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The Challenges of Inter-Religious Peace-building in a Post-Conflict Context

Mrs. Laura Coulter- Peacebuilding Advisor, United Mission to Nepal

Abstract

This paper will consider how the early years of this new Century have been characterized by a number of violent conflicts involving adherents of particular religious/ethnic groups, many of whom use their religious affiliation to justify their actions, particularly in the Middle East.

The inevitability of this process will be challenged through highlighting the counter-trend of religious peacemakers drawing on the resources within their respective traditions to find ways to dialogue together and promote peaceful relations. The goals, strategies and practices of inter-faith dialogue are outlined in the literature.

Recent conflict in Nepal, where religious intolerance increased during the process of promulgating a new constitution, will be used to illustrate such inter-faith dialogue through the work of a particular group in Sunsari district. The successes, challenges and lessons learned by this group will be described.

Introduction

My name is Laura Coulter. I come from Northern Ireland, a country that has experienced more than 30 years of conflict and violence (1968-1998). Thankfully nowadays, Northern Ireland is much more peaceful as we are moving on from our conflict. I have worked for many years as a peace activist and mediator in community, church and workplace disputes. One of the most interesting jobs I had was working as a mediator with those involved in political marches and protests with the goal of trying to promote a peaceful outcome to the marches. In 2015, my husband and I moved to Nepal where I currently work with United Mission to Nepal as a peacebuilding advisor.

Setting the Scene

The growth of extremist religious groups and the use of terror and violence has shaken the Western world in recent times. Religions can harness deep emotions which sometimes take destructive forms. We saw this played out in N.I. where sectarian groups have often used religious affiliation to justify their violence. More recently in India, Hindu fundamental groups used religion to justify violent actions (e.g. 2015 case of a man beaten to death by a mob because his family allegedly ate cow meat). The rise of the so called Islamic State group and their violence against many thousands of people in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East has deeply shocked a watching world. The multiple traumatic impacts, physical and psychological, of minority populations affected by violent death, displacement, disability, and the destruction of communities and culture may last for generations.

This trend can appear unassailable and we are tempted to ask is there anything we can do apart from meeting forced and terror with counter military force. Thankfully there is a, less headline-grabbing,

counter trend of people across many cultures and religious affiliations seeking to harness their religious traditions to promote forgiveness and peace.

While religions can become misused for political power, sometimes even killing in their name, they also have deeply rooted resources to counteract such violence and to enable peace. Faith leaders can be crucial in delegitimizing religious justifications for violence and highlighting the resources within their traditions that create the conditions for peace and justice. Every religion has deep resources and insight that can help build resilience and promote peace and justice at local, national, regional and global levels.

African peacemaker, Hizkias Assefa (2004) emphasizes the considerable role of religious leaders as an asset in promoting peace when he asserts that:

“Bringing the spiritual dimension into the peacemaking process can create access to the more deep-seated basis of the parties’ actions, enabling them to examine their attitudes and actions.”

The *Global Covenant of Religions* is a recent initiative to prevent and reduce religion-related violence worldwide. It is a growing movement of religious actors, scholars and civil society organizations dedicated to preventing religion-related violence, protecting its targets and rehabilitating its victims. Its vision states *“We believe a concerted international response is needed to prevent and reduce religion-related violence, to improve communication and understanding between and within religions, and to increase regional stability and community resilience.”* (Global Covenant of Religions 2015). The *Global Covenant of Religions* seeks to utilize the values deepest resources and insights of distinctive religious traditions to help build resilience and promote peace and justice at local, national, regional and global levels.

Comment [L1]:

Johnson (quoted by Smock, D 2006) has identified the following as attributes that religious leaders can offer in promoting peace:

- Credibility as a trusted institution
- A respected set of values
- Moral warrants for opposing injustice
- Unique leverage for promoting reconciliation among conflicting parties, including an ability to rehumanize situations that have become de-humanized over the course of a protracted conflict
- A capability to mobilize community, nation and international support for a peace process
- A sense of calling that often inspires perseverance in the face of major obstacles

Harnessing Religion’s Potential for Promoting Peace

Of course, these laudable aims, values and attributes can only operate where people are in contact with one another through inter-faith dialogue, i.e. Representatives of different religious groups coming together to converse with the aim of mutual understanding and problem-solving (Garfinkel, R 2004). Inter-faith dialogue can take place at various social levels and target different types of participants, including elites, mid-level professionals and grassroots activists. Inter-faith dialogue can unlock the power of religious traditions and provide the inspiration, guidance and validation necessary to move towards peaceful resolution of conflict. Such dialogues have become an increasingly important tool in ending conflict worldwide.

Comment [S2]: Any examples?

Swidler (1987) identified three goals of inter-faith dialogue as:

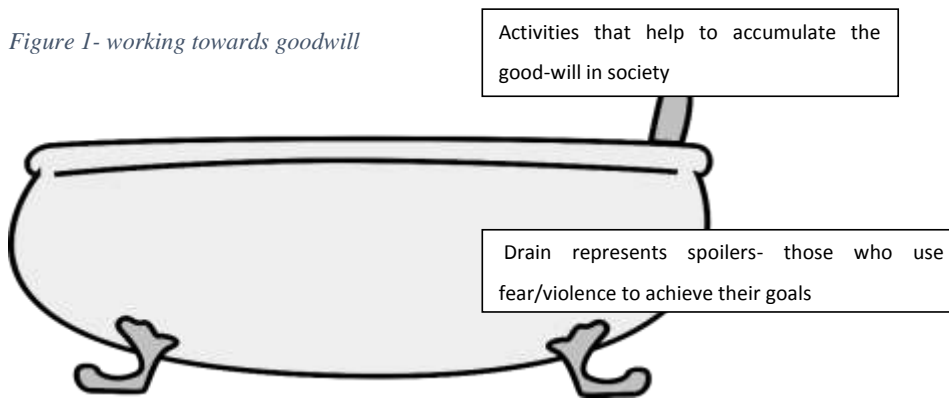
1. To know oneself ever more profoundly and enrich one’s appreciation of one’s own faith tradition
2. To know the other ever more authentically and gain a friendly understanding of others

3. To live ever more fully accordingly and to establish a more solid foundation for community of life and action among persons of various traditions

If we think of society like a bath-tub, the water represents good-will/harmony, while the drain is the spoiler. To build sustainable peace, good-will needs to be poured into the bath at a faster rate than it is being dissipated by the spoilers. Inter-faith dialogue, development of infrastructure to deal with tension/conflict, and credible leaders speaking out against violence and religious intolerance has potential to tip the balance.

A model to illustrate how inter-faith dialogue builds peaceful society:

Figure 1- working towards goodwill



Horowitz (2000), for example, has identified the following strategies to encourage religious harmony or peaceful co-existence in society and to intervene in conflict:

1. Promotive strategies to build an interest in peace, organize festivals and visits to the sacred places of different faiths; expose people to different traditions Ex: good neighbours’ visits
2. Preventive approach- establish structures between religions that will help in times of tension. (e.g. good communication networks, speeches by religious leaders to denounce violence can play an important role in de-escalating the cycle of violence) Ex: mobile phone networks in Belfast used during times of rioting to dispel myths, etc... between 2 communities
3. Preemptive actions taken to prevent violence from happening- e.g. dialogue to explore myths about each other, peace activities that challenge the demonizing of ‘the other’. The tendency to demonize is much more likely when we live separately or in ghettos. The ability to break down barriers is very important. Ex: Dialogue series with different churches in North Belfast

Smock (2006) has listed practical ways that interfaith dialogue has been organized:

- High-level religious leaders have convened to speak collectively for peace
- High-level inter-faith groups have engaged in conflict mediation between combatants
- Grassroots participants from different religious traditions have joined together to promote cross-community interaction

- Theological similarities among hostile religious groups have been identified to mitigate the hostility as a result of theological differences.

Challenges of Inter-faith Dialogue

In all inter-faith dialogue there are a number of **general challenges** that can be difficult to manage. Aamir Hussain (2014) has identified the following:

1. The first challenge is a lack of focus. For any interfaith dialogue to succeed, all parties must be clear on the conversation's goals. This can help people decide which conversations they should join. For example, if the goal is to discuss complex theological issues, it is necessary to include scripture experts, historians, linguists, and other academics. Lay people may not feel comfortable in these discussions. On the other hand, conversations focused around personal values and experiences would be more appealing to people who do not fit into a defined faith or spiritual category.
2. The second challenge is when people feel that they need to "water down" or compromise their religious identity in order to fit in. This often occurs when dialogue participants come across an irresolvable difference: for example, whether Jesus was a prophet (the Muslim belief) or whether he was the Son of God (the Christian belief). Ideally, interfaith dialogue is supposed to help each participant better understand their own religion and discover the areas in which their religion is unique. In the situation described, both parties should agree to disagree. They should accept that differences exist and seek to understand them without compromising their own beliefs.
3. The third challenge is proselytizing, or attempting to convert others. This is also antithetical to the idea of respecting each other's differences. However, in interfaith dialogue, participants should enter the conversation in order to learn about other religions' beliefs, not to promote their own.
4. Another challenge is that those actively involved in inter-faith dialogue may come under suspicion or even threat from those within their own tradition or community. This usually comes from fear of 'the other' or lack of understanding about the process. Misunderstandings can be helped by clear communication about the purpose of the inter-faith dialogue.

Mutual tolerance is essential for conflict prevention and resolution and inter-faith programmes are designed to increase this between participants through encounters with each other in an atmosphere of safety and mutual respect. These programmes are designed to help participants form relationships and develop a more thorough understanding of each other.

Most religions are committed to working for peace and justice and have well-established processes for doing so. The spiritual element in most religions can encourage people, particularly in a conflict, to look beyond their own group's interests to the wider common good. Though each tradition may disagree about the source and causes of violence, they each have time-tested traditions and rituals for mediating conflict and enabling peace. (Global Covenant of Religions, 2015)

The Nepali Context

Nepal is in a state of transition. Ten years have passed since the Nepali people took to the streets of Kathmandu demanding the restoration of democracy and the abolition of the monarchy through the popular People's Movement (April 2006). The movement brought an end to the ten-year long civil war with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in November 2006. Nepal endured its share of violence during its 10-year conflict - 13,000 people died, and in more recent times, following the adoption of its new Constitution in September 2015.

Out of the total population of Nepal (26,494,504), 81% are Hindu, 9% Buddhist, 4.4% Muslim and 1.4% are Christian (Nepal Census 2011). Social changes such as the growth of the Christian church and challenges to traditional Hindu beliefs from seasonal migration may affect social harmony and peace in the future. In recent days, Nepal has seen a new level of inter-religious intolerance and even violence. The proposal of Nepal as a secular state in the new Constitution is not accepted by Hindu fundamentalists who wish to re-establish Nepal as a Hindu Kingdom, which may have serious consequences for minority religions in future. In addition, Madhesi and Tharu communities, Hindi-speaking ethnic minorities located across the southern part of the country, began a protest claiming that the lack of a separate federal state did not ensure proportional representation for their people in state mechanisms. Protesters have been blocking the border between Nepal and India. Due to this ongoing blockade, Nepali people are currently facing limited supplies of essential supplies required for daily living, such as petrol, gas and building materials. A small inter-faith network in Sunsari district has been steadily working since 2007 to maintain and promote harmony among different religions and ethnic groups. Sunsari, one of the target districts of UMN is located in the eastern part of Nepal adjoining with India. The Morang district in Sunsari lies in the east and has 65 village Development Committees (VDCs). Diversity between castes and religions is visible with around 50 castes and 10 religious groups living in this district. Hindu, Kirat, Islam and Buddhism are the main religions.

The interfaith network in Morang began when religious leaders realized that there was a need to work together for peace and harmony in the local area. At that time there were growing tensions between Muslims and Hindus in nearby India and people were concerned that this tension would spill over into Nepal. Then a leading Muslim leader was killed and no-one claimed responsibility. This led to much fear in the district and the network was formed to provide stability and promote peace. Their mission is - *to enhance religious, cultural and caste systems for a peaceful and harmonious community*. They have been actively promoting peace and harmony through different sorts of activities and programmes including:

- Joining in feasts on different major festivals of different religions
- Publication of resources to raise awareness in the community
- Vocational training for the community to promote interfaith peace.
- Using the media for interfaith peace messages
- Interfaith speech programme by different religious leaders
- Interfaith dialogue with people from different religions.
- Lobbied the government for a secular state in the new constitution.
- Established interfaith peace park at local schools
- Interfaith peace class given to children by interfaith peace network members.

The Morang group has faced a **range of challenges** as they have sought to develop their work.

Working with highly sensitive issues - the need to be careful not to offend others in the community or draw negative attention to their work from those intent on creating conflict.

One religious group trying to manipulate interfaith peace programme- the need to ensure that all voices are heard equally

The sustainability of interfaith peace network programme can be a challenge in the face of limited resources (mention PCI's funding for 2016/7)

Risks for participants from their own faith communities, particularly in times of tension. (Ex.- inter-faith rally after new constitution was signed. Staff were unsure about going ahead due to an increase in community tension; after discussion it went ahead with no problems)

High expectations vs limited resources can be hard to manage.

Nevertheless, as a result of their work the capacities of interfaith network members have been enhanced and they have been mediating various cultural and religious conflicts in their communities. As a result, they now have a good reputation in the community and hope to build on this year.

Comment [S3]: I think you should say something about each of these since it is the main topic of your paper.i.e. Describe the challenge?

Comment [S4]: Any examples

Conclusion

Religious freedom and respect for religious diversity is an essential element of a peaceful society and a successful democracy. People who see that their religious identity is respected are more likely to feel that they have a stake in the success of their country. In Nepal, people of different beliefs live side by side. The opportunity and challenge is to work together to build a society rooted on a sure foundation of mutual respect, openness and trust. As already described, different religious traditions offer many resources to build such a society and teach the importance of good relationships characterized by honesty, compassion and generosity of spirit. In 1986, a group of spiritual teachers from a variety of the world religions came together to reflect on the most helpful elements of their respective traditions. (<http://www.scarboromissions.ca/guidleines>, accessed 03/02/16) They came up with some examples of disciplined practice, common to all religions, which may help society to build resilience and promote peace and justice at local, national, regional and global levels. They are: the practice of compassion, service to others, practicing moral precepts and virtues, training in meditation techniques and regularity of practice, attention to diet and exercise, fasting and abstinence, the use of music and chanting and sacred symbols, practice in awareness (recollection, mindfulness) and living in the present moment, pilgrimage and the study of scriptural texts and scriptures.

Living and working together is not always easy but we have a great deal to learn from one another which can enrich us without undermining our own identities or faith. Together, listening and responding with openness and respect, we can move forward to work in ways that acknowledge genuine differences but build on shared values for the promotion of a peaceful society.

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