

Religion and Peacebuilding: Reflections on Current Challenges and Future Prospects

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Introduction¹

Religion and peacebuilding as a subfield of study and practice has gained significant attention in the past two decades.² This has included a new wave of research published in recent years that examines theoretical frameworks and possible intervention models.³

Despite the great deal of achievements seen in the field over the last two decades—which has been well documented by leading institutions like the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Religion and Peacebuilding Center, the University of Notre Dame Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, and others—there are short comings and limitations that ought to be addressed. However, it should be emphasized that identifying these limitations or gaps is not a critique of USIP or the World Parliament of Religions, or Al-Azhar dialogue initiative, etc. These limitations exist across the board and are not associated with one specific organization, country or program.

This article focuses on some of the possible areas that the field of religious peacebuilding has yet to successfully address or explore, both in terms of research and practice. Specifically, four questions were identified in order to focus the discussion: 1) What are the main issues that the field has not examined in its practice and research? 2) What are some of the major future possible directions? 3) What are the cutting edge initiatives that are emerging, i.e. the “frontier work”? 4) How can the field of religion and peacebuilding be better integrated with other sectors in the larger field of peace and conflict resolution (PCR)? What follows is a discussion that speaks to these questions by identifying key issues and gaps within religion and peacebuilding.

¹ This article is based on two panel presentations, KIACIID’s panel on interreligious peacebuilding in the annual meeting of AAR in San Diego in November 2014, and an earlier keynote presentation at USIP in October 2012. The views expressed in this article do not represent these organizations. The author is thankful for Timothy Seidel for his review and editorial assistance.

² A common feature of any developing field of study and practice is the lack of standardization and the diversity in language and categories one encounters. The same is true in this discussion. So in this essay, I will be using the terms religion and peacebuilding, peacemaking, religious peacebuilding, and interreligious peacebuilding throughout. And while there are nuances to be explored in these different terms, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them.

³ See Johnston & Sampson (1994), Abu-Nimer (1996), Sampson (1997), Appleby (2000), Gopin (2000), Sampson & Lederach (2000), Abu-Nimer (2001), Smock (2002), Abu-Nimer (2003), Smock (2006), Little (2007), Abu-Nimer, Khoury & Welty (2007), Abu-Nimer & Augsburg (2009), and Thistlethwaite (2012).

Obviously, it is always challenging to attempt to predict future developments or trends in any given field of study (certainly in a field that involves religion, one does not want to try and give “prophecies” about the future). Thus, it is important to clarify that the following are mainly reflections based on the author’s research and practice in this field over the last 25 years, including working in conflict areas such as: Sri Lanka, Palestine/Israel, Mindanao, Chad, Niger, as well as the United States. In addition, as a senior advisor at one of the newly established interreligious dialogue centers that aims to globally engage the community of researchers and practitioners who work in the field of religion and peacebuilding,⁴ I have interacted with hundreds of practitioners, researchers, and policy makers between 2013 and 2015. The state of the field of religion and peacebuilding was an integral part of these interactions.

Limitations, Challenges, and Possibilities

Prior to delving into the limitations of the field, there are certain principles that ought to be recognized in order to clarify the context and boundaries of this brief essay.

First, the roles and functions of religion and religious identity in current world affairs can no longer be ignored by researchers and practitioners (especially policy makers). The wave of recent conflicts and the violence that has erupted, especially in the Middle East, and spread to many African and Central Asian countries reflects the need to further understand the role of religion. The need here is not only to understand religion’s role in escalating and triggering political violence, but also its potential role in the de-escalation of violent conflict. It is clear that religious identity is an influential factor in the political, social, and economic realities as well as the values and cultural fabric of many communities in the world today.

Second, engaging religious leaders and institutions in peacebuilding on all levels is a crucial key to bringing the message of tolerance, pluralism, and peaceful resolution of conflicts to these communities. Indeed media, government declarations, and secular civil society groups are influential agencies, yet they fall short in reaching out to the communities on the ground, especially in areas in which violence is being spread and instigated in the name of religion. Afghanistan, Myanmar, Somalia, Yemen are only few examples that illustrate the failure of existing agencies from countering the discourse of violence in the name of religion.

Third, religious peacebuilding is not the sure solution for all social and political problems in any given society. Nevertheless, religious institutions can play a complementary role in responding to these types of problems. Thus, the effectiveness and

⁴ Since 2013 I have worked closely with the KAICIID Dialogue Center (<http://www.kaiciid.org/>), an intergovernmental organization whose mandate is to promote the use of dialogue globally to prevent and resolve conflict, to enhance understanding and cooperation.

relevance of interreligious peacebuilding can only be evaluated in the context of other micro and macro agencies of change which operate in the same society or community.

Considering the above principles that underlie the discussion in this essay, there are a number of limitations and obstacles that have in many ways obstructed the development of the field of religion and peacebuilding. Some of these are internal or self-imposed and generated factors, while others are external and often imposed by hegemonic cultural, social, and political institutions.

I. Operates on the fringes:

Religion and peacebuilding as a subfield still operates on the fringes of the larger field of peace and conflict resolution (PCR), which is itself situated on the fringes of international relations, a field dominated by realpolitik or a hegemonic power paradigm, both in academia and in politics. Obviously, there are both internal and external factors that have obstructed this subfield's development into a more mainstream arena or gaining access to the policy making and academic center of power.

Thus practitioners and scholars in this field of religious peacebuilding need to explore more ways to strategically place the work (language, discourses, and strategies) closer to the centers of power. For example, how can interreligious peacemaking programs and initiatives be systematically linked to more formal and institutional diplomatic arena? What are the structures and mechanisms required for interreligious peacemaking to have direct impact on track one (formal political track) processes utilized by governmental agencies?

Some of the factors that have prohibited interreligious peacebuilding from gaining a role in these circles include:

First, the secular cultural myth that religion and faith can and have to be kept outside of political and academic institutions.⁵ Such a principle has guided the entire cultural institutional arrangements which govern all systems (political, educational, economic, legal, etc.). As a result of this, any attempt to bring religious or spiritual identity to the center of these systems is faced with significant structural challenges, and individuals who pioneer or lead such efforts are often forced to pay a heavy price for such attempts.

Second, the myth persists that conflicts are only or primarily about material resources and never about religious identity or other ideational factors. Such perceptions are wide spread both among policy makers and even followers of religious traditions. However these two groups deny the involvement of religious dimensions to a specific conflict for two different reasons. The policy makers are often guided by their power politics and interest-

⁵ See Abu-Nimer & Seidel (forthcoming) and Seidel (2014).

based diplomacy or negotiation. While followers of the religions groups refuse to recognize the possible role of religious values, rituals, institutions, or doctrines in triggering and sustaining violence. The most popular argument often declared by the religious leaders in defending their argument is that religion has nothing to do with the conflict or violence, and reduce the analysis to the argument that it is only the misinterpretations of scriptures or lack of understanding of the original or true message of their faith.

Third, due to the marginalization of the field, there are very limited resources and opportunities for support by professional organizations, donors, or even religious leaders and institutors when dealing with religious peacemaking. In other words, the dominant perceptions and biases named above have real material consequences, in both academic and policy arenas, in terms of identifying strategic priorities and allocating institutional resources. Religious peacebuilding is seldom considered let alone identified in those priorities and so does not benefit from those resources. For example, just quick scan of the structure and resource allocations of the United Nations various agencies reflects the deep level of marginalization of religious and spiritual identity in its mission and operation.

Fourth, as mentioned above, the field of religion and peacebuilding is a subfield of the peace and conflict resolution (PCR) field, which has developed tremendously in the last four decades. Over 400 undergraduate academic programs, over fifteen graduate programs, and six doctoral programs operate in the United States alone. Hundreds of nongovernmental organizations operating in countries around the world mainly specialize in implementing peace and conflict resolution programs.⁶ Practitioners in the PCR field have developed a great number of tools and processes of intervention (including, mediation, facilitation, problem solving, interest based negotiation, reconciliation, dialogue, etc.). However, in the religion and peacebuilding field, the application of such tools remains underdeveloped, especially the adaptation of these processes to conflicts that have religious dimensions. Thus existing approaches utilized by practitioners in religious peacemaking are still rooted in and strongly tied to the secular and humanist approaches that continue to dominate peace and conflict resolution mechanisms techniques.

II. No evaluation mechanism to trace impact:

Despite the recent wave of interest in peacebuilding evaluation expressed by various donors, religious peacemaking—similar to the larger peace and conflict resolution field—has not yet developed systematic methods to capture either its micro or macro effect or impact.⁷

⁶ See Zelizer & Johnston (2005) as well as the Peace and Collaborative Development Network (PCDN) website at <http://www.internationalpeaceandconflict.org/>.

⁷ Recently in 2014 there have been some organizations who began exploring the need for interreligious peacebuilding evaluation frameworks. For example, the Alliance for Peacebuilding (AFP) (<http://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/>) launched a special interreligious peacebuilding evaluation program, as a result of a generous grant from the GHR foundation (<http://www.ghrfoundation.org/>). For

In its current state, evaluators in the field of interreligious peacebuilding can trace how participants in one workshop of interfaith dialogue have been affected by the workshop and have transformed their interpersonal and individual relationships. In their existing evaluation tools and frameworks, evaluators are able to measure the change in attitudes and behaviors of participants in such activities. They can also trace the institutional changes at the organizational level as a result of the interreligious peacebuilding engagement. For example, an organization might change its structure by adding staff from other faith groups, add members to its board of directors, open new branches in other faith communities, issue institutional declaration denouncing sectarian violence and hate speech, change in local governmental policies, policies regarding interreligious relations, etc.

However, existing evaluation frameworks in the field lack tools on how to trace the cumulative effect of all the above possible meso-level indicators of change on macro level impact. For example, to what extent has interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding efforts in the Israeli Palestinian conflict contributed to the overall relationships between Arabs and Jews in Israel/Palestine? Similarly, since the 1980s what type of contribution has the field of interreligious dialogue made in the context of macro communal relations in Northern Ireland? Neither the field of peacebuilding nor interreligious peacebuilding has developed systematic and empirical answers to the above questions.

The lack of such systematic evaluation frameworks has hindered to a large extent the development of effective models that can guide practitioners in their intervention. Thus, there is a pressing need to address questions such as: What is unique about the religious peacebuilding tools and approaches? What conditions and factors are needed for interpersonal, organizational, and societal changes to take place as a result of religious peacebuilding interventions? Why do certain intervention models work and how? And how do we know?

For example, in 2010 the author was involved in conducting a workshop with Iraqi interfaith dialogue facilitators. The trainees were amazingly courageous and open to learn new skills and implement these tools. Each one out of the 15 trainers has completed several workshops and trained other community members in interfaith dialogue and pluralism. Thousands of people have been affected by their activities, because many of them organized interfaith and intrafaith discussions following the screening of the film of the Nigeria Pastor and Imam, who worked together for reconciliation. The film was well received by Iraqi participants or audiences. For example, Saleh, an Iraqi man in his mid-60s who publically cried watching the film and took it on himself to bring the field and

more on the peacebuilding evaluation program at AFP see <http://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/our-work/about-our-work/peacebuilding-evaluation/>.

interfaith dialogue into this community, said: “this is the type of reconciliation we need in Iraq today. We lack the presence of such religious leaders.”⁸

Nevertheless, two years after the program has been completed, Iraqi communities are still living in fear, anxiety, and the sectarian divides are growing. Evaluators of this specific initiative have no measures or tools to detect the effect of these workshops and programs on the larger context of Iraq.

One of the issues in this discussion is the perception of peacebuilding evaluation itself. For many practitioners, they see little value in the attempts to evaluate results. For some this is due to their suspicions either of the ability to actually measure such results or suspicion of donor pressures to dictate local peacebuilding program designs and priorities. However for others, despite the above limitations in measuring macro impact, they feel it is enough for interreligious peacemakers to be “believers” that participants have benefited and have transferred their knowledge and skills to their communities. For them “faith or belief in the divine calling to make peace” is enough. This clearly presents challenges to mainstreaming evaluation in religious peacebuilding.

Another current example is the Forum for Intercultural Dialogue (FID), which has operated in Egypt for the last twenty years, conducting hundreds of workshops and training for Christians and Muslims in all districts of Egypt. Hundreds of their participants have been active in the Egyptian revolution. They have published dozens of books and other publications on interfaith dialogue and pluralism in Egyptian society. Despite this the program has very little evidence of their contribution to the macro political level and on the Egyptian discourse of tolerance and coexistence between religious groups.

Nevertheless, despite the explosion of sectarian violence in Egypt every few months, one still encounters the perspective that “we are all deeply committed and ‘believe’ we have an impact on Muslim Christian relations in Egypt.”⁹

The same story can be found in Israeli Palestinian interfaith peacebuilding. There are many who believe that it is effective despite the macro deterioration of Arab Jewish relations in Israel Palestine context.

In explaining this reality, practitioners point to number of factors. First, as mentioned above, there is no specialized research to design more systematic evaluation mechanisms. Second, many of the interfaith officers who implement these programs often are not professionally trained in program design and implementation, and certainly not trained in basic monitoring and evaluation techniques. Third, the donors demand impact measures, yet in most cases donors and implementers fail to allocate resources to macro or

⁸ Interview with Saleh, Irbil, Kurdistan, November 8, 2010.

⁹ Interview with a Muslim facilitator in the FID program, Cairo, Egypt, December 7, 2014.

systematic micro evaluation; “they do not take it seriously,” as stated by one international evaluator.¹⁰

III. Limited and weak presence in academic institutions:

Peace and conflict resolution programs in North America and around the world have grown tremendously in recent years. This rapid growth in academic degrees has flooded the job market with master’s degree graduates, yet with a limited number of jobs.

Nevertheless, within the field of peace and conflict resolution there is little emphasis on religious peacemaking.¹¹ For example, in the leading 5 U.S. academic institutions in Peace and Conflict Resolution, there are only 1-2 courses on religion and peace. There are two graduate programs that have developed a certificate or specialization. There is one PhD program that has been developed with such a specialty.¹²

Academic institutions and peace and conflict resolution have not yet embraced religious peacemaking as an integral part of its institutional structure or academic offering. There are a few institutions with endowed chairs in religious peacemaking, but they lack the funding and capacity to promote the academic offering in their institutions.

There are number of factors that can help in explaining this. First, Peace and Conflict Resolution programs themselves, in comparison to the disciplines of Political Science and International Relations, are often categorized, perceived or labeled by other departments as “soft sciences,” less rigorous or “naïve”, etc. Thus, Peace and Conflict Resolution programs hesitate to include religious peacemaking in their curriculum to avoid contributing to the above images within their academic institutions—underscoring the point above regarding the perception of religion as somehow outside the bounds of legitimate academic inquiry or politic discourse.

Second, academic institutions and the rigid disciplinary divisions have made it difficult for religious peacebuilding to establish itself as a separate or integrated discipline. Third, in general and especially in Western academic settings, religion is viewed as a sensitive and private matter. This obstacle affects all other areas too, however in academic and government institutions in which public space is protected. Thus when introducing

¹⁰ Focus group of international evaluators, KAICIID conference on interreligious dialogue, Vienna, Austria, November 18, 2014.

¹¹ Every year hundreds of students graduate with master’s degrees from at least 15 different graduate schools in the United States alone. See Carstarphen, et al (2010) as well as this “Guide to MA Programs in Peace and Conflict Resolution” at <http://www.internationalpeaceandconflict.org/profiles/blogs/guide-to-ma-program-in-peace>.

¹² In addition to Emory University, which launched a program in religion and peace in 2012, the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego also initiated new program in 2014.

religious and faith frameworks the issue becomes very challenging to any agent of change: “We do not talk about ‘our God’ and definitely not Allah in the classroom.”¹³

IV. We still protect your children from religious pluralism

Despite the flourishing of religious peace programming, the overwhelming majority of these programs are still targeting adults and community members, especially clergy. The overwhelming majority of religious groups and sects continue to protect their children from “education for religious pluralism.” Sunday schools rarely get a Muslim talking about his/her faith, certainly Muslims in Sunday school or Friday schools, do not get Christian, Jewish, Buddhist monk to explain their faith principles and practices. In Egypt, when the trainer suggested that a guest speakers to be invited to the Sunday Schools or have a priest come to the mosque to speak to the Muslim children, both sides were furious and argued that such an act will provoke their communities.¹⁴ The same reality exists in many Northern faith communities.

Obviously there are some programs in the field of interreligious peacebuilding that focus on interfaith education for children. However the above observation reflects major trends and is not an attempt to generalize to all religious peace initiatives. The few initiatives on religious peacemaking for children tend to be the smallest in scale and least accessible.

In an attempt to explain such trends in the field, a few factors emerged. First, religious clergy are still operating as gatekeepers of their faith and feel that their community has entrusted them with their children. Thus they are protective of the spiritual needs and identity of their young generation. Second, the assumption that children need to know their faith first and should not be confused with different doctrines before their have formulated their religious identity. Third, there is a perception by some that interfaith dialogue and interfaith education might weaken ones’ own faith.

V. Mainstreaming gender in religious peacebuilding:

Some progress has been made in introducing women’s experiences and perspectives in the peacebuilding field (primarily due to the efforts of international agencies such as the UN, USAID, DFID, World Bank, etc.). In interreligious peacemaking (academic, organizations, and participants), the majority of the programming and their organizations remain male dominated (both in perspective and representation).

In the case of Israel/Palestine, there is a pioneer women’s interfaith group that has been operating since 2005. However in many conflict areas, there is simply very little

¹³ As a student of interfaith dialogue noted as she criticize her school said in a dialogue group discussion 2015, American University, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴ Interfaith training in Cairo, Egypt, December 5, 2014.

access for women to these activities.¹⁵ For example, after two years of working with religious peacebuilding and pluralism in Islamic Quranic schools in Chad and Niger, Salam Institute for Peace and Justice trainers were finally granted access to women's Quranic schools. However, the clergy would not allow or promote the participation of the women of their community in interfaith dialogue meetings, and certainly not as panelists or facilitators. Such realities also exist in international organizations such as UN Women, the United Nations agency that focus on women. The agency does not have a single program on women and religious identity (let alone women and interreligious peacebuilding).¹⁶

There are too many instances that reflect the lack of proportional representation of women in interfaith dialogue and in interreligious peacemaking in general, especially when the programs are focusing on theological conversations or issues or when the target audience of the program is defined as institutional leadership. However, the lack of engagement of women in theological conversations or in leadership in interfaith dialogue changes when we examine the field at a grassroots level, as documented by Susan Hayward and Katherine Marshall and the reports by the network Women Waging Peace.¹⁷ At such levels of interreligious peacebuilding women participation is far more visible, even more than men in various areas.

When attempting to explain the underrepresentation of women in interreligious dialogue on a leadership level, several factors are identified. First, religious institutions themselves are still structurally dominated by men. For example, a majority of religious structures prohibit women from assuming full leadership in the realm of theological interpretations and leading their congregations or community of followers. In the Abrahamic tradition, various Christians denominations have recently opened the gates of leadership to women. In Muslim communities, a few Muslim women like Amina Wadud or Afra Jalabi have taken pioneer steps to challenge the domination of male preachers,

¹⁵ However this group is very small and marginal in the subfield field of interreligious peacebuilding in Israel Palestine. In addition, its work and even mere presence have been affected greatly by the polarization and waves of political violence that swept the region in the last decade. See more detailed about this interfaith women group in Abu-Nimer, Khoury, and Welty (2007).

¹⁶ Discussion in International Women's Day 2015, UN Side Event, March 13, 2015.

¹⁷ See Marshall et al (2011) and Hayward (2015) as well as the Women Waging Peace website at <http://www.womenwagingpeace.net/>.

especially in mosques¹⁸. This reality shapes the nature, scope, and level of women representation in interreligious peacebuilding and dialogue field.¹⁹

Second, interfaith dialogue is often defined as a space to talk about political problems or community relations problems. Such themes in many cases have been defined by most social norms, especially in traditional patriarchal societies as the male domains. Such structural conditions often limit women's access to interreligious peacebuilding, especially when it is primarily defined or frame politically by the intervention design.

Third, although there are a few private and governmental donors who have invested in supporting interreligious peacebuilding, the majority of such donors neglect or do not insist on incorporating or mainstreaming women's voices in the programs that they support.²⁰

VI. Religious peacebuilding is lacking in reaching out to media

Like the peace and conflict resolution field, religious peacebuilding has not invested enough resources in developing strategies and approaches to handle or reach out to media outlets. For example, observing the Arab revolutions in which youth and media constitute the primary engines behind the protest, it is obvious that for any peacemaking programs to become effective in mobilizing large segment of society, it has to establish creative ways to present itself and engage all forms of media.

In addition, since the early 1990s the "telereigious industry" have made serious breakthroughs in its capacity to reach out to followers of all faith traditions. Thus there is no shortage of religious media. In fact, there are many religious stations or satellite programs, both in Northern and Southern hemispheres, which preach intolerance and hatred, and contribute to ethnic and sectarian violence.²¹

¹⁸ Obviously there is a growing body of literature that examines all religions from a critical gender analysis lenses, nevertheless, some have stepped forward to challenge the practice of certain rituals and beliefs, and systems. See references on Amina Wadud case who led mixed gender prayer in a New York Muslim community setting: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/31/gender.religion> ; http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/19/nyregion/19muslim.html?_r=2&; <http://pluralism.org/reports/view/111>. In the case of Afra Jalabi she delivered Eid Khotba in 2014 in a Canadian gender mixed Muslim community.

¹⁹ As a senior advisor at KAICIID, the author has faced such challenge of integrating women's voices in interreligious peacebuilding at policy-making levels. Through several international summits, institutional religious representation was overwhelmingly dominated by male clergy. See descriptions of the global assemblies' panels and representation at <http://www.kaiciid.org/>.

²⁰ Based on discussion among interreligious donor affinity group sponsored by El Hibri Foundation, Washington DC October 20, 2014.

²¹ Both European and American media have contributed to the phenomenon of Islamophobia, and the negative images of Westerners and other foreigners are an integral part of many media outlets in the Muslim world. In the United States, organizations like the Center for American Progress

In 2014, a number of initiatives were launched to intentionally build the capacity of religious leaders in social media and media in general. This came especially after the widespread threat of ISIS who creatively mastered the use of media to globally disseminate its message of exclusion, hate, and destruction. In their efforts to counter this security threat, a number of governments have started paying additional attention to the potential use of media by religious leaders to inject a discourse of interreligious pluralism and tolerance.²²

The lack of capacity and awareness for the use of social media and media among interreligious peacebuilders can be explained by several factors. First, the existing religious media outlets themselves are part of the problem of promoting violence in the name of religion. In many conflict areas, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, or Somalia, as well as Western communities, extreme right wing religious groups have integrated religious media into the existing “war-making system.” Many of these religious media stations are mainly devoted to propagating one faith—their own—and excluding and denying other faith groups or sects from existence. They are often supported by political or ideological exclusionist agendas. Second, public media outlets are similar to government and academic institutions in most cases (especially in the Western hemisphere they separate the religious or faith from the public sphere or life). Thus dealing with religious identities in any form becomes a sensitive issue for these media outlets. Third, religious peacemaking is not the most attractive source of news. A group of “religious men” debating or answering questions about their faith does not make headlines.

VII. The interreligious enclave syndrome:

Interreligious peacebuilding programs and organizations are often isolated from the larger peacebuilding field, and certainly from political and social movements for peace and change. Integrating, coordinating, and networking with social and political movements for justice and peace are crucial strategies for those peace workers who aim to bring structural changes to their society.

It is often documented that in conflict areas there are certain interreligious peacebuilding activities and organizations which consciously frame their work as non-

(<https://www.americanprogress.org/>) and Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (<http://fair.org/>) have published studies documenting Islamophobia in American media.

²² In an attempt to counter this limitation among religious leaders to utilize media and social media for peace and pluralism messaging, KAICIID produced a toolkit to enhance the capacity and raise awareness of religious leaders in such area (see, media and interreligious dialogue program at: <http://www.kaiciid.org/>). Other governmental agencies, such as the U.S. State Department began integrating social media as one of the themes in their counter terrorism and extremism programs (see Global Summit for Counter Violence held in Washington DC in 2015).

political or carried out by actors who deliberately disconnect themselves and their programs from the existing social and political peace movements (Abu-Nimer, 2010).

For example, in Israel/Palestine, there are a number of interfaith dialogue groups and organizations. When interviewed these organizers did not perceive themselves as a part of the Israeli Palestinian peace movement. In fact they deliberately disassociated themselves from such movements (Abu-Nimer, 2007). Such interreligious leaders did not see themselves as partners who could take stands for economic, social, or political justice. There are similar cases in the United States. For example, very few interfaith groups joined the Occupy Wall Street campaign in various American cities. However, this pattern of isolation does not imply that there are no interreligious or multifaith organizations that are active in advocacy for social and political justice. But these groups are often clearly distinct from those religious peacebuilders that focus on dialogue, cultural and religious exposure programs.

In articulating the possible reasons that affect the interfaith dialogue and interreligious peacemaking decisions to stay away from peace and protest movements, various factors are identified. First, interfaith dialogue programs tend to be operated by faith-based initiatives or individuals who have had little professional training as community organizers or peacemakers. These officers tend to lack the skills or strategic and in-depth analysis of the conflict that they operate in. Many are mainly motivated by faith. Strategic alliances are not part of their faith-based planning programming. On the contrary, linking their efforts with other social movement groups and organizations might be viewed as risky and dangerous, especially in a conflict context.

Second, in many cases interfaith initiatives are de-politicized because they tend to be supported by government agencies or donors who represent the mainstream establishment or dominant majority organizations. Thus any link to social or political groups might be negatively perceived by the donor. For example, the Israeli government will support interfaith programs (not financially, but certainly ideological), while Palestinian organizations support nonviolence resistance and social justice movements. Until the Egyptian revolution in 2011, the government often supported or endorsed interfaith dialogue programs between Muslim and Christians that were mainly apolitical (Abu-Nimer, 2007). In the Arab world, many of the interfaith and interreligious groups stood by, waiting on the dividing line for too long before they joined the social nonviolence movements characterizing the Arab Spring. Such organizations often operate within the realm of the mainstream establishment. Similar patterns exist in conflict areas such as many interreligious organizations in Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, etc. For example, majority of the interreligious institutions in Sri Lanka between 2007 and 2010,

rarely took a clear stand against certain governmental policies, especially during the protest against the war (2007-2010).²³

Conclusions

Despite the limitations identified in the above analysis and reflections, there is no doubt that religion and peacebuilding as a field is growing and expanding. Governmental as well as nongovernmental agencies, research centers, think tanks, and the donors funding this work are beginning to discover and explore the potential effect that religious institutions and actors have in reaching out to grassroots communities. Unfortunately, these realizations have mainly been a product of their failure to overcome or defeat the religious extremism and growing security threats, especially in European and American context. Thus, policy makers are starting to recognize the fact that a pastor, an imam, or a monk can be a key force in curtailing the discourse of radicalism and extremism on a village, neighborhood, or even at family levels.

Such a realization is essential and contributes to the ability of religious leaders to play their proportional role in building peace in their communities and the world. However agencies who support interreligious peacebuilding for such purposes ought to be careful not to negatively impact or harm local religious actors or organizations by wrapping their interreligious peacebuilding and dialogue efforts with a framing or a blanket of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism. This approach delegitimizes and reduces the moral authority of many religious actors. They become associated with governmental agencies and foreign political and ideological agendas. For interreligious peacebuilding actors to be credible and effective in their intervention, their discourse has to continue and rely on their moral and spiritual message, values, and beliefs.²⁴ In addition, when the counter terrorism and extremism become the main lenses in which policy makers, researchers, and donor agencies approach or introduce interreligious peacebuilding, the field and its actors (leaders and their institutions) is perceived as being manipulated by political structures and eventually lose their capacity to reach out to large segments of the world population. To maintaining spiritual and moral authenticity in interreligious peacebuilding, and addressing the limitations identified in the earlier sections of this essay, there are several other initiatives that can contribute the advancement of the field of religious peacebuilding: First, professional development of the field is needed. This could include the initiating of an annual international conference sponsored by a Religious Peacebuilding Practice and Study Association (RPPSA). Such an association could certainly promote further legitimacy of the

²³ It should be noted that often in such conflict areas government and security policies tend to be extremely strict and brutal. They leave very little space for any public organization or movement to express dissent or opposing views against political or national authority and policies. In each of the listed countries, religious and secular civil society leaders have been killed and imprisoned for their reluctant to publically side with governmental policies.

²⁴ Throughout 2014 and 2015, in their campaign to fight ISIS, many Muslim and western governments have launched multireligious or unireligious campaigns and enlisted top religious leaders to take stand against this extreme groups, however such initiatives were mainly framed from a security and counter terrorism lenses and narratives

field in both academic and policy circles. Second, there is a need for a special Journal of Religious Peacebuilding (JRP). Such a publication could provide a space for scholars and practitioners to explore theories, methodologies, and applications of religious peacebuilding worldwide and in multi-religious settings. A refereed journal will certainly advance the status and visibility of religious peacebuilding in the field of peace and conflict resolution.

Third, launching a network for Religious Peacebuilding (NRP), which would function as a professional networking for practitioners that enhance the capacity of scholar practitioners to reflect and disseminate their experiences.

Finally, researchers and scholars of interreligious peacebuilding need to further develop a research agenda that is rooted in both the field of peacebuilding practice and in scholarship. Such an agenda would be instrumental in advancing the accumulation of knowledge and theory building in this field, in order to answer questions such as: what makes interreligious peacebuilding effective? Are the theories of change that underlie interreligious peacebuilding different or similar from other peacebuilding processes? How essential is theological interpretation and reinterpretation for interreligious peacebuilding? How can interreligious peacebuilding operate within a secular paradigm?

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