



Interreligious Dialogue As An Antidote To Radical Religious Violence

31.12.2016 | Ron Kronish

How can interreligious and intercultural dialogue be used positively to reverse the destruction created by radical extremist fundamentalist movements?

This is the question that I was asked to address last week on a panel discussion on “Revisiting our Cultural and Religious Heritage to Resist Radicalization”, which was part of a two-day conference in Seville. The conference was hosted by Tres Culturas (Three Cultures—Judaism, Christianity and Islam) Foundation, a prestigious organization in southern Spain, co-sponsored by the government of Andalusia and the government of Morocco I have worked with this foundation for many years, and was honored to be invited to be part of the deliberations of this important conference. The overall topic of the conference was “The Geopolitical Situation and Values in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.”

In my presentation, I focused on 3 major issues connected to the future:

- What are the main issues and challenges facing interreligious dialogue as a method to counter radicalization of religious groups in the years and decades ahead?
- Why is the dialogue with Islam so important –and yet so neglected— and what needs to be done?
- How can we connect our dialogue to reality especially to the critical issues of peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine and other parts of the world?

The number one problem that we face in Israel and Palestine —and around the world— is still ignorance. After all these years, we still don't know very much about each other Accordingly, we still need multi-faceted, sustained and systematic educational programs in many and diverse settings: schools, seminaries, teacher-training schools and universities, in the curricula of Jewish, Muslim Christian schools, in newspapers and magazines, in scholarly journals, in conferences and workshops, in formal and informal education, in dialogues and seminars, and through the media.

To overcome ignorance, we need to develop a genuine interreligious dialogue; a dialogue based on mutuality, and the existential need to learn about each other and from each other towards the practical end of finding better ways to live together in communities, countries, regions and in the world. This is not learning for learning's sake. Rather, it is a set of programs that should be designed to build trust among people of different religions, who must then develop this into ways and means of living peacefully together.

Why is the dialogue with Islam so important –and yet so neglected— and what needs to be done?

Why are so many people where I live (in Israel) and around the world, especially in the West, not yet engaging with moderate Muslims (who are the overwhelming majority) in a systematic, substantive and sensitive way?

- Because we are all afraid. We have become Islamophobic! Some of our fear is rational. Yet, much of it is a “phobia”, an irrational fear, fed by rumors and stereotyping of a whole

community and a whole religion and all of its followers.

- Because we and our communities have largely been influenced by the media—who only portray the work of fundamentalist extremist radical cut-throat Muslims—ISIS, Al Qaeda, and all the rest. The media is constantly indoctrinating us that this is who Muslims are! This is their religion. This is how they think and act. And we—most of our leaders and our communities—go along with it.
- Because we don't really make the effort to come to know Islam. We don't study the sacred texts of Muslims and their holy teachings. Rather, we rely on the internet and the tabloids to "teach" us what Islam supposedly stands for!

This must stop! Fostering hatred of another's religion—due to the fanatical acts of certain extremist groups who claim to be inspired by this religion but actually distort it unrecognizably—is not a good prescription for building a better world for all of God's children.

Accordingly, I would argue that developing a genuine dialogue with Muslims around the world—beginning in our own local communities—is one of the highest religious and ethical imperatives for those who are involved in interreligious and intercultural dialogue now and for the future. We can no longer engage in denial and apathy on this issue. We cannot continue to bury our heads in the sand and ignore this topic. It is vital for our common future.

How can we connect our dialogue to reality, especially to the critical issues of peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine and in other parts of the world? What will be needed in the future?

What will be needed is what I like to call "the other peace process"—the educational, religious, and spiritual one, to supplement the political one.

People engaged in interreligious dialogue will remain irrelevant and out-of-date if they do not address themselves to the critical issues of peace and justice in the world. Just as it should no longer be limited to Christians and Jews, nor should it be academic and abstract, focusing on the past, rather than the future. It has got to be related to peace-building efforts –and efforts to ensure social justice—all over the world, and especially in Israel and Palestine.

In the future, therefore, Interreligious Dialogue, Education and Common Action for Healing the World will be needed more than ever before. There will be an existential need for a massive religious, spiritual, educational, and psychological campaign to change the hearts and minds of the people on both sides of many conflicts—including and especially the Israeli-Palestinian one. As we prepare for the future, we will need to develop a serious and systematic set of programs that will educate the next generations about the basic skills that will be needed to learn to live together in peaceful coexistence.

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First published in [Huffington Post](#), 06.12.2016. Here re-published with kind permission by the author.