

## **Abdessalam Naijar: "Why Trialogue?"**

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As we, members of diverse religious groups, convene here to develop interfaith dialogue, I guess there is no need for talking about the importance of dialogue in dealing with conflict, dispute and diversity. I am aware that those people who are against dialogue will not attend meetings like this, but it is with them that the dialogue is the most important. I hope that in this meeting, we will explore the way to overcome this contradiction.

The differences among peoples, nations, races and religions may lead to conflict and therefore it is man's responsibility to establish peace and tranquillity (*Sakina*) in society. It is important that a balance is established in society based on mutual respect, love and compassion, and rejecting all types of arrogance, whether material or intellectual. Establishing such balance between different nations and communities is possible only by sharing knowledge about one another.

In my faith, Islam, Muslims are not allowed to fight for money, wealth or resources, grab power or occupy territory. Muslims cannot participate in unjust war, whatever the identity or religion of the enemy. Belonging to a particular faith does not mean that Muslims are required to accept or support injustice, simply because it is committed by another member of the same faith. On the contrary, Muslims, according to the teachings of Islam, are required to oppose and even stop such injustice, even if it is committed by another Muslim. The Prophet Muhammad said: "Help your brother whether he is unjust or the victim of injustice."

Each religion has its own understanding of interfaith dialogue and makes its own response to religious pluralism. They all assess the extent to which they can participate in interfaith dialogue in ways that do not compromise the fundamental beliefs that are at the heart of their own faith and commitments.

In our time, we are confronted with two contradictory trends: globalization and localization. While globalization in science and technology, mass communications, trade, finance, tourism, migration, crime and disease is progressing at an unprecedented pace and degree, the pervasiveness and depth of local identities, defined in terms of ethnicity, language, land, religion and traditions, have resurged as major forces.

The severity of the contrast between the "haves" and the "have-nots" at all levels of human experience—individual, family, society, nation and the world—feeds a mood of uncertainty. The fluidity of change enhances the inability to cope, thus fuelling bigotry, extremism and prejudice. Globalization in general that ignores ethnicity, language, gender, land and religion as powerful forces, intensifies economic, political, social, cultural and religious conflict in both inter- and intra-national contexts. Our awareness of the danger of civilizational conflict makes clear the necessity of dialogue. The politics of domination must be replaced by the politics of communication, networking, negotiation, interaction, interfacing and collaboration.

The problem is not diversity itself, but rather the perception of diversity as a threat. Our sense of belonging is not exclusive. We are part of our family, but also of our community, our linguistic group, our religious denomination, our professional brotherhood, our nation, our continent and finally, the human species.

The dialogue starts first within us. Ordinary human experience tells us that genuine dialogue is an art that requires careful nurturing. Unless we are intellectually, psychologically, mentally and spiritually well prepared, we are not in a position to engage ourselves fully in a dialogue. We hope that, through dialogue among civilizations, we can encourage the positive forces of globalization that enhance material, moral, aesthetic and spiritual wellbeing, and take special care of those underprivileged, disadvantaged, marginalized and silenced by current trends of economic development.

We need to be acutely aware of the presence of the other before we can actually begin communicating. Awareness of the presence of the other as a potential partner in conversation compels us to accept our coexistence as an undeniable fact. This leads to the recognition that the other's role (belief, attitude and behaviour) is relevant and significant to us. In other words, there is an intersection where all of us are likely to meet to resolve divisive tension or to explore a joint venture. When all sides have built enough trust to see each other face-to-face with reciprocal respect, the meeting becomes possible. Only then can a productive dialogue begin. Through dialogue / dialogue, we can appreciate the value of learning from the other in the spirit of mutual reference. We may even celebrate our differences, since they force us to expand our horizons.

Dialogue involves developing mutual understanding through sharing values and creating a new meaning of life together. We need to suspend the desires we have to sell our ideas, to persuade others to accept our beliefs, to seek their approval of our opinions, to evaluate our course of action in order to gain agreement on what we cherish as true and to justify our deeply held convictions. Instead, our purpose is to learn what we do not know, to listen to different voices, to open ourselves up to multiple perspectives, to reflect on our own assumptions, to share insights, to discover areas of tacit agreement and to explore best practices for human flourishing. Only then can we establish mutually beneficial relationships based on reciprocity.

Trust enables dialogue to occur, to continue and eventually to bear fruits; it is the backbone of true communication. Without trust, we can do little to facilitate any meaningful communication. Trust is not blind. It is a rational choice to enter into communication with the other. It is the minimum condition for transcending the psychology of fear. Unless we can move out of our self-imposed cocoons and face up to the challenges of the unknown, we will never be able to rise above our egoism, nepotism, parochialism and ethnocentrism. Trust enables us to accept the other as an end rather than a means to an end.

Trust is not opposed to a healthy dose of scepticism or the critical spirit, but it is never hostile to the other or cynical about the actual state of affairs. Despite tensions and conflicts in the world, trust involves a willingness to explore commonality and share ability with those who are stereotyped as radical others. Trust is the courage to enter into a joint venture with a stranger

who is conventionally labelled as the enemy, and through trust, we respect the integrity of the other as a matter of principle and also as an end in itself. While a trusting person may sometimes be disappointed and deceived, it does not deflect him or her from the commitment to continuous communication within and beyond family, society and nation. Trust involves keeping promises and seeing one's action through. If we have faith in dialogue among civilizations, we can learn not merely from the wisdom of our own tradition but also from the cumulative wisdom of the entire human community. Dialogue among civilizations is inclusive; it is an open invitation to all members of the global community.

As we are living in a "global village," no members of different religions can live in isolation from the other; all communities belonging to different religions, cultures and races must open their doors to one another.

I use the word "faith" to indicate the intellectual, emotional and creative means by which believers respond to the 'truth claims' presented by particular religions. The word "faith" also points to that motivating energy that sustains a commitment to the communal and personal visions, ways of life and missions associated with particular religions. The word "dialogue" indicates activities that involve somewhat intensive interpersonal relationships with a heavy emphasis on conversation and discussion. Interfaith dialogue, therefore, is an activity in which people of faith engage in serious and respectful conversations about the diversity of religious belief and practice.

The goals of the Pluralistic Spiritual Center in Wahat Al Salam / Neve Shalom, in which I am active, are to support dialogue among the followers of religions and cultures, to enhance dialogue, respect and cooperation between nations, to encourage peace, justice and reconciliation, and to counter justification for violence and conflicts. We run interfaith and cultural dialogue programs as well as conflict management and resolution projects to promote peace and peaceful coexistence between Palestinians and Jews in our region.