

## **The Dangers and Troubles of Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation**

In this paper I address four common aspects or representations of interreligious dialogue that may not be useful in contexts of peacebuilding and reconciliation work. After that I will turn to a brief case study of one project in Ambon, Indonesia to help show how a certain way of doing dialogue there has helped.

First, a common narrative amongst proponents of Interreligious Dialogue is that true religion is about peace, and only a distortion of religion allows it to be used for war, terror, and violence. Such a stance is, however, neither credible from an academic standpoint, nor is it a useful beginning for using dialogue as a tool for peacebuilding and reconciliation.

In the words of Professor Scott Appleby, we need to acknowledge the ambivalence of the sacred. Or, as Professor Perry Schmidt-Leukel has said, religion has both oil and water aspects, meaning that it has resources which if thrown into a hot conflict situation can either intensify the flames as well as having resources that can put them out.

To claim that only one of these represents religion is a problem: the crusades of Christianity in the Middle Ages were justified by Popes and Saints; Buddhist monks have endorsed the war efforts of countries such as Japan, China, Thailand, and Sri Lanka; Islam has a tradition of jihad as warfare as well as spiritual perfection; and, Sikhism has the warrior khalsa tradition.

In short, very central and mainstream parts of every major tradition justify warfare and violence in certain situations. Religion is not only about peace.

This is important, because a narrative that separates religion into a discourse only about peace may potentially alienate many of those who have fought. Especially those who fought with religious motivations, or believed that their actions were compatible with them being a good devotee of their tradition.

If all sides and standpoints are to be included this typical cliché of interreligious dialogue needs to be abandoned.

Second, representation. Who gets to speak for their tradition at the table of dialogue? In general, many dialogue events often work on what is termed a parliamentary style of representation. That is to say specific figures, often leaders, are chosen to speak from and about their own tradition.

Even before we come to the question of peacebuilding and reconciliation this itself raises many issues as a form of dialogue. As such, some of my criticisms here are criticisms of this model in general.

One issue is that only certain elite forms of each religion are represented in the dialogue. Smaller traditions, or those considered marginal, unorthodox, or heterodox in some way can be side-lined. Further, it may mean that not all strands within a religion are represented.

In many situations of conflict, we may not simply see divisions across religious boundaries but also within them. That is to say, disagreement and conflict may not simply be about inter-religious affairs but also intra-religious affairs. For example, in the Middle East and North Africa the major flashpoint is becoming the sectarian Sunni-Shia rivalry.

Indeed, even if the particular conflict situation is not an intra-religious one, if only one part of a tradition is represented then any agreement or resolution will not resonate or prove meaningful to other branches of that tradition.

The nature of many traditional religions also means that the representative voices are often, if not entirely, male. Yet studies have shown that it is often women who are actively involved at the grassroots in terms of peace and reconciliation work. Such models can make their voices marginalised or silenced, and can therefore make vital interreligious peacebuilding and reconciliation work appear less significant.

Again, events with high-level leaders are generally not sustainable, as it is often grassroots activity which is essential to rebuilding communities. High-level dialogue events certainly have their place but they should not be instead of nor neglect meetings of mid-level and grassroots leaders and the interreligious efforts they contribute.

Certainly, I do not wish to deny that the sight of leaders of different religious traditions speaking and dialoguing together is not significant. It can be a very prominent and powerful symbol of what is possible and allowed.

For instance, it is arguable that although dialogue was theologically justified in the Roman Catholic Church under the aegis of the Second Vatican Council it was not until the Assisi Day of Prayer organised by Pope John Paul II which saw him standing alongside not just other Christian leaders, but also Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and others that the concept and possibility of this entered a wider Catholic consciousness.

However, their often wordy resolutions also tend not to generate any particularly tangible results.

Third, an issue in dialogue and peacebuilding in general is the question of preaching to the converted. To be effective both dialogue events and peacebuilding and reconciliation work need to engage those who may be most resistant to speaking to the religious Other or their former enemies.

For many from conservative backgrounds, interreligious dialogue may be seen as a very liberal or relativist undertaking where some watered-down syncretism of religions is sought. To be involved in peacebuilding and reconciliation, interreligious dialogue may therefore need to clarify its aims and objectives and may not be the best name for such ventures.

Fourth, Western and Christian presuppositions are often said to dominate its practice. Certainly, interreligious dialogue as we know it today has largely emanated from a Western context. Meanwhile Christians more than any others have globally led, facilitated, and

initiated dialogue events around the world. This can give rise to a perception that the practice is both Western and Christian.

Even reconciliation which I have spoken of here has strong Christian resonances as a theological term. And in places like South Africa the Peace and Reconciliation Commission has been criticised for the almost overt Christian orientation around themes such as reconciliation and forgiveness which drove the agenda.

There are also fears amongst some that dialogue is simply a new way that Christians seek to do mission and convert others.

So far I have raised four issues which can be termed dangers or troubles for using interreligious dialogue in efforts at peacebuilding and reconciliation, but there are others that could be mentioned. It has not my aim to undermine any work or potential for peace. Neither do I deny that interreligious dialogue can be a useful tool. In places like the Balkans, case studies show that dialogue has been useful, while I will discuss Ambon shortly.

Nevertheless, we should not see interreligious dialogue as something which is inherently a panacea nor unproblematic. It is a tool that can be utilised alongside other tools in helping to shape peacebuilding and reconciliation endeavours. However, how that tool is shaped, named, and employed in any particular context will need to be given careful consideration.

I turn now to a specific case study of grassroots interfaith peacebuilding.

Ambon is an Island in Indonesia, part of the string of islands known as the Moluccas. Its largest city is also called Ambon. The population is mixed, primarily Christian and Muslim, with fairly old Islamic roots and Christianity primarily a facet of Dutch colonialism. While the history of interaction there has been relatively peaceful a full-scale conflict broke out which lasted from 1999 till 2002 which pitted Christians against Muslims and vice versa.

Time does not permit me to explore the background, but many tensions between the communities were economic, with privileges and advantages that had belonged to the Christians under colonialism being lost and the Muslim community in the ascendant economically and socially. Under Suharto's New Order Regime unrest was kept in check, but when conflict came it was brutal and bloody.

While it may be argued that the causes were ultimately economic or social rather than religious, the two sides were drawn on religious lines and justified their warfare and killing on religious grounds. For instance, on the Islamic side groups such as Laskar Jihad proclaimed the war a military jihad and cited quranic literature and hadith to support this.

Meanwhile, on the Christian side, priests blessed troops such as Kristus Laskar, and fighters cited military role models from the Bible such as Kings Saul, David, and Solomon, spoke of their war as a crusade, and sang hymns such as "Onward Christian Soldiers" which they saw as part of a militarist tradition.

While peace came in large part through the efforts of the Indonesian Army which over time restored order to the island, given the religious framing it was essential that a religious basis was given to the peace. As such, interreligious dialogue became part of the reconciliation work.

Rather than reviewing the formal peacebuilding situation under the aegis of the Indonesian government, I will focus here on grassroots initiatives for peace and reconciliation that have an ongoing presence in maintaining peace and accord between the two communities. While there have been some further outbreaks of violence and rioting, especially in 2011, nothing since 2002 has occurred on the scale seen then, while many flashpoints have been diffused.

The network I focus on call themselves the “peace provocateurs”. One of the reasons for the initial outbreak of violence, and in some subsequent events, have been rumours of either a Muslim or Christian being attacked or even killed in a part of Ambon city that is predominantly occupied by members of the other religious tradition. Either by word of mouth or social media, stories spread inciting anger and revenge leading to escalating violence.

The peace provocateurs seek to use the same means to spread peace. When reports of violence emerge, for instance in one report of a Muslim girl having her arm cut off, they have responded with their own social media campaign showing that in fact no such incident had occurred. Photos of the girl in good health in her home spread via social media within hours damping down the rumours.

Importantly, both Christian and Muslim peace provocateurs are involved. As such messages can easily spread across both communities. Further, they do not simply limit their work to times of tension but also through social media spread stories and pictures of a different normality. Such as of a Muslim trader who lives and works peacefully within a Christian area.

The scars of the 1999-2002 war are not yet fully healed and much suspicion remains. In particular, the fact that Ambon and other villages have now become deeply segregated is a problem. Nevertheless, such grassroots activism is seen as an important part of the long-term healing that is needed between the communities.

In relation to the criticisms raised already, while the peace provocateurs certainly work for peace the Ambon peace and reconciliation process has not castigated those involved in violence as being entirely outside their religion. The fact that they are seen as having misused texts and teachings to provoke violence is an issue, and the spreading of a different understanding of the religion goes alongside this.

Further, we do not see here a dialogue of elite groups in one-off events. Rather we see a more sustainable grassroots activity that can react quickly to events on the ground. As noted, this is not to say that more elite or leadership dialogue is not useful or important, but it is not what has built long-term peace and reconciliation. Many dialogues have also appealed to local customs, cosmology, and traditional reconciliation rituals, rather than simply dialogue in terms of beliefs and creating statements.

The stress is very much upon practical work and showing good relations between communities. As such, it does not rely upon statements or communiqués outlining principles of good-will, but shows the way that communities are working and living alongside each other in daily life. While perhaps most importantly it is also quick to put down any sparks of violence based upon rumours or misinformation.

In the writings of the peace provocateurs themselves they stress that gestures, acts, and symbols are more important and powerful than words in their own culture.

Naturally, this one brief case study is not representative of everything that can be said of positive models of interfaith dialogue to help build peace and reconciliation. Nor, as I have noted, do my critiques of other forms or modes of interreligious dialogue suggest they are never useful.

Rather my aim has been to show that beyond assuming that interreligious dialogue may not be helpful, or is inherently helpful, we have to look more closely at the context. The work of Ambon's peace provocateur's may not be suitable in every context. Although their model of a small informal network that actively seeks to spread positive messages and diffuse tensions may be practiced in other ways. Indeed, they do not frame their work as interreligious dialogue per se, though it clearly seeks to build community relations and understanding between Muslims and Christians.

To briefly conclude, it is important to look at how interreligious dialogue is framed and practiced in terms of building long-term and sustainable results.

### *Abstract*

*While one of many useful tools for engaging in peacebuilding and reconciliation, interreligious dialogue is not an inherently unproblematic practice. In terms of how it is framed and employed such dialogue may not help peacebuilding efforts but could even be counterproductive. This paper will point to some aspects of the practice and representation of interreligious dialogue that have been identified as potential problems in such work and so to serve as a reminder to practitioners and activists about the need for careful framing and deployment of dialogue for peacebuilding and reconciliation. It will also take a case study of Ambon, Indonesia to look at what has worked in one specific situation.*