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**Interreligious dialogue  
and the prevention of mass atrocities**

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## Introduction

Religion has taken centre stage in the cruel theatre being played out in our world today. Outrageous acts of violence have been perpetrated in the name of religion. News accounts of kidnappings, massacres, forced displacement and the destruction of sites once regarded as sacred defy the imagination. Politicians breathe threats, analysts scurry for solutions, and the rest of us sit and stare at the headlines, bewildered and repulsed by it all. Predictably, critics of religion have multiplied, even suggesting that religion itself is to blame.

Even still, while the media has largely focused on the religious dimension of these atrocities, we would do well to look beyond the ideological divides that masquerade as their cause. Indeed, the perpetrators, while applying religious rhetoric to justify their actions, are not typically motivated by religious conviction. In fact, religion-inspired conflict is hardly ever about religious beliefs. It is more often about *religious identity*.

Religious identity has to do with how one self-identifies in relation to a group. It is not the same as being religious, which implies adherence to particular beliefs and participation in religious activities. It is quite possible to have a strong religious identity (“I am a Christian,” “I am Buddhist” et cetera) and yet not be religious per se.

There can also be a huge gulf between one’s identification with a religion and that religion’s beliefs and ethics. For some, religion has potential to unite people and to inspire them toward extraordinary acts of generosity and compassion; for others, it can provide impetus for destruction on a massive scale. Christians can join in ethnic cleansing against Bosniaks, Buddhists in Burma can commit gross human rights violations against Rohingyas, and Muslims can perpetrate acts of genocide against Christians in the Middle East and northern Nigeria. In each of these conflicts – and many others could be cited – religious identity has played a role.

## Worlds Apart

Religious identity can therefore be a source of conflict just as much as ethnic or national identity. When bundled together, these identities – and we are each a composite of many identities – can create an environment where violence and mass atrocities can occur.

In a healthy society, differences are respected and can even be regarded as an asset. Monochromatic societies – if indeed they exist – typically find it difficult to incorporate the hues and contrasts that exist between their members and which are necessary for the development of tolerance and respectful relations. This is equally true for relations between those who claim variant religious identities, which can sometimes seem to be worlds apart.

There is, perhaps inevitably, tremendous misunderstanding about religious beliefs and practices that are different from one’s own. One reason for this is a common misconception about the nature of religion itself. Far from being a straightforward checklist, religion englobes a culture, attitudes and worldviews that have shaped communities and individuals over a long period of time. Identities are formed and help to interpret one’s sense of place in the world.

Even within most religions themselves, there is a wide range of beliefs, such that coreligionists can hardly recognise one another as belonging to the same faith community.

It is clear, for instance, that one cannot speak of Judaism, Christianity or Islam as if there is a uniformity of belief. Instead, we are compelled to speak of Judaisms, Christianities and Islams. This can equally be said of religions with far fewer numbers.

Within any language there are numerous dialects that have been shaped by widely divergent societal and cultural variables. Similarly, religions themselves are diverse even within their own worlds; therefore, Christians can be in conflict with other Christians, as in Northern Ireland, or Muslims with other Muslims, as we are presently witnessing in the Middle East, usually for reasons that have little or no relation to religion per se. It goes without saying that intra-religious dialogue is as vital today as dialogue of an inter-religious nature. In the end, it is about understanding and respecting all people in their incredible and terrifying diversity.

## **Interreligious dialogue as builder of social cohesion**

Dialogue between religious communities is one way that we can begin to understand the different “languages” that we speak. When sustained over time, it can be a strong vehicle for building social cohesion and for averting mass violence. However, genuine dialogue is never about reaching for the least common denominator on which all can agree. There are some fundamental incompatibilities between religions and ideologies that cannot be bridged by shared consent. There are plenty of differences; after all, that’s why there are conflicts in the first place.

Religious people can be loyal to the truth of their experience, but to regard that experience as absolute or normative for all people is threatening to those of differing religious loyalties and identities. Interreligious dialogue begins when we acknowledge that social harmony is possible in a religiously pluralistic environment. Instead of reaching for common agreement, we reach for that which is common in our humanity. We are the same humanity but not the same religion.

Hans Küng has famously said: “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.” As religions have the capacity to unite peoples and to inspire the best in humanity, there must be greater attention given to creating spaces for real and sustained dialogue that builds bridges of understanding between those who hold different beliefs and religious identities. This fosters a culture of respect for everyone, not just for those who are religious.

Interreligious dialogue is humanising. It can therefore be a powerful deterrent to violent conflicts and to the commission of mass atrocities. Genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity are perpetrated precisely where the humanity of the other has been denied. Conversely, wherever people genuinely engage in exploring the narratives, hopes and values of those outside their identity-based community, there is much less chance that hostilities turn to mass killings. Religious narratives are particularly influential in shaping identities and give clues to how communities situate themselves in the world.

## **In lieu of a conclusion**

For dialogue of this sort to be effective, it cannot be haphazard. There must be a structure and a methodology that enable real exchanges that transform conflict over time into opportunities for living productively in a diverse society. Usually this means the establishment of dialogue groups, composed of diverse participants (and not just the experts) that meet regularly to build relationships and to discuss ways to foster greater

understanding between their communities. Trained moderators help guide the discussions and interpret what the participants are experiencing in relation to the wider community. Due care is given to the dialogue setting, to the language that is used and to the unspoken dynamics between group participants.

As people engage in interreligious dialogue, it often is found that the resources needed to promote social harmony and to avert serious conflict are already present in the religions themselves. Most religious traditions share core values of honour, compassion, justice, solidarity and peaceful relations within the community. As these values are affirmed and shared across the lines of demarcation between religions, models of social cohesion can become a catalyst for change in societies that have long suffered from inter-communal tensions. Dialogue, when done well, is at the heart of this process.