



NOREF Report

Religious dialogue and the quest for peace in the Middle East

Rev Dr and Canon Trond Bakkevig

Executive summary

Many political conflicts have a religious dimension, as religion is at the heart of the identities of those involved. Thus, religious dialogue may be a key to the peaceful resolution of these conflicts. Nowhere is this more true than the Holy Land. But how can such a dialogue be initiated and sustained, what problems does it face, and what is the character and role of a facilitator in the process? Here, Rev. Dr. and Canon Trond Bakkevig addresses these questions by drawing on his long experience of working in the area of religious dialogue between religious leaders of Israel and Palestine.

Dialogue, he says, is vital in creating space where religion can be made visible, common humanity affirmed, the “other” recognised, and constructive solutions which recognise the integrity of those involved in conflicts achieved. Thus, religious dialogue can clear the way for political decisions. All this, however, requires the facilitator of

dialogue to play a distinctive role, which involves a range of attributes: among them attentiveness to the complex range of actors and factors in any encounter, understanding of and insight into the religious beliefs and sentiments of the participants as well as respect for them personally, the capacity to engage and network widely, and – a vital quality – the ability to listen.

The story of the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land is a case-study in such efforts to practise religious dialogue between leading representatives of the faiths in this region – though small, more than half the world’s people have religious or historical links to this tiny area. The story reveals the problems and obstacles the Council has faced in its early years, but also a glimpse of the great contributions the religious dialogue it represents can in principle make to a sustainable peace.

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Political and religious dialogue

It is politicians, not religious leaders, who negotiate an end to disputes and armed conflicts, and sign peace treaties. These conflicts usually turn on issues of power, control, and sovereignty. Politics, the process of governing this world, is at their heart.

But religion also becomes an important part of political conflicts when these hostilities reveal aspects related to the identities of the main participants. The conflicts in Northern Ireland or Sri Lanka, for example, are often tagged by the religious identity of the leading groups involved (respectively Catholics-Protestants, Buddhist Sinhalese-Hindu Tamils). The conflict in the Holy Land can be seen as a conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, but everyone knows too that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are deeply involved.

Religions are intertwined with personal, national and ethnic identities – with history, buildings, places and politics. Because religious identity is also used to define oneself in relation to non-adherents, such identities can easily become elements in a political conflict. The many elements of human identity are so intertwined that it is impossible to distinguish what part might belong to a pure religious nature. In any case, in this world there is no “pure” religion.

The role of religious leaders

If religious leaders are to play a role in efforts to create peace, they have to rise above their own origin, history or national politics; they need to seek religious roots beyond their visible and immediately accessible identity. Neither religious leaders nor nations can, in the face of other believers, convincingly claim to have superior access to God or the mind of God. As I was writing this report I heard an Iranian ayatollah say that if anyone claims to speak on behalf of God, we would have many Gods. In a religiously charged environment like Iran, that is a political statement, with deep relevance also for the situation in the Holy Land. The ayatollah’s insight should leave us with humility in the face of God, and in the face of others.

Holy Scriptures are dear to believers, and religious leaders have a guiding role in interpreting them. They need to remember – and also to remind believers – that even if they can find in their Holy Scriptures arguments for war and conflict, and no room for those of other faiths, the same scriptures also teach respect, peace,

forgiveness and reconciliation. Any interpretation of Holy Scriptures means making choices. Religious leaders need to clarify what principles and what clues are needed to read Holy Scriptures in support of peace and justice.

Religious leaders can intensify conflict by delegitimising the religious attachments of others instead of seeking a common vision for a city which all regard as holy.

The separation between religion and state is familiar in many parts of the world. That situation opens a space where religious leaders are able freely to speak their mind. In the Holy Land, this is not so straightforward. For the mainstream Muslim establishment in Palestine, which is more closely linked to the political establishment, tradition and context are not the same. The Jewish side is again different. The Bible speaks about priests being close to kings, while it is prophets who utter the critical words. But only after 1948, for the first time since the Roman occupation of the Middle East, has Judaism related to a state which is based on Judaism; in modern Israel, the Chief Rabbinate is part of the government. At the same time, there are huge differences between rabbis. Some are very critical of the government; others are linked to it and hesitate to distance themselves from it.

Religious leaders have important roles in the Holy Land in guiding their flocks and interpreting scriptures. They can intensify or escalate conflict by stressing religious elements, or by delegitimising the religious attachments of others instead of, for example, seeking a common vision for a city which all regard as holy. The cases include a Chief Rabbi who asks why Muslims need Jerusalem as a holy city when they already have two others, Mecca and Medina; and a Supreme Judge of sharia courts who says that Jews have no cultural or historical connections to Jerusalem.

Dialogue can enable religious leaders to seek a common vision and shared ground, because:

- Dialogue makes religion visible as a community of believers – as persons and peoples created by God.
- Dialogue establishes a theological foundation of common humanity. That is a foundation which is beyond human tensions because it is created by God.

- Dialogue invites partners to identify religious elements which are of relevance to a political conflict. Thereby it becomes possible to discuss and deal with these elements.
- Dialogue opens religion to questions from other believers. Through this, we may all discover new resources for peace in our own religion.

Dialogue can establish a common foundation, affirm shared humanity, sort out religious elements in a conflict, and open space for the “other” in one’s own religion. Dialogue can deny space for religious incitement, and create space for constructive solutions where the integrity of all, religious or non-religious, can be respected. In short: religious dialogue can clear the way for political decisions.

How to facilitate religious dialogue

I have been a facilitator and convener of religious dialogue for many years. I have failed, I have at times managed, I have despaired, I have rejoiced, I have lost my sleep, I have had my secret moments of amusement, and I have at times been on the brink of giving up. First and last, I have had to reflect on and live with this role. What follows are not conclusions, but reflections along the road.

A religious dialogue in the midst of a conflict is constantly faced with new challenges. The actors and factors involved are not only those visible at the table (if they are able to come at all) – but governments, bureaucrats, religious scholars with differing opinions about dialogue, an audible or elusive (even secretive) public opinion, and violence both ongoing and sudden. Participants have feelings of humiliation, superiority, anger and not least a deep desire to be seen and heard. A facilitator has to deal with all these elements – often at the same time. And her or his work extends beyond what happens around the table or engagement with those who sit there; the ability to network widely is also necessary.

A facilitator needs knowledge of the relevant religions in order possibly to foresee which issues are relevant for an actual peace process. It is necessary to understand the sentiments of those involved, as well as intellectually to understand why religion is important to them. A facilitator’s capacity reflects the fact that he or she is not religiously neutral – as

everyone is, for human beings always belong to or have a background in a religious tradition. The role of the facilitator starts with deep respect for partners and their faith. A facilitator will be respected in her or his identity, but will also be expected to rise above their own religious adherence. The same holds true for a facilitator’s political viewpoints; it is crucial that a facilitator must be able to supersede any personal opinion and to value and respect positions and concerns on each side.

Above all, however, the most important qualification for a facilitator is the ability to listen – not only to what is being said, but also to undertones and background noises. Each conflict, and every religious dialogue, differs from each and every other in certain respects. In religious dialogues, for example, there will sometimes be participants who are well versed in theology, used to religious discourse and have a good command of the language being used; and others with meagre theological training, no experience in dialogue, little knowledge of other religions, and in need of translation.

To a certain degree, all these elements are in play in the Holy Land – with regard both to politics and religious dialogue. The frequent result can be tensions in the dialogue and difficulties in mutual understanding. Participants may want different issues to appear on the agenda; one may want to engage in dialogue, while another for the moment does not want to, in fear of being used for purposes that serve the stronger part. In such situations, a facilitator needs to be more than an observer, and make the concerns of the one understandable to the other in such a way that dialogue either continues or takes a necessary break.

The beginnings of religious dialogue

The Oslo process and the Oslo accords were signed in September 1993 between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), as well as the United States and Russia. At its core, the agreement signified a relationship between two political entities, two peoples and a piece of land which should be divided in two. Some months afterwards, in connection with the awarding of the Nobel peace prize of 1994 to Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat, a workshop in Oslo with participants from the Middle East concluded that there was a need to engage

religious leaders – for otherwise the peace process might fail. A short while later it did start to fail, suggesting that this was a sound judgment.

Among the reasons for the breakdown was that on both sides, religious extremism was on the rise. Some Palestinians were driven by religious motivations to become suicide-bombers or to commit outright bomb-attacks, both of which killed Israelis, and to practice religious incitement. Jewish extremists became a more important factor in the Israeli settlement population, through their actions in setting up outposts and settlements which would make the establishment of a Palestinian state more difficult, and also by using violence against neighbouring Palestinian villages and their inhabitants.

Rising religious extremism contributed to the failure of the Oslo accords, highlighting the need for religious dialogue.

In this situation, the Church of Norway, with the support of the Norwegian government, asked me to look into the possibilities of establishing a dialogue among religious leaders in Jerusalem. Jewish and Christian leaders accepted the invitation to

dialogue. The Muslim side found it more difficult. This was, I believe, for two reasons. First, Muslim leaders traditionally have not had an independent role in relation to political leaders, and hesitated to assume one. Second, and in consequence, they asked: why should we talk to Jewish leaders about any topic other than when they will end the occupation?

Religious coexistence in conflict

But on the grounds that Palestinians and Israelis will continue to live side by side even after the occupation is ended, I maintained that there are issues between them where religious leaders have special responsibilities. These include Jerusalem, a holy city to all three religions; the sites holy to the various religions, which exist in close proximity to each other; and the frequent use of religion to create misleading images of the other in the media or in the field of education. In the end, Muslim leaders agreed to participate, on two conditions: that the dialogue was not negotiation, and that all issues could be raised and discussed.

If it was hard to get to this point, it must be remembered the conflict in the Holy Land is an asymmetric one – not a conflict between two sides with equal powers. One party is an established state, and has the possibility of defining and determining the overall situation in the region; the other exists to a large extent at the mercy of the more powerful side, and can at best rule over limited areas. This imbalance of power is a further key to understanding the Palestinian position.

The first meetings with official Jewish, Christian and Muslim participation took place in 1997. Though there had been many dialogue efforts in the area, this was the first official religious dialogue. The outcome was to create a network of religious leaders. This network, which has survived many changes, remains the genesis of what is there today.

A groundbreaking institution

A meeting was held in Alexandria in 2002 under the auspices of the Archbishop of Canterbury and Sheikh Tantawi of al-Azhar University in Cairo. Most of the important religious leaders in Israel and the Palestinian areas were present. The participants issued a statement condemning both violence perpetrated *in the name of* religion and violence *justified by* religion. The meeting set up a continuation committee that operated in the Holy Land. There, violence persisted in causing problems, especially suicide-bombings, which made life insecure and unpredictable for Israeli citizens and deeply frustrating for Palestinians, who for moral and political reasons wanted another approach to end the occupation.

As events developed it became apparent that the dialogue initiative required a wider scope and a different organisation – many of the religious leaders insisted on the need for local ownership of the process. These leaders met and decided that religious dialogue should be maintained by institutions which could secure official representation and long-term commitment. At that time these institutions were the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the Meeting of the Heads of Local Churches in the Holy Land and the Supreme Judge of the Islamic Sharia Courts in the Palestine Department.

In summer 2005, they agreed upon what was called a “Protocol” for the “Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land”. The preamble of this document reads: “In the Name of God, who is Almighty, Merciful and Compassionate, religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities, have proposed to form The Inter-religious Council of the Official Institutions of Religious Leaders of the Holy Land.” The purpose of the Council was to secure a meeting-place, sustain close relations with the governments, promote mutual acceptance and respect, and work for a durable peace. I was asked to be the secretary and later the convener of the Council.

Religious dialogue conditioned by politics

It was a milestone to have agreed on a constitution for the new body, but there were practical difficulties in constituting the Council. The Supreme Judge of the Sharia Courts, Sheikh Tayseer Tamimi, had several times been refused a permit to enter Jerusalem, and for several years much of the Council’s energy was spent in efforts to secure one. The Chief Rabbinate worked relentlessly in support of a permit but, even though the Supreme Judge was an official Muslim representative, appointed by the president of the Palestinian Authority, Sheikh Tamimi was never given the chance to participate regularly. This matter made it evident to everyone, if it was not clear before, that inter-religious dialogue in the Holy Land is at every point conditioned by politics.

We responded to this problem by finding meeting-places outside of Jerusalem, though it hampered the Council’s representative functions. And other problems arose. For example, in late summer 2006, an assembly of “Religions for Peace” in Kyoto, Japan, invited a large delegation from the Holy Land which was composed of a Chief Rabbi, a Patriarch and a Supreme Judge. The Council had our own meetings, which were joined by Professor Bruce Wexler and the Rev John Lindner from Yale, thereby providing good American partners.

Our meetings were frank, open and constructive, but the context (this was the summer of the conflict between Israel and Hizbollah, and attacks over much of Lebanon) provided us with new challenges. In the final plenary session, the fine results of our meetings

evaporated when participants in these same meetings gave speeches that fused politics and religion in an unholy alliance. Suddenly we were faced with the question: does the Council have a future? The rest of 2006 was used to try to get around this corner – if indeed it was a corner and not a wall.

The breakthrough was a suggestion by Professor Wexler that we all agree on a pledge, an internal “code of conduct” prescribing how we speak to and of each other in public, and how we bring issues onto our agenda. Everybody signed this agreement at a meeting in January 2007. We could start then working on a new basis.

Ongoing tensions

Soon, we were again faced with the kind of issue that shows why the Council is needed. The Mughrabi gate leading to the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem had been waiting for repairs since a snowstorm in 2004. The question was who should do the work. So many interests and considerations were involved: archaeological excavations around the area, whether a police force could enter the bridge between the gate and the mosque, Jordanian sovereignty over the Haram el-Sharif, Muslim fears of an Israeli takeover of this holiest of religious sites, and Israel’s annexation of and claim of sovereignty over East Jerusalem (including the Old City).

A very tense situation developed, in which the Muslim side expressed the view that amid what they saw as an existential situation for Muslims, dialogue could not go on as usual. We managed, later in 2007, to get the Council’s work started again, but it had to be without any publicity. It was (and still is) very sensitive for the Muslim side to meet with Jews appointed by an official institution like the Chief Rabbinate.

Public exposure and consolidation

When at the end of 2007 the whole Council was invited to Washington – through the efforts of Cardinal McCarrick and Ambassador Tony Hall, and with the help of Professor Wexler’s organisation *A Different Future* – this had to change. The visit itself, and the fact that we had to go public, consolidated the Council and made members accountable to each other both inside the body and in the public sphere. A communiqué summarised our efforts and plans.

The preamble laid the common ground: “All of us believe in one Creator and Guide of the Universe. We believe that the essence of religion is to worship Him and respect the life and dignity of all human beings, regardless of religion, nationality and gender.”

The statement went on to address the duties of religious leaders; the status of holy places as places of worship and not of conflict; the notion that believers of the three religions have been placed in the same land and have to live in peace; and to outline a plan of action of which two important ingredients were a shared reflection on the future of Jerusalem, and the promotion of mutual respect and acceptance of this principle in schools and media.

With regard to the involvement of women (in reference to the word “gender” in the preamble), I am sad to say that this official dialogue hitherto has taken place exclusively among men. There are no women in any leadership positions. As a convener, I regard it as one of my duties constantly to draw attention to this issue. But I see no immediate solutions.

Outreach, expansion and research

The visit to Washington created an atmosphere of trust within the Council which helped meetings with politicians back in Jerusalem. The latter included the speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi; Israel’s then foreign minister Tzipi Livni, who challenged the Council on how religious leaders deal with extremists; and the US’s then secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, who after carefully listening ended the meeting by sharing her own experience of what it felt like to grow up and be considered three-fifths of a person because of the colour of her skin! Rahm Emmanuel, later chief of staff for President Barack Obama in the White House, was another who met with the Council.

The Council has to manoeuvre between possibilities, opportunities and crises. One such crisis occurred in 2009 when Pope Benedict XVI met with religious leaders in Jerusalem. As the Council’s convener, I was entrusted to greet His Holiness for two minutes on its behalf. But Sheikh Tamimi got up and delivered a fierce attack on Israeli policies. In light of the agreed code of conduct, his intervention made things more difficult.

In 2008, the Council created one-and-a-half staff positions in Jerusalem. The personnel filling these posts handle logistics, plan and prepare meetings, develop networks, and draft statements. We have also set up a [website](#) for the Council.

Research is proceeding on the concept of “the other” in Israeli and Palestinian school textbooks.

In spite of difficulties, we are proceeding with (among other things) a big research project on the concept of “the other” in Israeli and Palestinian school textbooks. Here, we have a joint Israeli-Palestinian research team and a large international advisory panel. Professor Wexler – who has worked with me since the time of his proposal of a code of conduct in 2006 – is the mentor of this project, whose funding comes from the US state department. We are proud of the project and look forward to receiving its results.

The constant issues

The work of the Council has to be mindful of four issues that are ever at the forefront of tension and discussion in the Holy Land.

The land

Both Jews and Muslims maintain that the land is given to them by God. Some Jews maintain that this gives them ownership of the land, and the right to govern it and advise others about their place in it. Other Jews also consider that the land has been given to them, but add that it should be governed by justice and with equal rights for all. Some Muslims claim that since the land once was Islamic, it remains so and must always be. Other Muslims want equal rights for all. The provocations of extremists on both sides show how important studies and dialogue are in dealing with this issue.

Jerusalem is the most difficult part of the land issue. What makes it more complex is that some Muslim voices say there never was a Temple in Jerusalem, and some Jewish voices say the Qur’an never mentions Jerusalem, therefore Muslims have no right to claim attachment. Such views are in part due to ignorance, but owe most to a lack of recognition of or respect for the other’s attachment

to the city. Religious dialogue can further mutual understanding and acceptance, and deal with the relationship between this as a religious issue and as an issue of political sovereignty. We hope that we can realise our joint aspiration, namely “a common vision for this city which all of us regard as holy.”

Access to holy places

Some are inaccessible because they are on the wrong side of the security fence/wall, as is the case with Rachel’s tomb in Bethlehem. Some are only partly accessible because security considerations are used to refuse entry, as is the case when access is limited or denied to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, and the Nativity Church in Bethlehem. This is seen as lack of respect for freedom of religion, but can only be solved by political authorities.

Holy places

Some places are holy to more than one religion, like the Ibrahimi Mosque/ Cave of Makpela in Hebron and Rachel’s Tomb. In Jerusalem, the al-Aqsa mosque and the Western Wall are side by side. Religious leaders can help separate the issues of state sovereignty and religious control. Dialogue can be used to discuss if space can be made in holy places for members of other religions.

Concept of the other

The media and public sphere often circulate comments from and about religious leaders, some of which are derogative of others. We try to track these and to find ways of dealing with negative remarks. We also hope through our schoolbook project to facilitate an education which can contribute to peaceful coexistence. Religious leaders have a special responsibility not to incite, but to speak well of each other and educate their flocks in doing likewise.

Conclusion: the responsibility of religious dialogue

Religious dialogue takes place in the midst of a situation characterised by polarised views of the same situation. Palestinians do not control a country of their own, experience everyday restrictions, and at root feel that they are exposed to military power. Israelis feel that they are not secure, that they are not

wanted in the region, and that Palestinians represent a larger force which wishes them ill. Palestinians do not recognise themselves in this, and do not understand how the Israelis, with all their military power, can see things that way.

Religious dialogue takes place in the midst of all this – on a small piece of land which is regarded as important only because of religion. After all, this land has no oil or minerals, is not a trading hub, and (despite the heavy build-up of arms) has no strategic importance to outsiders, neither globally nor regionally. But the conflict does involve the whole Muslim and Jewish world, and a superpower; and it engages people all over the earth – more than half the world’s population has religious or historical links to this tiny area.

Against this background, the very least which can be expected from Israel and the Palestinian Authority is that they take religious dialogue very seriously, that they support appointments of religious representatives, and that they lift all restrictions which can hinder participation in such a dialogue. All participants in these efforts should feel a special responsibility to speak for non-violence and against incitement.

In addition, both Israelis and Palestinians should feel that they gain something by religious dialogue. Jews should feel that they are welcomed as people and with their faith, and that religious dialogue is an important contribution to their security. Palestinians must be given something to show the value of dialogue, and in a deeper sense, of non-violent efforts. The most obvious achievement would be easy access to their holy places – something which to a large degree is denied them today.

Where religious dialogue is not taken seriously, religion can easily become the big spoiler of any peace effort. If it is taken seriously, it can make formidable contributions to a lasting and sustainable peace in the Holy Land.

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