that a series of dialogue sessions can have. Trust is something that is built up over time, and often the first dialogue sessions are only able to address surface-level issues, and avoid very sensitive and important topics. As such, dialoguers should ideally set an expectation and commitment among participants for a series of dialogues.
- *Venue.* Select a site for the dialogue that will be comfortable for all participants, for example, a neutral location that is not affiliated with any one religious tradition.
- *Participants.* Interfaith dialogue must engage religious leadership at the top, middle and grassroots levels, and must target participants other than cler-

gy or traditional religious leaders. Senior religious leadership plays an important role in shaping the religious institutions and predominant religious narratives in a conflict zone (particularly in conservative religious environments), and so they are important to target for greater religious institutional change. In addition, the senior leadership often has greater access to political decision-makers, and so can leverage their influence to exert pressure on political leaders to formulate just policies which contribute to peace. However, these leaders are often more removed from grassroots communities, are less willing to engage in work they suspect may challenge their own institutions, and may not have as much time to engage personally in advocacy or grassroots peace-making work. As such, middle-level and grassroots leadership are also important to target (bearing in mind that younger or lower-level religious figures may not feel free to speak openly, especially in self-critique, with senior members present; however, if the senior leadership involved is openly engaging, this will encourage others to be active). Ordained religious figures are not the only persons who shape religious narrative and institutions however, and if those interested in conducting interfaith dialogue only target clergy, they will necessarily leave out important segments of religious communities. Women, for example, may not serve as traditional ordained religious leadership in many parts of the world, and yet they are often crucial figures shaping religious sensibilities through their active engagement in religious communities, in religious schools and in their family lives, emphasizing particular religious narratives and values to their children. The World Conference of Religions for Peace, based in New York City and affiliated with the United Nations, has a programme that specifically engages women in interfaith dialogues. In Colombia, the Religion and Peace-making Programme of the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) has worked with Catholic and Protestant women who have been energetically engaged in peace work through their churches, building ecumenical relationships that strengthen their work and broaden their network. Interestingly, building these ecumenical relationships in Colombia through dialogue and joint workshops has found greater success working with female church leaders than an earlier project that engaged senior, mostly male leadership. Interfaith

dialogue can also target youth, lay people, scholars or academics, staff of faith-based humanitarian relief, development or advocacy organizations, and so on.

- *Preparation.* In preparing for the dialogue, carefully consider who should be targeted for participation, and select a topic and structure appropriate for that group. For example, if scholars are engaged, the discussion content may delve into theological details. If young people are involved, the focus should perhaps be on personal spiritual experiences. It can also be helpful to conduct separate intra-religious preparatory sessions with each religious community prior to the inter-religious dialogue. This allows participants from each group to explore the topic to be discussed and so familiarize themselves with it, to establish places of agreement and disagreement within their own group, and to explore concerns or hopes regarding the interfaith encounter. Indeed, sometimes these intra-religious encounters can be just as important as inter-religious encounters, if not more so, since members of one tradition can disagree vehemently about what their tradition teaches on particular social or political issues.
- *Move from less sensitive to more sensitive topics.* One goal of interfaith dialogue is to strengthen participants' willingness and ability to critique their own religious group's behaviour regarding how it has lived up to or fallen short of religious values and to understand its impact on other communities. In order to get to a place where such a sensitive task can be done openly, however, there will need to be trust built among participants. As such, it is best to start with less controversial topics and then move to more difficult and sensitive areas.
- *Choose your facilitator with care.* The facilitator plays a significant role in setting the tone, expectations, process and ultimately affecting the outcome of the dialogue session. The facilitator must be someone who is trusted by all participants, can skilfully acknowledge tensions and address difficult moments that arise, can strive to rectify power imbalances, and can model active listening and constructive speaking.

The limits of interfaith dialogue

Interfaith dialogue is not a panacea for curing injustice and violent conflict. Dialogue alone can-

not transform exclusionary cultures or institutions. Interfaith dialogue must be appreciated as a tool for peace- and justice-making, to be used alongside other tools in the activist's or diplomat's toolbox, such as mediation, community mobilization or non-violent strategic action. When used in this way, it can strengthen these sorts of initiatives. For example, USIP's religious peace-making project in Sri Lanka, which has engaged over 150 Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu and Christian leaders in local conflict analysis and peace-building, has started using interfaith dialogue sessions as a way to build relationships between the members of this network, so as to strengthen the network and ensure its sustainability when facing the inevitable hurdles that will appear in the course of their advocacy work. It has had the added benefit of spurring project ideas by the members of this network for educating their own communities on Sri Lanka's other religious traditions, combating religious bias and strengthening local pluralism.

Dialogue that does not lead to transformations beyond the dialogue room can result in resentments among participants, particularly those of minority or disempowered communities. For the religious, ethnic or linguistic majority group, the gaining of empathy is often a sufficient and appreciated final goal of the dialogue sessions. Members of minorities will desire more than talk, hoping that the majority community will subsequently support efforts to gain greater justice for their communities. In the Sri Lankan case, Tamil and Muslim minority communities often expressed more scepticism about the long-term practical effects of individual interfaith dialogue initiatives than the Sinhala Buddhist majority community did, asking how dialogue would ultimately make a difference in their lived reality of fear and perceived political disenfranchisement. At the same time, as the earlier quote from the December 2009 session in Sri Lanka reveals, minority communities expressed a great deal of appreciation for being able to share their views with Sinhala Buddhist monks, a group with whom they often have little meaningful contact but who are perceived to have considerable influence on local and national political decision-making and popular Sinhala sentiment. Ultimately, when one is using interfaith dialogue as a tool for minority rights protection, one must consider how to engage with the larger community.

Conclusions

All of the world's religions have been grappling with conflict, injustice and violence for millennia. Not surprisingly, they have all sought to introduce and sanctify practices and values that can reduce these negative social dynamics. One practice, affirmed in the teachings of many religions, is compassionate engagement with those of other communities.

Interfaith dialogue alone will not end conflict and create universal justice. However, as argued in this chapter and as witnessed again and again around the world, interfaith dialogue can be a powerful tool for relationship-building and for strengthening pro-social norms as a means to amplify advocacy and activism. It can also be a powerful ally for nurturing cultural diversity and pluralism, necessary components for securing minority rights. ■