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Engaging Contemporary Culture: Current Trends in Interreligious Dialogue

Abstract: The traditional image of interfaith dialogue has significantly changed over the last few decades. The paper highlights some geopolitical and social processes that are shaping the forms of interfaith contact throughout the globe today. In addition, the key technological advances and their impact on interfaith dialogue, including the spread of the internet and of social networking media, are explored. The emerging forms of dialogue have in common that they reflect as well as aim to engage contemporary culture to a greater extent. By describing examples, a number of trends and their tangible results are identified and discussed, among them the spread of grassroots interfaith movements, issue-based advocacy, and the increasing involvement of young people in initiating and facilitating dialogue.

Keywords: interfaith dialogue, grassroots movements, new media, contemporary culture, religious diplomacy, youth

Povzetek: **Vključevanje sodobne kulture: sedanje težnje v medverskem dialogu**

Tradicionalna podoba medverskega dialoga se je v zadnjih desetletjih močno spreminjala. Prispevek osvetljuje nekatere geopolitične in socialne procese, ki danes oblikujejo medverske stike po svetu. Poleg tega obravnava tehnološki napredek in njegov vpliv na medverski dialog, vključno z razširitvijo interneta in socialnih omrežij. Številnim nastajajočim oblikam dialoga je skupno to, da odsevajo in hkrati poskušajo bolj vključiti sodobno kulturo. Prispevek ob zgledih identificira in obravnava več skupnih teženj in njihovih otipljivih rezultatov, med drugim širjenje osnovnih medverskih gibanj, podporo, usmerjeno na posamezne teme, in povečano vključenost mladih v vzpostavljanju in olajševanju dialoga.

Ključne besede: medverski dialog, novi mediji, osnovna medverska gibanja, podpora, sodobna kultura, mladina

In keeping with the central theme of the conference, this article addresses a few currently observable trends and developments in interreligious dialogue, particularly as they relate to engaging contemporary culture. This is accomplished in part through highlighting select trends and providing examples from different

countries and cultures, while focusing on the practical and not primarily on the theoretical aspects of dialogue. While aiming at providing a global overview, the article in no way claims to be presenting an exhaustive picture of all that is taking place in interreligious dialogue around the world. The author also brings some of her personal experiences stemming from various continents and a number of different countries and religious contexts, of being involved in interreligious dialogue and initiatives as participant, facilitator, and at times, educator.

This article operates with a broader definition of »interreligious dialogue« than usual. In this text, the term refers primarily to initiatives that go beyond the discussion of theological issues, covering diverse forms of interreligious encounter and cooperation. Dialogue – true dialogue in the sense of a two- or multiple-directional mutual flow of information and sharing – often happens in such settings, even in very profound ways and also when dialogue may not be the central goal of such endeavors.¹

1. Unexpected Initiators of Dialogue

In recent years there has been an increase in calls to dialogue originating in unexpected corners of the world: from religious traditions that hitherto have not been known to be intensive supporters, let alone promoters, of interreligious dialogue; and from geographical locations where dialogue has not had an established tradition.

One of the best known examples on the global scene was the publication in October 2007 of *A Common Word between Us and You*, signed by 138 Muslim scholars and clerics from all over the world. The document, which one of its principal drafters, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan, called »an extended global handshake of religious goodwill, friendship, fellowship and consequently of interreligious peace« (Volf, bin Muhammad and Yarrington 2010, 8), issued an invitation to Christians to engage in dialogue with Muslims. Another specific call to dialogue with the Western world has been issued by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. As a result, the World Conference on Dialogue was held in Madrid, Spain, in July 2008, at which a declaration of mutual respect for others' religions was made public. Furthermore, this growing openness to dialogue has made it possible for professors at Saudi Arabian universities to intensify their contacts and exchanges with their colleagues abroad.

Addressing the global Orthodox Christian community, Bartholomew, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, set out in his February 2010 encyclical to categorically reject all fanatical accusations against intra-Orthodox and ecumenical dialogue stemming from within the worldwide family of Orthodox churches.

¹ Leonard Swidler offers the following definition of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue: »Dialogue is a two-way communication between persons who hold significantly differing views on a subject, with the purpose of learning more truth about the subject from one another.« (Swidler, Duran and Firestone 2007, 7)

Instead, he issued a call to Eastern Orthodox Christians to engage in dialogue with other faith traditions and with contemporary culture, stating that »Orthodoxy must be in constant dialogue with the world« (Bartholomew 2010).

Concerning calls to interreligious and intercultural dialogue from Asia, »The First Indonesian-Hungarian Interfaith Dialogue on Common Responsibility of Religions for Promoting Peace and Understanding,« which took place in Hungary on 25 May 2010, should be mentioned. The event was initiated by the Indonesian ambassador to Hungary and the one-day conference was seen as the first of annually occurring dialogue encounters among representatives of religious communities from both participating countries (The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary 2010, 1). Similarly, the first Serbian-Indonesian interreligious dialogue was initiated and held in Belgrade in April 2011 (Međuverski dijalog Srbije i Indonezije 2011).

One of the most basic elements necessary for successful dialogue to take place is to enter it with honesty and sincerity, while assuming the same about our dialogue partners – in other words, building trust (Swidler, Firestone and Duran 2007, 28). In the case of dialogue initiatives originating from places and individuals previously opposed to dialogue may raise questions about their real motivation and honesty. Such reaction is legitimate, as hidden intentions and ulterior motives can undoubtedly be present and it does take courage at times to accept a handshake extended to us. At the same time, this highlights the need to also examine our own motivations for entering dialogue, without passing judgment on our (potential) dialogue partners.

2. Grassroots Movements with a Focus on Social and Ecological Activism

The past decade has seen a global explosion of involvement in grassroots movements and organizations engaged in interreligious dialogue. One of the reasons for the growth of such locally-based initiatives is due to changing perceptions, namely believing that dialogue is not something to be pursued only by religious leaders and theologians. People across the globe are getting empowered to take action regarding issues they care about. In addition, in many Western countries grassroots level activism and volunteerism have even come to be en vogue, which has helped raise their profile in society. There has been a growing number of movements with a focus on social or political activism that bear a dimension of interreligious advocacy as well. Grassroots organizations typically exhibit an inclusive attitude to segments of society that are often excluded from or are underrepresented in high-level interreligious dialogue: laity, women, young people, or disadvantaged groups such as immigrants.

A well-known example of grassroots-based interreligious work among young people that confronts elitism in the United States is represented by the Interfaith Youth Core (IYC). Founded by Eboo Patel, an American Muslim, the organization

not only encourages interfaith encounters primarily among high school students but it provides opportunities to work on shared projects that help them get involved in serving their communities. One of the principles exhibited by the IYC, as well as by many other grassroots movements, is that in their recruitment they attempt to bridge the difference between the religiously more conservative and more liberal camps of believers, drawing them both into their activities. Additionally, the global environmental crisis has also been bringing people together across the globe, drawing responses and concrete action by many grassroots initiatives focused on sustainability. An increasing number of interfaith organizations are therefore focusing their attention on tackling this very serious issue.

3. The Role of New Media, Social Media and the Internet

The global spread of new media in recent years has undoubtedly facilitated the proliferation of grassroots organizing. New media platforms make the quick dissemination of information possible and possess a potentially powerful multiplying effect through the creation of personal networks. The latter can help broad-based mobilization, especially across geographical and cultural boundaries. This can take place both in symbolic form, through raising awareness and gaining solidarity, and also literally, by inviting people to show up in person in support of a certain cause. Thus, new media tools can be effective in facilitating communication both at the local and the global level, as the experience of the Arab Spring and other recent developments have shown.

New media is also being used to spread ideas about interreligious dialogue. The rise in youtube videos on this topic, ranging from lectures to interviews to filming of actual dialogue events, along with blogs, web sites, internet-based newsletters and bulletins all indicate that dialogue organizers and participants are making use of cutting-edge technologies in order to spread their message. For example, it was through such internet-based tools that a broad-based and growing interreligious initiative in the Congo has recently been introduced to interested readers and viewers around the world.

Social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter and many different local platforms working on a similar basis particularly contribute to fast and effective participant-mobilization and dissemination of information. For example, for the past months my Facebook news feed has been loaded with regular updates – in Bahasa Indonesia – from a friend who is an organizer of an interreligious initiative taking place in Indonesia and involving only Indonesians, joining forces and calling for an end to organized violence in the Province of Papua, on the Indonesian-controlled half of the Island of New Guinea.

It is not only young people who are utilizing social media sites and forms of new media, of course, but some of the innovative approaches and observable growth of interest and initiative comes from the younger generation, particularly

from high school and university-age students. For example, former Middle Eastern participants of Fulbright-sponsored study programs with a focus on religious pluralism in America have remained in touch with one another primarily through social media sites and these contacts have recently resulted in cross-border exchanges, visits, and even the planning of a joint project between Lebanon and Iraqi Kurdistan.²

4. Peace-Building through Dialogue

Engaging in interreligious dialogue with the hopes of bringing peace to troubled countries or regions is nothing new, but recent global political developments have repeatedly highlighted the need for renewing efforts in this direction. As is visible from the recent proliferation of literature on this topic, a growing number of political and religious organizations have rediscovered the potential interreligious dialogue offers for peace-building.³ The art of religious diplomacy is gaining international respect, parallel to the recognition that religion is being instrumentalized in many of the ongoing conflicts in the world and therefore needs to be addressed specifically in the course of peace-making efforts. Among the new trends is therefore the amalgamation of the principles of interreligious dialogue and peacemaking, observable also at the grassroots level. Instead of pursuing religious diplomacy exclusively in the highest political circles, these efforts have combined immersion in dialogue for affected participants through intense and prolonged encounters with the aim of peacemaking.

5. Shifting Fault Lines

The last trend to be addressed clearly reflects changes in attitudes, influenced in part by developments in contemporary culture. This means that the fault lines within interreligious dialogue may not lie anymore where they could traditionally be expected. The dividing lines between so-called »conservative« and »liberal« representatives of any religious tradition are often becoming blurred when it comes to relating to, and participating in, interreligious dialogue. In many instances, these are simply due to a pragmatic and practice-based approach to dialogue: the participants recognize the deep-seated differences of their religious traditions and accept the fact that they will not be able to necessarily resolve the-

² These programs, funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State, are conducted by the Dialogue Institute and the International Center for Contemporary Education between 2010 and 2013.

³ Among recent publications on the peace-building aspect of interreligious dialogue is Ina Merdjanova and Patrice Brodeur, *Religion as a Conversation Starter: Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding in the Balkans* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009). Publications on religious diplomacy include Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds., *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Douglas Johnston, ed., *Faith-Based Diplomacy Trumping Realpolitik* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2003).

se through cooperation. However, there are certain pressing issues in their communities that affect everyone (such as violence against immigrants, acts of religious intolerance, poverty, ecological threats) and they agree to address these problems together and work towards their resolution. This can be achieved by building upon the commonly held values and principles by the different religious traditions. Such examples of cooperation while agreeing to disagree about certain issues, which abound, signal a clear move away from any syncretistic tendencies that interreligious dialogue initiatives and participants have been often accused of – at times justly, at times unjustly. This attitude also weakens the argument that interreligious dialogue is only pursued by the liberals in every religious tradition, which has been another criticism often aimed at dialogue practitioners.

Some of the issues that bitterly divided religious communities in the past may also be shifting due to this more pragmatic and more practice-focused approach and also as a result of general changes of attitudes in society. One of the examples, where the traditionally defined fault lines may be changing, concerns the growing number of ordained and non-ordained women in religious leadership positions. Today, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States is for the first time a female. The notion of female rabbis, already present for decades in some branches of North American Judaism is now being exported to European countries such as Germany and Hungary. The Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) elected its first female chair of the council, the highest leadership position in the organization, in 2009. While it must be admitted that many religious communities remain opposed to women's involvement in ordained ministry or religious leadership, women's active involvement even in those traditions continues to grow, for example as religious educators.

The personal component of knowing each other as dialogue partners can also make a difference in making formerly contested topics a non-issue. For example, in 2009, when Margot Käßmann, a divorced woman, got elected as Chairperson of the Council of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, the Russian Orthodox Church threatened to end its relationship and ongoing dialogue with the EKD altogether because of this decision. This crisis led to the cancellation of celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the beginnings of the bilateral dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the EKD and caused a noticeable cooling of relationships between the two church bodies. Interestingly enough, the Central European Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church expressed their disagreement with the reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church in the midst of this controversy. At that time, the Serbian Orthodox Church had been participating in a decade-long dialogue process with the EKD and the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference in Germany. It may have been a direct result of these encounters, together with the long-standing personal contacts with Margot Käßmann and the EKD through ecumenical dialogue and locally in Hannover, where both the EKD and the Central European Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church are headquartered, that the Serbian Orthodox Church did not join the Russian Orthodox Church in vehemently protesting the election of a divorced woman as a church leader (Serbische Kirche verteidigt Käßmann 2011).

6. Conclusion

The five points elaborated upon in this article aimed to provide at least a partial answer to the question, »What does interreligious dialogue look like in the 21st century and what are some of the developments that can be identified in this field?« It is clear that among the current trends are some that in fact originated many decades ago and therefore cannot be called brand new at all, such as the introduction of the interreligious dialogue component into peace-making efforts. However, some of these trends have become much more apparent and more widespread only in recent years and in many cases global developments acted as catalysts for their intensification.

As it can be observed, the face of interreligious dialogue is changing considerably. It has been noted that there are new and fresh initiators of dialogue and that issues of contention are also shifting. Overall, it can be stated that there are many efforts at engaging contemporary culture, whether in the form of social activism, volunteerism, starting grassroots movements or making use of new media platforms. It is also evident that in many new initiatives, both global and local concerns are reflected. With an increasingly connected world, international networks can be built up to raise awareness even about local issues. At the same time, attempts at engaging the local culture and continuing in and honoring local traditions in how dialogue is approached, is also present, calling for creative and respectful solutions. Through all of these efforts, the profile of interreligious dialogue has been raised considerably on the one hand. On the other hand, the new forms of initiatives have allowed for participation in interreligious cooperation for a greater number of people, including those representing underprivileged segments of society. The successful balancing of local and global engagement, and of inclusivity and professionalism, are among the major challenges that interreligious dialogue and cooperation initiatives will be facing in the future. Finally, the growing recognition that the religious component should not be ignored in peace-making efforts lends interreligious dialogue not only higher visibility but also greater responsibility for shaping the world for the next generations.

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