

Interreligious Insight

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Opportunities & Challenges for Islamic Peacebuilding after September 11

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THREE VIGNETTES

- (1) On September 14, 2001, three days after the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, a group of around two hundred interreligious activists formed a human chain and encircled the Bridgeview masjid in the southwest suburb of Chicago, while their Muslim neighbors were performing their Friday Jumu'ah prayers inside. That same evening the same group stood vigil with candles vowing to protect the mosque against any kind of revenge attacks. Reporting the on the events of that day, the Chicago Tribune said: "Protestants and Catholics, whites, blacks, Hispanics carried signs with the Muslim greeting, "Peace Be Upon You, Assalam Alaikum," and "Christians, Jews and Others Support Our Muslim and Arab Brothers and Sisters."1
- (2) On September 26, 2001, in response to reports of anti-Muslim reprisal attacks a number of Jewish and Christian religious leaders as well as several public officials gathered at the local Michiana Islamic Center to show their solidarity with Muslims. An open letter to the members of the Michiana Islamic Center undersigned by priests representing various denominations affiliated with the United Religious Community of St. Joseph read as follows: "Please be assured that we, the undersigned, as well as other members of the religious community of Michiana, are praying and working for a spirit of active respect and justice within the American society for all its diverse citizens. Our prayer is that God's peace will surround you in these difficult times." In the subsequent weeks, the masjid received a bouquet of flowers and regularly received Christian delegations to their Friday jumu'ah services. This scenario was not a unique experience to Michiana but was repeated all across the United States of America.2
- (3) On September 11, 2002, the first anniversary of the attacks on America was marked all over the country by interreligious services. The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) estimated that more than 100 local Muslim communities participated in interreligious commemorative events all across America. ISNA's President, Dr. Muhammad Nur Abdullah, represented Muslims at the national interfaith prayer and remembrance service that was held at the Washington National Cathedral.3

Interreligious Solidarity and the Post September 11 Reality

These three vignettes underscore the widespread solidarity that many Muslims received from their non-Muslim compatriots in the aftermath of September 11. For those interreligious activists who have long campaigned that interreligious solidarity should be accorded a more prominent place in the programs of religious institutions, the irony of the post September 11 reality is painful. Interreligious activities have indeed ascended to near the top of the agenda of a number of religious institutions all over the United States, but it was triggered by an abominable attack that has only served to reinforce the widespread public perception that Islam is linked to violence in some special way.

This paper argues that the dramatic turn of world events triggered by the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, has ironically led to an unprecedented interest among Americans in Islam and Muslims. This puzzling or confounding curiosity presents a renewed opportunity to counteract negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims and to foster and deepen interreligious solidarity in the United States. The critical challenge however, facing interreligious advocates is how to sustain and transform this renewed interreligious solidarity and energy into a powerful grassroots interreligious movement for peace and justice. The paper proposes that one necessary pre-condition for an interreligious movement to become self-propelling and sustainable is for the interlocutors to identify and accentuate intrinsic reasons from within their faith commitments for promoting good relations with people of other religion traditions.

Extrinsic Motivations for Interreligious Solidarity

The remarkable interreligious solidarity that ensued in the immediate aftermath of the attacks of September 11 may appear odd, especially since the atrocities were alleged to have been perpetrated by al-Qa'ida, a Muslim group, but it is certainly not unique. There are numerous examples of similar interreligious solidarity movements that emerged in the wake of terrible deeds committed by members of one religious against another all over the world. Having been intimately associated with the interreligious solidarity movement in South Africa, I can personally attest to what I prefer to call a "counterintuitive reality." Notwithstanding the fact that the Apartheid crime against humanity was perpetrated in the name of a Calvinist interpretation of Christianity, which caused untold misery and suffering to the lives of millions of people of color in South Africa, the same country also spawned one of the most vibrant interreligious solidarity movements during the same period.⁴ Another striking example is the establishment of an interreligious council in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1997, shortly after the genocidal campaign perpetrated by Serbian Orthodox nationalists between 1992 and 1995 that led to the brutal murder of tens of thousands of Bosnian Muslims.⁵

How does one explain this "counterintuitive reality"? How does one account for the fact that in the midst of the worst kind of religious bigotry and barbarism, people of different faith traditions can also find solace and healing through interreligious solidarity? The

answer to this question I contend vividly illustrates the ambivalent role of religion in conflict, violence and peacebuilding. For while on the one hand religion has and continues to be implicated in situations of deadly conflict, on the other hand it has and continues to provide hope and sustenance in the face of the worst kinds of indignity and human suffering. What makes it even more mystifying is the fact that this contradictory role of religion in conflict can occur almost simultaneously, and indeed does so in many instances. I would like to illuminate what I regard as rudimentary and undeveloped theological as well as academic accounts for this “counterintuitive reality” I have described here.

The Indian Muslim peace activist, Mawlana Wahid al-din Khan (b. 1925) offers a creative and alternative reading of the oft quoted Qur’anic verses (94: 5-6) in which God promises that “hardship” is accompanied by “ease,” or “relief.” According to Wahid al-din these verses have been misinterpreted by some exegetes to mean that relief comes only after an experience of hardship. He notes that the verse in question actually speaks of ease together with hardship, which means that adverse circumstances might themselves point to new openings.⁶ Such a theological interpretation of the interreligious solidarity that proliferated in the wake of the September 11 attacks did indeed surface. For example the American Islamic scholar, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, in a direct reference to the unexpected outpouring of love and gratitude from other religious groups towards Muslims has courageously proposed that: “This has been an extraordinary year of blessing. There is often a blessing hidden in some of the worst events in our lives.”⁷

This Islamic theological interpretation of the counterintuitive post September 11 reality is not unique and resonates with similar accounts by religious peacebuilders in diverse contexts. A useful example of this can be found in the theological reflections of black Christians who were struggling against racial discrimination in Apartheid South Africa. They preferred to describe their struggle to rid South Africa of the scourge of racism with the powerful biblical concept of “kairos”, meaning a moment of crisis, of suffering and pain, but also a moment of hope and opportunity. By seizing that “kairos” moment, black Christians in South Africa were able to transform their society from racial oppression and dehumanization towards hope and justice.⁸

The anthropologist and peace scholar, Cynthia Mahmood, has provided us with a cogent academic and empirical support for this counterintuitive reality. In her studies of the conflicts of the Punjab in India she concluded that:

It would not be too strong a statement to say that many Sikhs and Kashmiris have ended up “finding religion,” so to speak, through their own incarceration and torture.

Mahmood argues that oppressive conditions and situations of intense human suffering demand more than human resources and religion provides such resources. In her view, religion can and does provide a “humanizing” role in the face of terror.⁹

Here again the finding is not idiosyncratic. Religious activists in other conflict zones as diverse as South Africa, Palestine and Latin America have given similar accounts. **Intrinsic Motivations for Interreligious Dialogue** Now while the “counterintuitive reality” I have been accounting for thus far may provide us with a wonderful opportunity for interreligious solidarity, the key argument of this paper is that it is not a sufficient condition for sustainable peacebuilding. This is so because interreligious peacebuilding emphasizes and is dependant on long-term relationship building with a broad spectrum of religious adherents, rather than a kind of “quick fix” superficial solution to a crisis. The problem of the latter strategy has been usefully captured by the title of a discussion on religious tolerance, conflict and peacebuilding held by the World Council of Churches recently that aptly read, “Interreligious dialogue is not an ambulance.”¹⁰

I am arguing that while extrinsic motivations may be helpful in getting an interreligious dialogue started they are insufficient to sustain the movement in the longer term. In order for the interreligious movement to become self-propelling and sustainable, it needs to find intrinsic reasons from within faith commitments for promoting good relations with people of other religions. Intrinsic motivations lie at the heart of genuine and sustainable interreligious solidarity. Intrinsic motivations however continue to be the most elusive goal for interreligious movements all over the world. But what exactly are intrinsic motivations all about?

Intrinsic motivation deals with challenging questions of intentionality. Why and for what purpose are you motivated for the encounter with the “other”? Is the purpose merely instrumental? For example, does there exist a need for interreligious dialogue if there is no conflict or external problem to be dealt with collaboratively? Intrinsic motivations for interreligious solidarity, moreover deals with the difficult and challenging questions of evangelism and d’awah. Does one engage interreligious solidarity in order to convert the other to your faith? Can one get involved in interreligious solidarity with a clear conscience? Is the interreligious encounter legitimated by or compromising our deep-seated beliefs and theologies? These difficult questions cannot simply be swept under the carpet. They are of primary importance, because, unless they are clearly and unequivocally answered, we run the risk of having an outwardly agreeable dialogue that does not dispose of the mistrust and suspicion and in the end is superficial and does not lead us to the goal of peacebuilding. Building interreligious trust should be one of the most important goals of interreligious solidarity movements.

Jihad Al-Afkar: The Contestation of Ideas

At this point, it may be useful and expedient for me to explicate intrinsic motivations for interreligious dialogue based on sound Islamic theological foundations. The foundations

out of which an Islamic perspective on any topic should arise are nothing less than the authentic sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Both the Qur'an and the Hadith embrace and affirm Ikhtilaf, i.e. differences in belief, perspectives and viewpoints, as being natural and an essential part of the human condition. A denial of the right of others to hold beliefs and views, which are different and incompatible to one's own, is tantamount to a denial of Allah himself. In Surah Yunus, chapter 10, verse 99, Allah, the Sublime, declares:

If your Lord had so desired, all the people on the earth would surely have come to believe, all of them; do you then think, that you could compel people to believe?

Again, in Surah Hud, chapter 11, verse 118, Allah, the Sublime, declares:

And had your Lord so willed, He could surely have made all human beings into one single community: but (He willed it otherwise, and so) they continue to hold divergent views.

Both of these verses establish the principle of freedom of belief and thought in Islam. At the conclusion of the first verse, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is himself reproved for transgressing this principle by being over-enthusiastic in convincing others with regard to the truth of Islam. Thus, the Qur'an stresses that the differences in beliefs, views and ideas of humankind is not incidental and negative but represents a God-willed, basic factor of human existence. The genius of Islam lies in its strict Monotheism - the belief in the Oneness of God. Islam teaches that the more we embrace diversity in God's creation the closer we are to acknowledging the unity of God. It is essentially this creative paradox that escapes Muslim extremists.

Furthermore, Muslims are obliged by the Glorious Qur'an to seek good relations with, and to act justly towards other peace loving religious people. (Surah al-Mumtahinah, Ch. 60 Ayah/Verse 8-9). The challenge which the principle of freedom of belief and thought in Islam holds for Muslims is to develop clear ethics and find mechanisms to manage and deal with the differences of beliefs and theologies that exist. In the Islamic perspective of religious pluralism, human beings are called upon to excel in and celebrate the contestation of ideas, known as al jihad al-afkar. This generates intellectual and social vitality. The process of contestation spawns a rich variety of competing solutions for dealing with any particular problem, each of them valid in its own right. There is no moral judgment and vilification of partners/opponents in the contest. The challenge, for contemporary Muslims, is to amplify the Qur'anic teachings on interreligious solidarity and work hard to make it an integral part of the fabric of contemporary Muslim culture.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the tragic events of September 11, 2001 have ironically created renewed opportunities for interreligious solidarity in the United States. The paper

has sought to identify a critical challenge, which interreligious activists need to face in order to transform this newfound interest and energy into a sustainable movement for peace. The interreligious movement in the United States of America has contributed to the difficult process of healing in the post September 11 period. It is my considered view however that in order for this interreligious movement to become sustainable and authentic intrinsic reasons needs to be nurtured. Why do we always need to wait for conflict and violence to overwhelm us before we feel the need to develop healthy interreligious and cross-cultural relationships? If intrinsic reasons were to precede external ones, the interreligious movement would not only be contributing to the resolution of existing conflict situations, but be going a long way towards preventing them occurring in the first place. In fact, a far more genuine and permanent religio-pluralistic culture and ethos could emerge. This we believe to be the major challenge of the interreligious movement in the United States of America in the post September 11 era. The interreligious solidarity movement needs to transform itself from an ad-hoc body into a permanent body with a long-term relevance to the nation and the world at large.

Notes

- (1) Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah, Don Terry and Ted Gregory, "Muslims Witness Support Amid Anger," *The Chicago Tribune*, 15 September 2001
- (2) Islamic Society of Michiana Newsletter, *The Voice*, Volume 2, Issue 13, October 5, 2001.
- (3) "Interfaith Prayer Marks Remembrance", in *Islamic Horizons*, November/December 2002, p.10.
- (4) For a detailed account of the South African interreligious solidarity movement, see Farid Esack, *Qur'an Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity*. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997).
- (5) For an account of the genocidal war that raged in Bosnia from 1992-1995 see: Michael A. Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- (6) For a useful discussion of Wahid al-din Khan's perspective on Islamic peacebuilding, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 181-191.
- (7) Hamza Yusuf spoke these words at the 39th annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America. His words were recorded in a report of the conference published in *Islamic Horizons*, November/December, 2002, 24.
- (8) *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1985).
- (9) Mahmood Cynthia Keppley, "Trials by Fire-Dynamics of Terror in Punjab and Kashmir". In *Death Squad - The Anthropology of State Terror*, ed., Jeffrey A. Sluka. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 70-90.
- (10) <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/news/press/01/07feat-e.html>