



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

A major objective of the Religion and Peacemaking Initiative of the United States Institute of Peace is to promote greater interfaith tolerance internationally. As a means of developing proposals for action to enhance peaceful coexistence, particularly among Christians, Muslims, and Jews, the initiative convened two two-day interfaith trialogue meetings in July and October 2002. Twenty-one leaders from the three faith communities participated in these meetings and generated the recommendations contained in this report. We hope that these recommendations will be of value to both religious and secular institutions seeking to promote greater interfaith amity.

This report has been prepared by David Smock, director of the Religion and Peacemaking Initiative.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policies.

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CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Agenda for This Trialogue	3
Promoting Greater Mutual Understanding	3
Interfaith Dialogue or Trialogue	5
Need for Action by Religious Communities	7
The Interface between Religion and Politics	9
The Impact of the Media	10
The Role of Education and Culture	11
Conclusion	11

Building Interreligious Trust in a Climate of Fear

An Abrahamic Trialogue

Briefly . . .

- The events of 9/11 and after have made painfully clear the need for improved understanding among Christians, Muslims, and Jews.
- Participants in the meeting advocated that interfaith dialogue be conducted at all levels of religious hierarchies and across all segments of religious communities.
- It can be enormously valuable for persons of each religious community to hear members of the other communities confess the problems and shortcomings that that community is experiencing. Communication of humility and self-criticism can go a long way toward healing, understanding, and mutual respect.
- There is need to develop programs for interfaith reading of sacred texts to educate, inform, and deepen understanding of one another.
- There is need to develop shared mourning processes surrounding death, destruction, and injustice, particularly in relation to terrorism and acts of governmental oppression. More thought needs to be given to how to promote acts that express repentance and facilitate reconciliation and mutual forgiveness.
- It is essential to recognize that there are narratives in all three religions that are pluralistic and peaceful, but that there are also exclusive narratives in each of these traditions.
- Peaceful coexistence can be most effectively advanced by having activists in the three communities develop a common justice agenda to facilitate commitments across lines of religious division.
- It might be feasible to form facilitation teams composed of representatives from the three faith traditions to intervene in situations of conflict and tension.
- Participants asserted that diplomats need to recognize that religious peacemakers can be their allies in the promotion of peace and reconciliation.
- Several participants argued that trust and peaceful coexistence do not come so much from mutual learning and sharing through dialogue as from action on the ground and policy change, particularly in relation to the Middle East.

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- Participants were concerned about widespread stereotyping of Islam and misunderstanding about the nature of the Islamic faith.
- Many participants expressed strong views about the negative impact that the media has on interfaith relations. They believe that the excessive emphasis on the negative side of religion and actions of religious extremists generates interfaith fear and hostility. Greater media attention needs to be given to positive steps taken post 9/11 to reach out across religious boundaries.
- Efforts should be made to develop teaching materials about the three faith traditions for use at various levels in the educational structure. For example, an anthology could be developed on the three Abrahamic traditions to be used in high schools. In addition, courses need to be developed on Abrahamic peacemaking, teaching how the three faith traditions understand and promote peace.
- Building interfaith trust in the current climate of fear is both a challenging and urgent task.

Introduction

Conflicts among faith communities trouble those communities in many parts of the world. For Americans the most important relationships are those among Christians, Muslims, and Jews, and this includes relationships with the wider Muslim world. The events of 9/11 and after have made painfully clear the need for improved understanding among Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Misconceptions and misunderstandings abound. Little effective communication occurs. Extremists on both sides would like to see a clash of religiously defined civilizations. And the more that extremists define conflict in those terms, the more it will turn out to become a true clash of civilizations, thus becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

To forestall such a clash, dialogue is essential at various levels. First, there must be dialogue among political leaders from the West and from the Muslim world. Equally important is dialogue among people of faith, among religious leaders, among scholars, and among lay people. The fact that Muslims, Christians, and Jews all consider Abraham to be their spiritual ancestor and progenitor provides a natural basis for dialogue and religious communication. The sacred texts of the three traditions are also interrelated with each other.

Despite the genuine differences that exist among the three Abrahamic traditions, they all put forward visions of peace. We need to consider how the enduring virtues of these three great faiths can be used to build a shared community in terms of mutual respect, openness, trust, dignity, and responsibility. These three monotheistic religions need not meet as rivals, but can meet as partners and moral equals in building a shared future. In knowing each other, they can give the best of their traditions and values to creating a genuinely peaceful interfaith community.

Cultural contact between Islam and the West has been marred by historically unequal power relations, leaving the West often arrogant and insensitive and the Muslim world frequently defensive and insecure. But active engagement with one another, through sustained dialogue and interaction, permits each to understand the deeper meanings, associations, and history of the other. Active engagement permits us to understand the authentic, life-affirming expressions of human religiosity in each of the other faiths. Above all, we seek a paradigmatic shift in how we see, understand, and relate to one another. Our awareness can and must be expanded beyond existing limitations, as we develop a greater sense of belonging to the family of humankind.

There are sections of all three faith communities that are not prepared to engage in dialogue or accept responsibility for the conflicts generated within their own traditions. But all three communities also have members and leaders who cherish the opportunity to become better informed, who welcome the opportunity to hear and acknowledge the

pain that each may feel in relation to the other, and who are prepared to collaboratively work toward a more enlightened and peaceful future. And in doing so they recognize that there are serious issues that divide them and that these issues are often as much political as theological.

The overarching question is how to develop interfaith trust in the prevailing atmosphere of fear and mutual suspicion. In situations of trauma, as experienced continuously in the Middle East and as experienced in the West since 9/11, people are likely to turn inward. Accordingly, they have great difficulty in reaching out to the religious "Other." The prevailing attitude is often that no one's suffering can be compared to our own suffering. In this climate of victimhood, the Other—whether nation, ethnic group, or religious community—is often labeled simplistically and unhelpfully as either good or evil.

Agenda for This Trialogue

The Religion and Peacemaking Initiative of the U.S. Institute of Peace organized two two-day Abrahamic triologue meetings in 2002 to address these concerns and issues. Muslim, Christian, and Jewish leaders were convened in Washington to consider these questions:

- How can relations among the three religious communities be improved and how can mutual recrimination be avoided?
- How can the three communities increase their mutual understanding and respect for each other?
- How can the three communities strengthen their commitments to reconciliation and peaceful coexistence?

A total of 21 religious leaders from the three communities participated in these sessions. The Christians and Jews were generally Americans; the Muslims came from the United States, Europe, and primarily Muslim countries. The names of the participants are listed at the end of this report.

This report summarizes the conclusions drawn by the participants in the two meetings. For the most part these are consensus conclusions, but when no consensus existed, that fact is indicated. The recommendations for action are grouped under the following topics:

- How to make dialogue/trialogue more effective.
- Action required by religious communities.
- Action required from nations and governments.
- What the media needs to do.
- What the educational sector needs to do.

Promoting Greater Mutual Understanding

Religion and faith are increasingly influential forces in many parts of the world. Reza Sheikholeslami, one of the triologue participants, said: "From Latin America to Algeria, Palestine, and Israel, to Indonesia and the Philippines there is a revival of articulation of resentment, opposition to factual or fictional suppression, and recognition of oneself in solidarity with others on religious terms. 'Religion,' as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out, 'is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions.' The liberal democracies are increasingly becoming managerial and procedural and lack vision to deal with the common good. Market forces are devoid of moral content. The prevailing order is increasingly and systematically depriving many of dignity and even minimal respect.

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Active engagement with one another, through sustained dialogue and interaction, permits each to understand the deeper meanings, associations, and history of the other.

“If religion does not become part of the solution, it will motivate hate.”

“With respect to Islam, one distinction that many observers fail to make concerns the difference between revivalism and fundamentalism.”

“As our political systems are incapable and far too short-sighted to address the basic moral questions, which have significant impact on world political stability and prosperity, it is the duty of religion to fill the dangerous chasm. If religious leaders fail to lead the moral crusade for justice and human dignity, if they fail to enunciate the essentially humane roots of religion, the oppressed, the deprived, the humiliated, and the dispossessed will flock to others who have chosen to forget the humaneness of religion, but will use its language and the solidarity it entails for violence. If religion does not become part of the solution, it will motivate hate.”

But the increased salience of religion also carries liabilities. Many participants were concerned about widespread stereotyping of Islam and misunderstanding about the nature of the Islamic faith. This has been particularly troublesome since 9/11. According to Abdul Aziz Said, “The shared cultural roots joining Islam with the West are forgotten far too often. Although recently voiced opinions regarding a ‘clash of civilizations’ posit that Islam falls outside the Judeo-Christian and Hellenic cultural continuum, the reverse is in fact the case. Classical Islamic civilization was constructed out of Arab, Biblicist, and Hellenic cultures but cast a wider net by integrating Persian, Central Asian, and Indian components within its cultural synthesis. Historically, Islam is the true bridge between West and East.

“With respect to Islam, one distinction that many observers fail to make concerns the difference between revivalism and fundamentalism. Islamic revivalism is a broad-based social and political movement directed toward internal renewal. First and foremost, it is a response to a widely felt malaise that has left Muslim societies weak and unable to meet the modern world on its own terms. Although its manifestations are remarkably widespread, Islamic revivalism is not a monolithic movement, nor is it equivalent to the militant fundamentalism that arose as a reaction to foreign incursions and perceived threats to identity and security and that captures the attention of the media. Islam and the West today are dangerously out of touch with one another, and misperceptions and mistrust have led to an ever-deepening estrangement. But there is the prospect of a cooperative nonadversarial relationship between Islamic and Western civilizations. Such a relationship would be premised not on ideas of cultural triumphalism, but on mutual respect and openness to cultural eclecticism.”

Sheikholeslami asserted that as a small step in changing public opinion, Muslims themselves should become reintroduced to some of the early conceptions which were essential to the Islamic faith: acceptance of the other, the divinity of social/communal differentiation, equality before God, and the dismissal of any superiority of one community over others. “I believe that the Christian and Jewish communities should become familiar with the essential message of Islam, which I think to be that of peace and tolerance. It is important if we want to live with each other to recognize the humanity and humaneness of the other. Many examples can be cited from the Quran of the non-confrontational dimension of Islam.”

In an effort to overcome some of the confusion that Christians and Muslims often exhibit in relation to Jews, Robert Eisen said, “What I believe is frequently misunderstood by Christians and Muslims is the ambiguity and complexity of Jewish identity in the modern period. The Christians and Muslims with whom I have spoken tend to think of Judaism as a religion and of Jews as a people who adhere to that religion. What is underestimated is the extent to which Jewish identity is as much defined by a host of other factors such as nationality, ethnicity, and culture. Often religion plays an important role in combination with these other factors in the formulation of an individual’s Jewish identity, but there are any number of Jews for whom religion is of less importance than these other factors—or of no importance at all. Jews with a historical or cultural identity may simply not be as interested in dialogue with Christians and Muslims as Jews who have a more purely religious identity. A Jew who has a strong sense of Jewish identity that is not predicated on religion may find it difficult to relate to devout Christians or Muslims.”

An obstacle to improved interfaith relationships is fear surrounding “supersecessionism,” particularly on the part of Jews in relation to Christianity and Islam. In so far as these faiths proclaim themselves to supercede and to be the “perfection of a new version” of Judaism (by Christianity and Islam) and Christianity (by Islam), this denigrates the older traditions. But Christians pointed out that supersecessionism is only accepted by some branches of Christianity, and Muslim participants identified a number of statements in the Quran that assert that it is God’s will to have diversity and that God has ordained three distinct Abrahamic paths to the Holy.

Mutual understanding is frequently deterred by the rigidity of fundamentalism. Participants agreed that fundamentalism exists within each of the three traditions. Fundamentalism is often accompanied by an inclination to see the world sharply divided into good and evil forces. An inclination toward religious zealotry is often reinforced by the unquestioning adherence to rigid religious dogmas and submission to religious authorities.

Interfaith Dialogue or Trialogue

Participants advocated that interfaith dialogue be conducted at all levels of religious hierarchies and across all segments of religious communities. Said articulated the consensus view in stating: “Together we can explore and conceptualize a shared vision of peace that has depth and integrated meaning, that integrates our understandings, experiences, needs, hopes, and fears. A vision of total peace, achieved through dialogue, permits us to know one another not as rivals, but as partners exchanging the very best that each other has to offer.”

Dialogue can explore common values, challenges (such as structural inequalities, terrorism, peacebuilding), adversaries, prejudices, and mistaken assumptions. All these can be surfaced and mutually explored. Participants then may be able to identify interfaith partners and connect their communities with shared societal concerns and joint action projects. New models and ways of relating to the Other can emerge through the dialogic process of listening, sharing, learning, and empathizing.

But participants shared two reservations about how interreligious dialogue is normally conducted. First, dialogue generally places too much emphasis on talk; the greatest impact comes from undertaking activities together. Engaging in joint activities and projects is generally a more effective means of building trust and mutual understanding than is discussion or debate.

Second, participants in interreligious dialogue tend to be like-minded moderates who are already committed to dialogue and have considerable understanding of the other two faiths. They may be marginal to their communities and not reflect the majority view of their co-religionists. Often interfaith elites who serve as the “official representatives” of their faith communities are eager to preserve their positions, when they actually have little credibility within their own communities. In turn, they are unlikely to be accountable to or responsible for their communities. It is primarily extremists or separatists who create interfaith conflict but they are rarely willing to engage in dialogue. Their encounters with the other communities are more likely to be confrontational. Even if extremists cannot be successfully engaged with dialogue, those individuals who are invited to participate should carry weight in their own communities and be able to influence the thinking of significant portions of these communities.

Donald Shriver suggested fruitful topics for dialogic exploration. The three religions, especially Christianity and Islam, make certain exclusive claims of authority. On what particular internal bases (for example, scripture and theology) would each of them call for social-political orders that legally mandate religious tolerance? What internal standards make it difficult for tolerance to emerge unambiguously from each religion? What sorts of help would each faith provide for the maintenance of religious neutrality in government, that is, how does faith itself undergird the very concept of “secular”? How, on

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the contrary, does it hinder or contradict a secular definition of the functions of government? What is the difference between mutual tolerance and mutual affirmation? What would each of us most regret if we looked back on our respective religious histories? What are the times and places in each of our faith-histories that function as sources of pride?

It has been observed that each community tends to promote the best in its own tradition while criticizing the worst in others. This tendency seems especially common in our respective uses of our own scriptures. All of this raises the question of what authority we assign to these scriptures. Are each of us permitted by our own traditions to be selective in the use of scripture? Is every word authoritative, or are some themes and texts more authoritative than others? Are there illustrations from each tradition of themes and texts that, in our time, we consider more “weighty” than others, especially for the purposes of dialogue? What does each of us admire in the traditions of the other two? What does each of us fear in the other two?

It can be enormously valuable for persons of each religious community to hear members of the other communities confess the problems and shortcomings that that community is experiencing. Communication of humility and self-criticism can go a long way toward healing, understanding, and mutual respect.

The principal goal must be to build trust. This can be achieved through coming to know and understand the Other. Those engaged in these efforts must be prepared to take risks and confront the possibility of offending or alienating both members of one’s own community and of the other communities. But over time and through creative efforts, misunderstandings can be overcome and trust will hopefully follow. At the very core of any trust-building program must be empathy. Authentic trust cannot be built without convincing demonstration of empathy emanating from both sides.

Other recommendations for effective dialogue include the following:

- More thought needs to be given to how to engender trust among the three faith communities and particularly how to promote intra-community awareness of the suffering of the Other. Each community needs to be convinced that the other communities genuinely feel its pain.
- There is a need to develop programs for interfaith reading of sacred texts to educate, inform, and deepen our understanding of one another. This also builds awareness of textual linkages that exist among the three Abrahamic traditions and expands opportunities for cultivating a greater interfaith Abrahamic identity. Similarly, devotional practices can be developed together. Particularly valuable would be shared study of Islamic, Judaic, and Christian texts on acknowledgement, empathy, confession, repentance, and forgiveness.
- The three traditions need to share with each other their understanding of peace and spirituality, and they need to broaden their understanding of peace collaboratively.
- There is a need to develop shared mourning processes surrounding death, destruction, and injustice, particularly in relation to terrorism and acts of governmental oppression. More thought needs to be given to how to promote acts that express repentance and facilitate reconciliation and mutual forgiveness.
- Through dialogue each community can articulate what it needs from the other two communities. For instance, Jews express the need to hear Muslims and Christians condemn all forms of terrorism, including suicide bombers in Israel. Muslims express the need to hear from Jews and Christians that they truly comprehend the suffering experienced by Palestinians at the hands of Israeli authorities.
- Through dialogue each community can work to see itself as others see it.
- A severe problem in many dialogues, particularly in the Middle East, is asymmetry of power. In the Middle East, most dialogues are initiated and dominated by Jews and held in Jewish locations, which tends to alienate Muslims. More dialogues should be held in neutral locations.

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- Dialogue must not be confined to clerics. Dialogue must be multifaceted; different dialogue efforts should involve different constituencies and strive to achieve different ends. The most promising participants are those with the potential to develop a commitment to peaceful coexistence and mutual enlightenment. The role of women as potential religious peacemakers must be recognized.
- It would be helpful to develop handbooks to guide local congregations on how to engage in productive dialogue with congregations of other faiths. Many local congregations experiment with dialogue but they could benefit from the prior experience of other congregations.
- Similarly, handbooks could be developed for particular regions of the world. One of the dialogue participants has started writing a handbook on how to conduct inter-faith dialogue in the Middle East, particularly Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel.

Need for Action by Religious Communities

Participants expressed deep concern over the problems confronting their own communities today. Much of the hard work to promote peaceful coexistence must be done internally by each community. The religious peacemakers must take on the defamers and mythologizers within their own communities who are demonizing the Other. Religious peacemakers within each community have essential roles to play in countering the hostile and distorted statements made by their co-religionists toward the other religious communities.

But participants lamented that internal critics of the defamers are often not listened to, so they remain marginalized and ultimately ignored by their own communities. These critics are often the chief advocates of pluralism, peaceful coexistence, and dialogue with the Other. In the end, the voices of hard-liners and those espousing intolerant views end up being the ones generally heard, in part due to the media's tendency to focus on negative news, and in part due to the ease with which political leaders manipulate deep sensitivities and in turn generate fear and outrage. Finding ways to support the views of internal critics advocating pluralism, within and across communities, emerges as one of the most important challenges confronting religious peacemakers.

One of the biggest challenges to creating a pluralistic framework is how to react to co-religionists who have adopted separatist mindsets. These exclusivist perspectives, often forged in isolation, entail the exclusion or denial of the equal rights of others and thus form some of the greatest obstacles to the legitimacy of religious pluralism. One of the main challenges for peacemakers is bolstering moderates while exploring the views of, and making room for, separatists as well.

Cultivating an ethic of self-criticism emerged as one of the central concerns of participants. Self-criticism in two respects—accountability to and responsibility for the highest values of one's own community, and as a path for building trust and security with other religious communities. Self-criticism within a religious tradition reflects the belief that each tradition has the obligation to reflect deeply on the practices and principles governing its own religious system. Internal self-criticism involves an awareness that leads to accountability, to the need and ability to correct actions and thoughts inconsistent with religious ideals. On the other hand, participants were deeply concerned over whether internal self-criticism is possible or desirable for any community that feels weak, defensive, or under attack.

Self-criticism is implicit in the freedom to interpret, which invites other communities to respond in kind. In relation to others, self-reflection and interpretive freedom are essential confidence-building measures that have the potential to establish the sense of trust and hope for peaceful coexistence. But the practical application of self-criticism

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entails costs and risks for religious peacemakers. Critics have been censured, kicked out of religious houses of worship, and even had their lives threatened and their offices targeted for speaking out critically.

Several participants emphasized the need to recognize the fear and sense of vulnerability that Muslims in this country feel. They do not feel as free as other groups. Wire tapping, religious profiling, problems confronted at immigration, government statements that whoever is not with us is against us—these all create hypersensitivity and a predisposition to pull back from interfaith interaction. Jewish participants also pointed out the sense of vulnerability that many Jewish families in this country feel.

Recommendations for action by religious communities included the following:

- Religious peacemakers in each community need to inform religious peacemakers in other communities about those with whom they can work, that is, those who share their commitment to peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding. Each community needs to know who its potential partners might be in the other two communities.
- Peaceful coexistence can be most effectively advanced by having activists in the three communities develop a common program of action to facilitate joint commitments across lines of religious division. Examples include developing a justice agenda or a project to help humanize globalization from an Abrahamic perspective. A powerful illustration occurred when Rabbis for Human Rights in Israel organized delegations of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish clerics to jointly visit both Palestinian and Israeli casualties in hospitals. This compassionate act received good media attention and had a public impact in both Israel and the Palestinian Authority.
- The three communities should explore and promote the option of nonviolence in such zones of conflict as the Middle East. The three communities can also work to discourage the use of religious justifications for violence and hateful actions or policies.
- It is essential to recognize that there are narratives in all three religions that are pluralistic and peaceful, but that there are also exclusive narratives in each of these faith traditions as well.
- Muslim participants pointed out the effect of mutuality. For instance, if Christians and Jews can acknowledge the evil of Israeli oppression of Palestinians, then Muslims will be more prepared to condemn Palestinian suicide bombers.
- Religious actors might take a civility pledge, if not formally at least personally, to guide their manner of communicating on interfaith matters, to make sure that they do not demonize the Other or make ad hominem attacks.
- “Boundary leaders”—those who operate on the borders of their communities and are ready to reach out to other communities—need support from each other. Their work is psychologically and spiritually taxing. Boundary leaders are primarily experts at empathy, and this can be threatening to the separatists. Support networks would be particularly valuable for boundary leaders who are under attack.
- It would be helpful for boundary leaders to share with the wider communities stories of their “conversion” experiences that led them to the boundaries, ready to reach out to other faith communities.
- Religious leaders should be urged to utilize their skills as empathizers and conflict resolvers not to reinforce boundaries but to reach out to other religious communities. Clergy often protect boundaries rather than reaching across them.
- We should provide training for seminary students and military chaplains about the other two faiths. Clergy who are well trained in interfaith relations can have an enormous impact on the level of intercommunity understanding.
- Sermonic aids and ideas for sermons relating to interfaith issues could be made available to preachers in the three traditions to promote mutual understanding. A website could be developed for this purpose. Model sermons on interfaith topics could also be posted to give guidance.

Peaceful coexistence can be most effectively advanced by having activists in the three communities develop a common program of action to facilitate joint commitments across lines of religious division.

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- It might be possible to form facilitation teams composed of representatives from the three faith traditions to enter situations of conflict and tension. Multi-faith media teams might also be created to jointly author essays and articles on religious, particularly interfaith, issues.
- Greater publicity needs to be given to examples of religious peacemaking and inter-faith collaboration. Such examples can provide models for others to replicate. Little press attention is given to these activities because goodness is generally not considered newsworthy.

It might be possible to form facilitation teams composed of representatives from the three faith traditions to enter situations of conflict and tension.

The Interface between Religion and Politics or Diplomacy

“One area where work is greatly needed in the United States is to promote more awareness of how the United States and its actions are viewed around the world,” noted Susan Thistlethwaite. “Even from a Just War perspective, it is critical for the security of peoples and nations that they understand clearly how others regard them and their actions. We need to look at how our religious traditions can be used to promote the virtue of empathy. Dualistic understandings of good and evil promote violence. All evil is projected onto the other; the theological category that remains for oneself is that of goodness and innocence. The sense of American innocence has been extended to include an almost complete deadness to the understanding, interests, and perspectives of the other side, which would contribute to the work of empathy. One of the functions of terrorism is to deaden empathy and make the work of peace and reconciliation more difficult, if not impossible. The evil-doer deserves punishment and because the evil-doer is the embodiment of all evil, no punishment is too extreme. This generates a descending spiral of violence and hatred. Vengeance is the companion of unresolved anger, lack of acknowledgment of wrongs, and a dualistic understanding of good and evil. It is our duty as religious peacemakers to be critical of our governments, when appropriate, in the name of religion, spirituality, and citizenship.”

She then quoted Alan Geyer, who wrote, “Peacemaking, whether in personal, group, or international relations, requires a variety of capacities for self-transcendence: transcendence of one’s own interests and perspectives for the sake of understanding the interests and perspectives of the other side, which calls for the virtue of empathy; transcendence of one’s pride and defensiveness, which inhibit the acknowledgment of injuries done to others—a capacity for repentance and perhaps restitution; transcendence of one’s own grievances and desire for vengeance over injuries inflicted by others—a capacity for forgiveness” (Glen Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War*, Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 1998).

Participants asserted that diplomats need to recognize that religious peacemakers can be their allies in the promotion of peace and reconciliation. Many observers believe that the public response to the Oslo process in the Arab-Israeli conflict could have been more positive if religious leaders had been drawn in and had been associated with the process. The negotiators insisted that the Oslo process remain exclusively secular. The involvement of religious actors could have helped avoid the alienation that key members of the respective religious communities felt toward Oslo. To leave the language of faith out of peacemaking is a serious deficiency. This language is powerful. It motivates people. The language of faith needs to be central.

Interfaith teams need to seek out government officials to help them understand the intersection between faith and policy. A network of interfaith organizations should be created to provide a national voice for interfaith harmony and for the shared justice concerns of faith groups engaged with each other.

Interfaith delegations should be sent to Capitol Hill, to testify on the state of inter-faith relations and the need for dialogue, and on the issues that are important to reli-

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gious peacemakers. An interfaith delegation could be helpful both on Capitol Hill and at the White House to answer such questions as “Why do they hate us?”

Several participants asserted that trust and peaceful coexistence do not come so much from mutual learning and sharing through dialogue as from action on the ground and policy change, particularly in relation to the Middle East. These participants said that dialogue should focus on the promotion of justice rather than on spirituality. They also pointed out that there is a general failure in the United States to appreciate the impact of American policy toward the Middle East and the extent to which the American bias in favor of Israel is deeply resented by the Muslim world. One participant stated that any interfaith initiative that does not relate to the justice issues in the Middle East is comparable to “grinding water”; interfaith dialogue in the United States should focus on U.S. policy toward the Middle East. Unfortunately, he asserted, traditional interfaith dialogue tends to avoid divisive justice issues and policy.

Some participants suggested that commemorations of the second anniversary of 9/11 would provide opportunities for greater self-reflection, more openness to accepting some responsibility for some of the forces that cause hardship and suffering in the world, and a greater empathy for persons in other parts of the world who have died unjustly at the hand of a variety of malevolent forces. This would reflect a greater acknowledgement of the victimhood, not only of Americans, but of the Other as well. This would provide an opportunity to mourn all those who have died innocently around the world.

The Impact of the Media on Interfaith Relations

Many participants expressed strong views about the negative impact that the media has on interfaith relations.

Many participants expressed strong views about the negative impact that the media has on interfaith relations. News accounts generally focus on religion as a source of conflict. The separatists and extremists are given the most prominence, which means that the fundamentalists are the most visible representatives of each tradition. The excessive emphasis on the negative side of religion and actions of religious extremists generates interfaith fear and hostility. Those with pluralist and inclusive perspectives usually have great difficulty conveying their messages. The media often highlights and glamorizes radical perspectives and behavior to the detriment of peace.

Both Muslims and Jewish participants stated that most of their co-religionists feel that they are not understood by the media or given a fair hearing. Muslims believe the U.S. media has a serious anti-Muslim bias. This bias contributes to anti-Muslim prejudice and exacerbates tension with the other two faith communities. Similarly, many Jews are concerned about what they view as a growing anti-Israel bias on the part of key U.S. media.

Greater media attention needs to be given to actions taken post 9/11 to reach out across religious boundaries. On an unprecedented scale, Christian congregations have visited mosques, synagogues have invited Muslim leaders to speak, and mosques have reached out to the other two communities. National Public Radio could productively broadcast a series of programs on local Abrahamic interfaith activities. Reports on interfaith initiatives of this kind in the United States can have important spill-over impact in places like the Middle East.

Religious leaders have an obligation to try to sensitize the media to the two-dimensional character of most current news stories on religion and interfaith relations, particularly in relation to Muslims.

Efforts should be made to develop teaching materials about the three faith traditions for use at various levels in the educational structure.

The Role of Education and Culture

Efforts should be made to develop teaching materials about the three faith traditions for use at various levels in the educational structure. For example, an anthology on the three Abrahamic traditions could be developed for use in high schools. And teaching materi-

als on Islam need to be developed for use in Christian and Jewish seminaries, and vice versa. A common curriculum could be developed for religious schools that focuses on shared values among the three religions. A study should be undertaken of the depiction of the three religious traditions in textbooks in use in schools in the United States and internationally, to correct biases and distortions.

Courses need to be developed on Abrahamic peacemaking, teaching how the three faith traditions understand and promote peace. Guidance needs to be given to college student leaders on how to handle interfaith relations. Some campuses are exploding, with the atmosphere filled with mutual recriminations. Student religious organizations on campuses should be encouraged to have regular exchanges.

Interfaith camps for high school students, built on the model of Seeds of Peace, can be effective, both domestically in the United States and internationally. Interfaith camp experiences should focus on building mutual trust.

Often the most effective form of interfaith sharing and mutual appreciation comes from sharing of cultural materials, such as films, novels, and music.

Conclusion

Building interfaith trust in a climate of fear is both a challenging and urgent task. Principal responsibility for taking up this challenge rests with the respective religious communities. Unfortunately, not all religious leaders wish to assume this responsibility and some religious leaders promote religious triumphalism at the expense of interfaith amity, and this only compounds the levels of fear and mutual hostility. Those within these communities who are committed to pluralism and peaceful coexistence must step forward and take the initiative. While the responsibility rests primarily with people of faith, governments, educational institutions, and the media can play critical roles in either exacerbating the problem or contributing to the solution. This report has enumerated steps that each of these actors can play to contribute to religious peace and the reduction of religious tensions.

***Building interfaith trust
in a climate of fear is both
a challenging and urgent task.***

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For more information on this topic, see our web site (www.usip.org), which has an online edition of this report containing links to related web sites, as well as additional information on the subject.

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