

Virtual School of “Dialogue, Democracy and Peaceful Conflict Resolution”

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE – Ingrid Vik Lesson II



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- Peacebuilding in the Western Balkans: A qualitative study of the Nansen Dialogue Project. 2003.

- Conflicting perceptions. A study of prevailing interpretations of the conflict in Macedonia among Albanian and Macedonian communities. The Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2003.

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- Islam is my father, Africa is my mother. A study of religious practice in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. University of Oslo 1999

Reflections on inter-religious dialogue efforts in post-conflict societies

“Religion is in many conflicts considered to be a part of the problem. My main idea is that it should be opposite. Religion is a part of the solution”

(Former Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik in a speech at World Council of Churches, 11.12.2003)

Introduction

The quotation above portrays well how we tend to view the role of religion and religious leaders in peace building. Somehow, we take for granted that religious leaders can always play positive roles in processes of reconciliation. In this lecture I will try to examine such perception through observation of two concrete peace and reconciliation efforts in the Western Balkans, namely the internationally initiated inter-religious councils in Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo.¹ I will argue that the establishment of inter-religious peace councils is not the only, nor necessarily the most effective way of achieving reconciliation between religious communities. Above all, the authoritative role assigned to religious leaders may be questioned. More often than not, such initiatives seem to be based on the assumption that religion is always a positive social factor and that religious leaders embody their community's best moral values.

Finally, I will highlight some preconditions that need to be in place if positive achievements are to be expected, or even to avoid counterproductive results from religiously-founded peace initiatives. Accordingly, three overall criteria for meaningful inter-religious dialogue will be emphasised here; the participants (i.e. involved religious leaders) commitment to, and understanding of, peace and reconciliation processes, and secondly; the level of local ownership in the process. In this connection ownership means the participants willingness to take responsibility for inter-religious relations in their respective communities and their view of themselves as agents for peace. The third prerequisite relates to the level of legitimacy of the religious representatives in the dialogue both inside an outside their respective local (religious and secular) communities.

Background

Over the last years we have seen a striking renewal of interest in the role of religion in conflict and war. The debates are manifold and relate to different and interrelated topics on the international agenda such as the US-led war against terrorism as well as to many ongoing conflicts around the world. As a response to the new world disorder, there has been an increased call for inter-religious dialogue as a means to counter conflicts in the local and global arena.² Supporters of religious leader's involvement in peace- and

¹ The lecture is based upon a more elaborated report and an article, researched in 2004 and written in 2004 and 2005. The research includes interviews with religious leaders, academics, political analysts, NGO-workers, students and journalists.

² Johnston 2001. Appleby 2000.

reconciliation processes underscore the positive message inherent in all major theologies, and claim that, notwithstanding their negative record of legitimising, mobilising and inspiring violent or political conflicts, one should not underestimate the positive role religions may play in bringing about peace and tolerance.

Recently religious actors have also given more attention to religion in foreign diplomacy, based upon the notion that Western governments and their traditional diplomacies have always neglected religious factors.³ According to such views, this has rendered the West ineffective, both in dealing with religious differences and in combating demagogues who adeptly manipulate religious identity labels for their own purposes. One maintains that religious communities contain under-utilised assets, which, with proper training, could be valuable to peacemaking. Hence there is, according to many, a need to further examine the positive role that religion could play in preventing or resolving conflicts.⁴ One can agree with those who advise nations and international organisations not to overlook or underestimate the complex, multiple roles and functions of religion in conflict. Yet, many religious non-governmental organisations, are, and have been, active in peace endeavours in most recent conflicts. This certainly includes the Western Balkans.⁵ Yet, more systematic and critical studies of the influence of religion in peacemaking are conspicuous by their absence. In literature and reports on the subject, most arguments are based on mainly positive suppositions rather than on systematic research based on case studies and lessons learned. Moreover, very few scholars focus on the motivation underlying the role of religious organisation in peace building. This is puzzling in view of the extensive debate on this subject among scholars reflecting on religiously motivated humanitarian and long-term development cooperation. While one can agree that the potential role of religion should not be neglected in peace-making processes, it is essential that the involvement of religious organisations is also systematically and critically followed up and discussed among actors, donors and researchers. This is important, not only in order to improve awareness and understanding of the role of religion in peacemaking, but equally to scrutinise potential and achieved results of such activities.

Inter-religious councils in the Western Balkans

As mentioned above, the lecture refers to two internationally initiated inter-religious dialogue programs, namely the inter-religious councils in Bosnia Herzegovina (established in 1997) and Kosovo (established in 2001). The programs are led by the US-based organisation 'World Conference on Religion and Peace' (WCRP). WCRP's approach and methodology are based on the notion that inter-religious cooperation is stimulated through the establishment of inter-religious councils, consisting of senior leaders from the various religious communities in the actual country or region. WCRP has promoted the establishment of both regional councils that include religious leaders from different countries in a specific region (such as the European Council of Religious Leaders), as well as national councils comprising senior religious leaders from different religious community in one particular state, such as for instance in Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo. This approach has, according to WCRP itself, proved to be both functional and replicable in any setting. Accordingly, when engaging in a new region or country, WCRP's approach is to invite central religious leaders to a meeting and offer its support in terms of technical assistance and financial backing to form an inter-religious council.⁶

³ Fox & Sandler 2004

⁴ See also Johnston and Eastwold 2002, and Appleby 2000.

⁵ Appleby 2000

⁶ Interview with WCRP regional representative in the Western Balkans (conducted in March 2004). See also: http://www.wcrp.org/RforP/CONFLICT_MAIN.html

The main goal is to increase inter-ethnic tolerance and coexistence by establishing and supporting an inter-faith council.

The functioning of the inter-religious council

Looking more closely at their mandates⁷, the inter-religious councils would address a wide range of highly sensitive political issues, e.g. the role of religious leaders and communities during conflicts, reconstruction of religious monuments in ethnically cleansed towns and villages, the return of religious leaders of ethnic minorities, lack of protection of basic religious freedoms at the local level, and the restitution of expropriated and nationalised property, as well as common concerns in reconciliation processes such as the return of internally displaced people and refugees, inter-ethnic relations, and minority concerns. These are all vital challenges that need to be dealt with throughout the Western Balkans. It is thus possible to argue that both Kosovo and Bosnia Herzegovina need an inter-religious institution, e.g. a well-functioning inter-religious council to ameliorate relations between religious communities on the ground. One would also expect that a well functioning council would thus respond proactively and of its own accord to inter-ethnic/religious developments within its area of responsibility. However, the inter-religious councils mostly fail to respond to critical situations. For instance, in the post-war Western Balkans, aggression is frequently directed towards religious monuments, but neither of the two Councils have not yet made a common statement related to any such concrete situations. Furthermore, one would expect the Councils to be willing to make public statements promoting tolerance and condemning harassment of any national/religious group and to distance themselves from the ongoing inter-ethnic conflict. This is not yet the case. Notwithstanding the positive symbolic and potentially practical value of inter-religious councils, it remains thus difficult to see the extent to which they in fact have contributed to reconciliation in the still ethnically divided Western Balkan region. Clearly, the Councils' potential achievements depend on their influence on political currents and mainstream opinion-making, and we lack sufficient data in order to draw any firm conclusions in this area. What we do know, however, is that inter-religious cooperation and dialogue mediated through the Councils are currently not functioning in either Bosnia Herzegovina or Kosovo.

Lack of local anchoring

Seemingly, the inefficiency in the inter-religious council is partly due to a manifest lack of local anchoring among religious leaders who head the inter-religious councils.⁸ This was clearly demonstrated during the clashes in Kosovo in March 2004, when the Council in Bosnia Herzegovina issued a letter to the religious communities in Kosovo, as well as a press statement, condemning the inter-ethnic violence and the destroying of religious buildings. However, it was the international agent that took the initiative on behalf of the Council to write this letter. The press statement issued on behalf of the Council was also proposed by WCRP.⁹ A vital question is therefore why the Council was not able to make such a move on their own initiative, after many years of existence. There is apparently

⁷ WCRP's documents.

⁸ Appleby also notes: "The external limits of its (WCRP's) effectiveness are set by the religious communities it seeks to serve and represent, and by the political, social and religious environments in which those communities must operate. Eventually, vigorous leadership must come not only or even primarily from the New York-based UN headquarters, but from religious leaders heading the local chapters and inter-religious councils." Appleby 2000:155.

⁹ Interview with an NCA-staff member that was present in WCRP's locations in Sarajevo during the forming and issuing of the press statement and the letter.

still a long way to go before it has developed into a strong organisation with a distinct and resolute commitment to reconciliation processes between religious communities.

The religious leaders form part of, or are influenced by, the ongoing political discourse, a reality which must be taken into account when planning and developing inter-religious dialogue in any post-conflict society. For instance, interviews with leaders of the main religious communities in Kosovo revealed a setting marked by mutual recrimination and lack of acceptance of the views and needs of the other parties. The principal disagreements followed ethnic lines, i.e. between the Serbian Orthodox Church on the one hand, and the predominantly ethnic Albanian Islamic and Catholic communities on the other. Moreover, interviews with senior representatives of the religious communities reveal a lack of understanding among them regarding their own roles and responsibilities in such processes. In fact, it was striking to note that they repeatedly appealed to the international organisations and criticised them for their inability to push the reconciliation process further. When asked during interviews, none of the religious leaders were able to elaborate on how, and in what way, they themselves could contribute, or at least explore the potential for engaging themselves in future collaboration projects. Changes in the current deadlock situation would hence depend on “the others”, be it the other religious communities, or the international organisations.

Consequently, one may well ask to what extent the parties were genuinely committed to the promotion of inter-faith dialogue and cooperation. Did the necessary will and courage exist among religious leaders to contribute to a more pluralistic public debate on the mainstream policies underlying ethnic division? And to what extent were they actually committed to a common ground of moral values, such as tolerance and non-violence? One should also consider the parties’ motivation for participating in a dialogue forum such as an inter-faith council. The respective communities could have hidden motivations for participating or not in dialogue. For instance, it may be that religious communities are using the forum for their own purposes and give way to what they perceive as international pressure without necessarily being committed to the ideal of a future multi-religious community. The cost for any organisation to not take part in peace- and reconciliation efforts are possibly very high, e.g. reduced political and economical support. If their commitment is genuine, one could expect religious leaders to act in accordance with an attitude of openness and reciprocal acceptance of the other religious communities as equal partners, regardless of their status as minority/majority organisations. One would expect them to be willing to make public statements promoting tolerance and condemning harassment of any national/religious group.

Dialogue on the local level

There is however potential for dialogue between religious leaders at the community level. Several informants also pointed out the need for it to be more strongly involved at local and grassroots levels. There is an apparent need to reform hard-line priests and imams who are actively impeding developments in inter-religious relations (and hence return processes) in villages and towns throughout the region. It was also pointed out that support could have been given to the relatively few moderate and inter-religiously oriented clerics on the ground. According to several sources, the Councils have not been able to interest or involve itself in broader segments of the communities with respect to such efforts. E.g. an NGO-activist from Mostar claimed that, to his knowledge, the Council in BiH did not involve the religious leaders at community level at any point.¹⁰

¹⁰ Interviewed in Mostar in March 2004.

An example of a more locally and context-oriented approach could be exemplified through the Norwegian Church Aid's (NCA) inter-religious dialogue efforts in Kosovo (supported by Kosovan Nansen Dialogue 'KND'). It maintains a stronger focus on concrete achievements on the ground. In the case of Kosovo, they have also been more proactive in reassessing the dialogue's actual and potential results, and have openly discussed optional approaches as a result of the deadlock in the religious dialogue process. Over the last year, NCA and KND have been targeting local religious leaders in towns and villages across Kosovo with the aim of introducing inter-faith dialogue on a grassroots level. The strategy is to focus their efforts on local towns and villages where NCA is already involved in other development projects. This approach is founded on the hope that there is a real wish among local religious leaders to engage in reconciliation and dialogue efforts with leaders from other religious communities. The experience so far, according to NCA, is clear: there are many individuals at ground level in all the main religious communities who express more constructive attitudes towards inter-religious cooperation than in the upper levels of the hierarchy. It is furthermore the hope that local pro-dialogue attitudes will filter upwards, and prepare the ground for talks also on a higher level. Thus NCA and WCRP have different methods and goals. Whereas WCRP aims to include local religious leaders in a regional and global effort for peace, NCA tries to facilitate local peace initiatives.¹¹

Legitimacy and credibility

With regard to the question of legitimacy, most informants acknowledged that all main religious communities, particularly in Bosnia Herzegovina have, to varying degrees, contributed to inter-ethnic/religious hatred and segregation, and are hence partly responsible for the dissolution of the former multi-religious character of towns and villages. Accordingly, without a proper process in which religious leaders assume public responsibility for actions and attitudes expressed in the name of their religious communities during the war, informants asserted that the Council would not win the trust and credibility essential to acting as a strong and influential force in reconciliation processes. Several of the informants from Bosnia Herzegovina also underlined the fact that the Council strongly interrelated with the international community, and they questioned whether the Council would have existed without an international organiser and expressed doubts as to whether the religious leaders involved in the Council would have been attracted to such an organisation if it had been a purely local initiative. This objection is imperative because it captures ulterior motives among the Council's participants, implicitly accusing them of pursuing their own personal ambitions for an international career. For religious leaders to be accused of such motives is indeed serious. Being a spiritual leader, authority relies more on personal integrity and consistency compared to leaders from other organisations. In fact, their legitimacy as leaders requires them to rise above such mundane motives as a high status in an organisation outside their own religious community may provide. "I believe the international organisations and donors involved should pay more attention to the potential motivational factors for taking part in such a forum", an NGO-worker stated¹².

The assumption that religious leaders are always relevant actors in peace processes by virtue of their roles as moral leaders is not automatically correct. In fact, experiences from the Western Balkans suggest that religious leaders in many cases have contributed to

¹² Interviewed in Sarajevo in March 2004.

political and ethnic radical polarisation, not only during conflict, but also in the post-conflict period. Scholars remind us that religious leaders, like most other leaders, can be both good and bad.¹³ One should also note that the individuals that constitute the current religious leadership are mainly the same as before and during the wars. Perhaps then, we need to be more concerned as to whether international organisations are in fact giving legitimacy to individual religious leaders with a highly problematic historical background by inviting them into internationally supported and sanctioned dialogue processes.

The possibility to obtain concrete results from peacemaking and reconciliation efforts depend to a large extent upon the participants, and their sense and ability to act as moral leaders and independent peace agents who stand above mainstream nationalistic politics and currents. One can also expect that these requirements apply particularly to religious leaders participating in reconciliation processes, not least where the religious communities played an important part in the conflict. They must, each of them, be able to distance themselves from atrocities committed by their respective religious communities during the conflicts. A vital aspect of any peace- and reconciliation process is the need for a society to be able to call to account those responsible for violence and suffering. In most conflicts the main focus has been on politically and militarily responsible persons.¹⁴ However, other types of actors who have contributed to inter-ethnic/religious hatred and supported violence and other form of oppression should also be held accountable in reconciliation processes. For instance, it is widely held that the media largely played a destructive role in the conflicts in the Western Balkans and were responsible for hate speeches and ethno-nationalistic propaganda throughout the region. Hence efforts have been made to reform and restore an independent and critical press through several national and international projects as a part of a general democratisation process. The question, however, remains whether similar assessments of the role of religious leaders and communities have been carried out. In this particular case, one might question to what extent international agents such as WCRP did perform such analyses and assessments in advance. Apparently, WCRP held a preconceived view on the positive role of religious leaders in peacemaking and reconciliation processes, and disregarded the religious actor's role in the conflict. In places like Bosnia Herzegovina that has recently experienced devastating conflicts, such blind disregard for the past is, if anything, strikingly naive. It is therefore possible to argue that the credibility of religious leaders who were actively spreading ethno-religious propaganda during the war (or worse; supported and lent legitimacy to inter-ethnic cleansing and atrocities) would be seriously compromised. As expressed by a group of students in Sarajevo; "How can we have faith in the inter-religious council when we know what role the religious communities and their leaders played during the war?"¹⁵ A point thus far neglected in the inter-religious dialogue efforts could be a more consistent approach towards addressing the need for internal processes of catharsis within the religious communities. This would be essential if they are to earn the requisite integrity to serve as moral role models and positive agents in reconciliation processes. Any religious leader engaged in a peace process should not only speak to and on behalf of his own religious and ethnic community, but also be accorded legitimacy by the general community, including other religious, ethnic or secular groups. In order to receive positive attention in a broader society, it is therefore vital also for religious leaders to take

¹³ Perica 2003

¹⁴ Countries or regions that have lived through conflicts have found varying ways of doing so, e.g. through national or international legal processes, or, as in the case of South-Africa, through nationally conducted truth commissions. In the Western Balkans region, the responsible institution in this regard is the International War Crimes Tribunal (ICTY).

¹⁵ In discussions with a reference group of students representing different religious and ethnic backgrounds. Conducted in Sarajevo in October 2003.

public responsibility for any wrongdoing in the name of their particular religion. Notwithstanding the delicate nature of the subject of national and ethnic catharsis, sweeping difficult issues under the carpet may prove counterproductive and an obstacle in the long run.

Final remarks

In order to be a credible peacemaker in a post-war society, it takes an enormous amount of credibility in the general public; not only within one's own constituency. When religious leaders have played positive roles during a conflict by e.g. calling for humanity and non-violent solutions from all parties involved, they are likely to be regarded as trustworthy also in times of post-conflict. A prominent example is the South African archbishop Desmond Tutu who was actively promoting non-violent measures to end apartheid, and when, after the fall of the regime, he initiated reconciliation attempts, groups on both sides met his efforts with approval. Archbishop Desmond Tutu could convincingly convey such messages because he was a representative of the suppressed part in the Apartheid regime, because of his consistent message both during and after Apartheid, and finally due to his extraordinary skills as a political and spiritual leader. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that religious leaders who take sides or actively promote conflict could play any role in a reconciliation process. For those leaders, probably the majority, that kept quiet during times of conflict, they will certainly have to be empowered and stimulated to develop the necessary level of civil courage in order to be able to play a proactive role in a post-conflict period. The point is simple; if religion and religious communities are to be part of the solution, as cited in the introductory remarks, we need to know if and how they contributed to create the 'problem'. Without such knowledge, peace efforts can be worthless or even produce the opposite of the desired effect.

Questions for reflections and discussion:

- Can religious leaders play meaningful roles in dialogue and reconciliation processes?
- If yes, when can they do so? If no, why not?
- What are necessary preconditions in order for religious leaders to play a constructive role in post-conflict society?
- What should be international organisations involvement in inter-religious dialogue?
- How can international organisations help local religions communities to strengthen local ownership in inter-religious dialogue processes?

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