

Harmonization versus Liberation: Basic Conditions for Effective Interreligious Peacebuilding

A Response by Mohammed Abu-Nimer to Ron Kronish

(original article: <http://irdialogue.org/journal/issue05/“inter-religious-dialogue-as-a-method-of-peace-building-in-israel-and-palestine”-by-rabbi-dr-ronald-kronish/>)

Dialogue, peace education, conflict resolution, management, settlement, and reconciliation are processes that have been utilized by practitioners and more recently by faith based organizations to promote peace in conflict areas. Interreligious peacebuilding (IRPB) practitioners apply these processes in contexts in which religious identity has been manipulated by politicians and religious leaders to justify certain policies. Thus the emerging field of IRPB should be viewed as part of a wider peace and conflict resolution field that has been developing since the late 1970s and has accumulated impressive knowledge on what makes dialogue and peacebuilding effective.

The following are some reflections on several core lessons learned from the field of peace and conflict resolution that can enhance the effectiveness of IRPB in conflict areas and assist its practitioners in preparing for genuine peace and reconciliation processes. These core lessons can be crystalized as: Power Dynamics, Symmetry, Harmonization vs. Liberation, Credibility, and Link to Action.

Ron Kronish's piece on IRPB in Israel/Palestine mirrors some of the limitations and shortcomings of this emerging field, especially when it is implemented in a conflict context without careful examination of the macro setting and without questioning the impact of that conflict context (including asymmetrical power dynamics) on the interreligious dialogue framework, process, and expected outcomes of success.

Power Dynamics and Symmetry: IRPB, especially the dialogue process, often neglects to take into consideration the conflict reality of asymmetric power dynamics. For example, Palestinians in East Jerusalem understand and experience themselves as living under occupation and suffer abuses of their basic human rights in mobility, employment, housing, etc. Such reality ought to be recognized when IRPB models are designed and described. Recognizing the conflict reality of the participants in the dialogue requires that the IRPB organizers adjust their models and processes to reflect Kronish's assertion that "they live in different realities."

Harmonization versus Liberation: Humanizing the enemy is crucial but not enough. Humanizing the other is an important and essential part of peacebuilding work; nevertheless, the PB programs that stop at the "humanization gate" of individual awareness (dialogue design and implementation) might indeed end up contributing to the status quo--in this example, helping the occupier, the Israeli occupation system, both find justification for the existing reality of basic human rights abuses and justifying inaction against them. Those Palestinian and Israeli peace activists who oppose dialogue when its goal is mainly harmonization argue that such activities can end up encouraging inaction and fail to directly confront the structure of the occupation.

For example, all of the 10 categories of accomplishments listed by Kronish precisely reflect the limitation of this kind of interreligious dialogue, especially when being utilized by the dominant Israeli Jewish majority to engage the dominated Palestinian group members in a limited sensitization process that has a clear ceiling of accepting and humanizing the other. Due to the nature of the participants, organizational sponsorship, facilitators, and definition of success, the interreligious conversation and interaction process becomes primarily focused on harmonization as opposed to liberation (Abu-Nimer et. al., 2007).

Kronish's article declares that the main goal of IRPB is as follows: "The goal of peace is normalization, not separation." This statement provides an example of why IRPB and dialogue do not have a wide acceptance or credibility among Palestinians in the occupied territories and elsewhere. "Normalization" is the term used by those who oppose interacting and dialogue in all its forms with Israeli organizations and the Israeli government.¹ They accuse the dialoguers of contributing to accepting the reality of occupation and pacifying the resistance (both militant and nonviolent resistance). The use of "normalization" here is problematic, even if it is intended to refer more generally to having a "normal relationship" between Israeli and Palestinian communities under a new set of rules and different conditions (for Palestinians without occupation and for Israelis with acceptable security guarantees). It signals a lack of attention to the political context in which the dialogue is taking place and to the very particular meaning of "normalization" in that context.

Even if according to Kronish, IRPB leads to the call for joint or separate action, it is clear that the overall framework utilized for the dialogue lacks the macro contextual analysis of power dynamics. In fact, it aims to "equalize" the experience of all the participants in the IRPB model by largely focusing on the individual's suffering and reducing the relationship from collective rights to individual awareness of victimhood and humanization. The system of occupation and control that will continue to generate the root causes of the conflict between Arabs and Jews in Palestine and Israel winds up being absent from the model or the analysis.

This is contrary to what has been described regarding conflict transformation experiences in South Africa and Northern Ireland, where IRPB produced massive structural changes of the system of apartheid and Protestant ethnic control respectively. Without having these kinds of outcomes or objectives in the framework of the Israeli-Palestinian IRPB, it will continue to be perceived by most Palestinians and their allies as a tool for the dominant majority to mask reality and delay the theological liberation of both Palestinians and Israeli Jews from the consequences of their relationships as occupied and occupier.

This dynamic is not unique to Israel-Palestine interethnic and interreligious dialogue; research has documented similar processes in other conflict areas (see Hubbard, 2001 and Abu-Nimer, 2009). In Mindanao, Philippines, when Muslim minority members of interreligious dialogue groups asked the organizers to adjust their interreligious peacebuilding efforts to include issues related to the recognition of their historical rights over the land, self-determination, and the role of the Catholic Church in the subjugation of the indigenous people, the IRPB organizer declared

¹ The BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement has called for stopping all contacts with Israeli institutions, especially those linked or related to occupied territories (<http://bdsmovement.net/>).

that this is not the purpose of the dialogue; we need to understand each other and accept each other. Additionally, when Buddhist monks in Trinco Mali in northeastern Sri Lanka stood up and declared that interreligious dialogue should not be political and should avoid any discussion of the domination of the Sinhalese Buddhist culture over Muslim and Christian Tamil cultures and religion, he was adopting a model of harmonization and attempting to deprive the minority members in the dialogue group of exploring their role as liberators of their faith and their collective ethnic identity. In Egypt, Muslim imams have stated that there is no need to delve into the structural restrictions imposed on Christian Copts, de facto defining the state as Islamic, and called for an emphasis on humanizing, common values, and some cultural differences.

Credibility of IRPB and Link to Action: The credibility of IRPB in a conflict context is always linked to the type of analysis and framework that the peacebuilder uses to view the conflict and design their intervention accordingly. This is one of the most difficult challenges that limits the effectiveness of IRPB, and dialogue in general, in conflict areas. Practitioners are often asked by skeptics about the value of such programs.

I face such questions at least once a week, “As a Palestinian, you have been doing dialogue for three decades; why do you participate in Israeli-Palestinian dialogue?” Over the years, my answer has ranged over the following:

What other options do we have?
We have tried everything else.
War is easy to make, but violence destroys our community.
Dialogue is about education and deeper understanding of the other.
Individual change is essential for structural change.

In addition to the above, I have begun looking at the IRPB as a liberation space (Abu-Nimer 2011). The liberation model of IRPB in conflicts such as the Israel-Palestine conflict includes an additional transformative component that is integrated or mainstreamed into the typical four stages of dialogue processes that Kronish outlines.²

The joint analysis of collective power dynamics and its implications for individuals’ faith and daily life practices is crucial for the development of new awareness among the participants, one that takes into consideration the need for a different set of actions by each group depending on their own context and reality. Such analysis starts by exploring the privileges of the individual in the first stage of knowing the other as a human (what privileges do you have as individual Israeli or Palestinian?). In stage two, when participants in interreligious dialogue jointly explore their holy texts, a crucial question needs to guide their exploration: How are their asymmetric power relations moving them to understand their holy texts? What sources of theological liberation can they commonly identify in their text? In the action stage, the primary dialogical question is: What is the range of actions that your faith inspires you to take in order to eliminate all forms of

² The four stages of dialogue as described by the article were identified in early 1980s as part of a problem-solving workshop (Herb Kelman 1972; Abu-Nimer 1993; Halabi 1998; see also <http://kelmaninstitute.org/>). The four-stage dialogue process is a model that has been articulated and detailed in number of research and program evaluation reports (Abu-Nimer 2004).

oppression and injustice? What are the limits of your faith-based action in confronting the systems of domination in your society?

The integration of the above questions into an IRPB dialogue process can enhance its credibility among underprivileged groups and individuals. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, despite strong religious identity among Muslims, Christians, and Jews, IRPB is even more marginalized and underestimated as a tool for peace and reconciliation than other secular forms and models of peace and reconciliation. The lack of credibility of such organizations among the Palestinian community is a major challenge, and as a result the majority of the activities are based on the engagement of foreign Christians and Israeli Jews (with few Muslim participants). The inability to engage many Palestinians, either Muslims or Christians, in such programs is primarily linked to the approach and ownership of such organizations (Abu-Nimer, 2007).

Since the early 1990s, the IRPB field in Israel and Palestine has been facing a crisis in sustaining partnerships between the key organizations on both sides. On many occasions, scholars and practitioners justify or explain this reality as due to the waves of violence and wars that sweep the region every few years. However, intra-organizational and inter-organizational factors such as structure and management, methodologies, and funding sources play a significant role in the lack of ability to sustain organizational partnerships and relations across national and religious divides. This is certainly an area of research that can shed further light on the potential of IRPB in Israel and Palestine as a viable venue for supporting peace and reconciliation.

The ability to sustain partnerships is crucial in determining the effectiveness of IRPB outside of Israel and Palestine, as well. Global efforts by the UN, the European Union, the United States Government, and Muslim countries support IRPB to prevent the manipulation of religious identity to justify political violence. However, a careful examination of these efforts often reveals the reality that such campaigns rely primarily on secular civil society organizations and individuals to implement their programs; as a result, faith-based organizations are not taking the lead. In addition, religious actors in these efforts tend to be mainly moderate voices and lack wider public constituencies, and their influence on the national and public agenda remains limited. The credibility of these religious organizations will be key to the success of IRPB in genuinely contributing to the culture of peace in any given society.

The various complex conditions discussed above that can enhance or diminish the effectiveness of IRPB in conflict areas should not be misunderstood as dismissing the potential importance of IRPB. On the contrary, after more than a century of violent conflict in the Israeli-Palestinian context, there is no doubt that a genuine arrangement based on peace, justice, and security cannot be achieved without a full and constructive engagement of religious constituencies.

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