



# The Role of Interreligious Dialogue in Peace-building in Israel

31.10.2004 | Kronish, Ronald

**Rabbi Ron Kronish, Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, discusses the role of interreligious dialogue in peace-building, reviewing such efforts in Israel and comparing them to similar experiences in Bosnia, Northern Ireland, and South Africa.**

## The Role of Interreligious Dialogue in Peace-building in Israel

[Ronald Kronish](#)

### Introduction

At a time when religious conflicts plague so many areas of the world, we find ourselves asking whether religion is in fact a positive force for humanity. In Israel especially we so frequently witness atrocities in the name of God that we are left to wonder if religion is in fact the problem or the solution. The Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI), which I helped to establish and have directed for the past 12 years, addresses this question, asserting:

Judaism, Christianity and Islam all preach peace. Too often, however, they are corrupted to fuel hatred and violence. In Israel today, growing numbers in all three faith communities are coming to see that their beliefs must contribute to the solution, not to the problem. They understand that faith has an active role in building a civil, tolerant society and in marginalizing those who would destroy it.<sup>1</sup>

Tragically, religion in general, and religions in particular in Israel and the Middle East, especially Judaism and Islam, are generally perceived by the people of the region, to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Islam is overwhelmingly identified, both by its own followers and certainly by the Jewish population in Israel, with violence and terror. Some of Islam's modern-day heroes are the leaders of Al Qaida, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hizbollah, and other groups which oppose peace and favor the path of armed conflict and violence as the preferred strategy to defeat Israel.

Similarly, the voices for peace and reconciliation among Jewish religious leaders are not very dominant or loud in Israeli society. Consequently, the prevailing perception among the Jewish masses in Israel is that religious Judaism, (Orthodox or Ultra-Orthodox Judaism in its various branches and streams) is in favor of the occupation (or what some religious Jews call the "liberation" of the territories) and deems the ongoing violence as a necessary means of "self-defense." One rarely hears mainstream Jewish religious leaders in Israel raising their voices for peace. The Jewish peace movement in Israel is overwhelmingly secular, with the exception of small numbers of modern Orthodox religious leaders and even smaller numbers of Reform and Conservative Jewish religious leaders, who unfortunately speak for a very small percentage of the Israeli Jewish population. And the Chief Rabbis, who are functionaries of the State, cannot be counted upon to have a prophetic role in favor of peace and reconciliation in Israeli society.

Consequently, the question of whether religions and religious leaders can become part of the

solution and not remain part of the problem in Israel is not a simple one. In all candor, one must admit that the process to move in this direction is very much an uphill struggle. Nevertheless, there have been some very significant positive developments in this field of endeavor in Israeli society in recent years.

Moreover, I would argue that there has been too much focus on the negative aspects of religion and not enough on the positive. According to Marty E. Martin, “So preoccupied have we become in asking why religion has been so central to killing that most of us have neglected to explore the potential for people acting in its name to heal.”<sup>2</sup> Continually stressing the negative role of religion becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This has become particularly true in Israeli society, which is largely secular and suffers from anti-religious attitudes which are often exacerbated by the media.

In contrast to the “conventional wisdom” of the dominant secular society that religion plays primarily a destructive role by perpetuating and exacerbating the conflict, we seek to offer an alternative vision and model. In a time when adherence to religion is increasing, we must take notice of the power that religion, religious leaders, and religious individuals can have in creating a positive social change. This paper will highlight one of the most important new developments in the area of religious peace-building in Israel in recent years so that people in Israel and abroad can be inspired by what is possible when interreligious dialogue is used in the service of peace-building.

It is important to state at the outset that these developments in Israel do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they are part of a new trend during the past decade, during which there has been a greater focus internationally on the potential positive role of religion in helping to solve or at least ameliorate conflicts in different parts of the world. A body of literature has begun to emerge which offers both theoretical models, reviews of programs in reconciliation in various parts of the world, and practical proposals for action.

Therefore, before describing one case study of a program in Israel which promotes peace and reconciliation by religious leaders, it is essential to set this work in its proper historical and ideological context.

### **Context: The role of religions in peace-building**

During the past decade, a number of important developments have occurred which have helped us take a new look at religion and its potentially powerful impact in the area of conflict resolution, both on the theoretical and practical level. We live in an age where there is more and more recognition that truces and diplomatic agreements aren't enough. We have shifted our goals from minimalistic tolerance to human and cultural acceptance, from side-by-side coexistence to understanding and cooperation. Our new perspective allows us to see the gaps in prior methods.

On the theoretical level, the writings of Rabbi Professor Mark Gopin, David Smock, Muhammed Abu Nimer, and J.P. Lederach have been of special importance in helping define a new and vital role for religion and religious leaders in the search for peace in general and in certain areas of conflict in the world. Through such academic work, religious concepts, rituals and world views have been exported to the public realm in attempts to understand and solve conflicts.

For example, Mohammed Abu Nimer integrates the power of practice into his mechanisms for peace-building. Basing his ideas on the power of the commonalities of the Abrahamic faiths, Abu Nimer asserts that integrating ritual into reconciliation practices will assist in the process by providing common experience and symbology. Abu Nimer explains:

Christianity, Judaism and Islam preach justice, and all prohibit excessive use of violence and destruction when pursuing it. Thus, using religious rituals to remind both sides of shared roots and

commonalities is another way to cope with the new level of hatred.<sup>3</sup>

John Paul Lederach, a key figure in understanding the meaning of reconciliation in the political sphere, has integrated understandings of truth, justice, peace and mercy into his approach to conflict. He explains that reconciliation comes through acts of “conflict transformation” which reflect a deeper understanding of the nature of conflict than concepts of “conflict management” or “conflict resolution.” Within this theory, peace building is a major component for creating change by reversing the effect that conflict has had on individuals and societies. Lederach explains that peace-building is a more integrated and complex approach, calling for “long-term commitment to establishing an infrastructure across the levels of society, an infrastructure that empowers the resources for reconciliation from within that society and maximizes the contribution from outside.”<sup>4</sup>

Both David Smock and Marc Gopin explore the concept of “peace-building” as a mechanism for conflict resolution and societal healing. As opposed to “peace-making,” “peace-building” is a process that engages participants in all levels of the conflict.

Peace-building is a term typical of the conflict resolution school of thought, which emphasizes long term relationship-building with a broad spectrum of society as the key to peace, as opposed to discrete sets of negotiations and settlements, usually between elites.<sup>5</sup>

The paradigm of peace-building, as opposed to goals of peace-keeping or peace-making reflects the same active attitude as efforts to move from ‘conflict resolution’ to ‘conflict transformation’. Peace-building recognizes the complex processes necessary to transform conflict and the variety of players necessary for confronting societal problems.

One can differentiate between the efforts of peace-makers and peace-builders through an understanding of Track One Diplomacy and Track Two Diplomacy. The term Track Two Diplomacy was coined in 1981 by Joseph Montville, referring to a broad range of unofficial contact and interaction aimed at reducing tensions and resolving conflicts, both internationally and within states. Montville, then a U.S. diplomat, used the term in contrast to Track One diplomacy, which refers to diplomatic efforts to resolve conflicts through the official channels of government.<sup>6</sup>

First Track Diplomacy is the work of the politicians and diplomats. They make peace between governments, not between people. They sign treaties and peace agreements. They create the political frameworks for peace. But they do not necessarily bring people to learn to live together in peaceful coexistence. This is not their job; thus their work needs to be supplemented by the peace-builders, those who are part of Track Two Diplomacy which is often called “People-to-People” programs.

Track Two Diplomacy is the work of civic society. This includes all kinds of NGO’s (non-governmental organizations); the peace-builders are educators, social workers, and clergy, rather than lawyers, diplomats and politicians. These are the people who need to move in when new “windows of opportunity” have been opened up by the peace-makers. These are the people who need to do the nitty-gritty grass-roots labor-intensive job of bringing people together from all walks of life to learn to live together in peace. This is long-term educational work, not short-term political work which is affected by elections and changes in political climate. Abu Nimer asserts the power of Track Two Diplomacy: “Moderates can assert themselves by initiating actions on a person-to-person level, rising up against radical leaders and those who preach that killing the other is a way to survive.”<sup>7</sup>

Religious leaders, especially local religious leaders with congregations and schools which function under their guidance and inspiration, need to play a much greater role as part of civic society; they need to serve as grassroots leadership. Religion is not just about prayer and fasting and what one

eats; it is about shaping a world-view which impacts on how people live their lives and how communities develop caring and compassionate social structures. Religion is about how societies become just and compassionate communities. Rather than a narrow antiquated restricted conception of religion, a more modern sophisticated one that serves to heal society's ills will need to be developed and applied, particularly in areas of conflict like the Middle East.

Religious leaders will need to be called upon to assert themselves as voices for peace and reconciliation in areas of conflict. They cannot hide anymore in the mosque, synagogue or church, thus remaining withdrawn from the real issues of their society. They have a significant role for improving the lives of members of their communities.

David Smock expands on the role that religion can play in personal and communal transformation by calling on religious followers to become 'agents of reconciliation':

Effectively guiding people of faith away from the entrapment of nationalist hostility in order for them to become agents of reconciliation requires both an identification with the suffering of their people and a challenge to discover the peace-building resources inherent within their faith traditions. Each of the Abrahamic traditions affirms the value of all human beings, the need to offer hospitality to the other and the importance of self-examination as measures of faithfulness to God.<sup>8</sup>

Religious identity can be a great source for *tikkun olam*, for repairing the world, now more than ever before, especially in a world in which people are turning more towards religion and establishing meaningful personal and communal religious identities. Mohammed Abu Nimer writes on the powerful potential of religious identity as an active force for change:

Religious identity is one of the most powerful sources in shaping attitudes and actions in a conflict zone... The spiritual, moral and ethical components of any religious identity are powerful sources of generating change.<sup>9</sup>

In the light of the growing realization that religious identity can be a force for good in communities and societies, there is an emerging acceptance of the idea that simply maintaining the status quo is unacceptable, i.e., religious leaders will need to think about how they can lead their communities and societies in new ways that will create positive social change.

Research and practice in recent years has clarified that there has been much too much emphasis on Track One Diplomacy and insufficient focus on Track Two. Moreover, to a large extent, religion has been either denigrated or ignored. At the heart of the problem was the notion that in Western liberal society "religion was the problem and the liberal secular state and public institutions are the answer. This has led to an impasse in the worlds of policy-making, conflict resolution and diplomacy."<sup>10</sup>

Religion and religious personalities were largely kept out of the arena of peace-making. They were considered irrelevant, at best, and destructive, at worst. This kind of negative thinking about the role of religion and religious leaders has not been helpful or constructive. Instead, political leaders and diplomats "need to understand that religion can be a force for peace-building rather than conflict."<sup>11</sup>

One could argue that this has certainly been the case for the peace movement in Israel, which is essentially a leftist, highly secular and mostly anti-religious movement. In fact, the movement has traditionally not involved religious leaders.

The mistake of the Israeli Left has been that it often undermines potential allies by promoting itself politically as the group that will fight religion in Israel, rather than as the group that will fight hateful

expressions of religion.<sup>12</sup>

This is certainly the case of the Geneva Accords group, which is totally a secular phenomenon.

In addition to new theoretical thinking on the role of religion in peace building, there have been some very important practical measures taken in recent years. The World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) and the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) are two of the most important institutions which have taken a leadership role in this area . The following examples of the work done to resolve conflict in Bosnia, Northern Ireland, and South Africa reflect the successful involvement of local religious leaders and interreligious councils in peace-building efforts.

The World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP), the oldest and largest interfaith organization in the world, has been one of the leaders in this field in recent years. The WCRP recognizes that:

Religious communities are, without question, the largest and best-organized civil institutions in the world today, claiming the allegiance of billions of believers and bridging the divides of race, class and nationality. They are uniquely equipped to meet the challenges of our time: resolving conflicts, caring for the sick and needy, promoting peaceful coexistence among all peoples.<sup>13</sup>

The concept that religions can be a proactive force for peace helps these communities unleash their enormous potential for common action.

## **Bosnia**

In the area of reconciliation, some of the most important work done by WCRP was done in Bosnia. Beginning in 1996, Religions for Peace worked with the senior religious leaders and other officials in Bosnia's main religious communities to facilitate and support their efforts at interreligious/intercommunal cooperation. A similar process was just beginning in Kosovo when the Serb military's campaign of mass expulsions provoked the NATO bombing campaign in the spring of 1999. Once the conflict had ended, Religions for Peace helped religious leaders from the Islamic, Serbian Orthodox and Catholic communities in Kosovo to resume their discussions and commence their work toward building a more civil society there.

Religions For Peace supported, and continues to support, the development, of communication between religious communities through the Interreligious Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina, (IRC). In so doing, it has collaborated with Bosnian religious communities to build the promising institutions of a multi-ethnic, democratic state. It has sought to reverse the communist-era restrictions on citizen associations and to promote religious communities as vital civic actors. It has acted as a neutral partner in seminars with human rights activists and theologians, and it has worked to create legal, fiscal, and governance structures necessary to sustain the IRC's autonomous role in Bosnian civil society. The result has been widespread public acceptance of the IRC's moral authority and popular support for its quest for tolerance and inter-ethnic understanding.

Under the auspices of the United States Institute for Peace, a pioneering program called the Religion and Peacemaking Initiative has been developed. According to the director of the initiative, David Smock, the purpose of the USIP's Religion and Peacemaking Initiative is "to assist religious organizations based in the United States to become more effective international peacemakers."<sup>14</sup> This initiative recognizes the power of religious leadership to create change through grass-roots initiatives.

Like the WCRP, the USIP has also played a role in Bosnia. From their experience in Bosnia they have reached the conclusion that "Faith-based NGOs have constructed an immense treasury of

credibility and trust, primarily through individual relationships between staff members and local actors.”<sup>15</sup> The USIP has learned that religion has been and is now an important part of the ethnic and national identity of the Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians and therefore “religion cannot be ignored when discussing future cooperation among the parties to the conflict.”<sup>16</sup>

In an effort to make a positive contribution to the post-war situation in Bosnia, the USIP held a conference in Budapest in October 1997 that brought together religious clerics, theologians, journalists, and others to consider the positive contribution religion can make in rebuilding Bosnia and the region. Representative of the different religious communities who came to the conference discussed openly the tensions between their communities. They also discussed such practical matters as the distress of refugees, the destruction of houses of worship, the prevalence of hate speech and incitement, and most importantly, how their various religious communities might address these matters.

Earlier in June 1997, a meeting was held at which religious leaders from Bosnia-Herzegovina formally agreed to establish the previously mentioned Interreligious Council as a forum for discussing issues affecting the different faiths in the country. The meeting, which included religious leaders representing the Jewish, Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Serbian Orthodox communities of Bosnia-Herzegovina, met in the U.S. Embassy in Vienna.

## Northern Ireland

The intra-religious Protestant-Catholic conflict of Northern Ireland evolved and changed, and was seen in many ways simultaneously a national, political, and religious conflict. For years, religious institutions were used as breeding grounds for hate and religious leaders were unwilling to take action against the violence. However, some brave clergy stepped up to their responsibilities as community leaders in secret.

According to Mari Fitzduff – now a professor and director of a new academic program in coexistence studies at Brandeis University, outside of Boston, and formerly the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council – confidential working meetings were held over a period of several years during the mid-90s between Sinn Fein and members of the Protestant/Unionist clergy.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, the powerful influence of religious leaders played a major role in resolving elements of conflict in the region.

As the socio-political landscape in Northern Ireland was transformed over the past decade, religion was one of the major tools used for reconciliation. In a manner unimaginable in the past, all of the main churches “agreed to include training to address sectarianism and practice in community relations both at a personal and community level.”<sup>18</sup> Not only does this training support current efforts towards peace, it assures that the future leaders will understand their responsibilities to respond to conflict.

One specific example of a religious community in Northern Ireland that uses religion as a means for reconciliation is Corrymeela – a community “comprised of people of all ages and Christian traditions, who, individually and together are committed to the healing of social, religious and political divisions that exist in Northern Ireland and throughout the world.”<sup>19</sup> Corrymeela runs a variety of programs including a residential Catholic and Protestant school, and training courses in the field of conflict mediation. Through these projects, the residential community aims to be a sign and symbol that Protestants and Catholics can share together in a common witness and ministry of reconciliation, to provide opportunities for meeting, dialogue and to support victims of violence and injustice. Community leader Trevor Williams – whom I had the privilege of meeting on a study tour to Ireland last summer – explains that by coming together in daily communal prayer, the community is “reminded that peace-building is God’s work.”<sup>20</sup>

## South Africa

Just as the reconciliation process in Ireland required both religious leaders and religious ideals, the historic success of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa reflected the potential for integration of religion into the process of conflict resolution.

According to Susan Collin Marks, author of *Watching the Wind, Conflict Resolution During South Africa's Transition to Democracy*, and co-director of Search for Common Ground, the role of the paired concepts of truth and reconciliation in conflict resolution in South Africa was critical. In an interview, she emphasizes the importance of amnesty and forgiveness as part of the commission's framework when she said that "for reconciliation to take place, there needs to be some sense that the past is being restored, in the sense of restorative justice."<sup>21</sup> Contrary to modern ideas of punitive justice, restorative justice, which can be traced historically and religiously to Hebrew scriptures, assisted South Africa to reconcile, heal and transform its conflict.

The value of restorative justice, as a mechanism of reconciliation, in the interest of peace-building is recognized and poetically explained by Nobel Laureate, Bishop Desmond Tutu:

Our people have been committed to the reconciliation where we use restorative rather than retributive justice, which is a kind of justice, that says - we are looking to the healing of relationships, we are seeking to open wounds, yes, but to open them so that we can cleanse them and they don't fester; we cleanse them and then pour oil on them, and then we can move into the glorious future that God is opening up for us.<sup>22</sup>

Bishop Tutu continuously brought the voice and power of religion to the table in his efforts to heal his community. Although it was counter to many past efforts, the efforts in South Africa attempted to acknowledge the pain and injury experienced by parts of the community without continuing the culture of violence which a punitive process would entail. The concrete goal of a democratic society was reached through the vision of a better world, and religiously inspired understanding that this comes through forgiveness and not revenge. As Smock states, "The process of reconciliation also emphasizes the need to restore relationships and to engage in processes that can lead to social and spiritual healing."<sup>23</sup> Reconciliation in South Africa used religious ideals of truth, forgiveness, reconciliation and restorative justice in order to create healing and build peace.

As seen in the cases of Bosnia, Northern Ireland and South Africa, both religious leaders – and religious ideas and ideals – have played significant roles in reconciling complex and protracted conflicts in major hot spots in the world. In these places, religious leaders – at the national and local communal levels – have been able to engage the power of their leadership to affect positive change through the message and the methods of reconciliation.. In these examples, religion was originally perceived as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution; however, in all of these regions, religion was used creatively by courageous leaders as an effective tool in the process of peace-building.

## Interreligious Peace-building in Israel

During the past twelve years, the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, has been pioneering in the area of peace-building by bringing together Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs (of Israeli citizenship) — both Muslim and Christian — for a wide variety of dialogues, seminars, workshops, conferences and other innovative educational programs. ICCI has been integrating messages and methods from the interrelated fields of Conflict Resolution and Interreligious Dialogue to promote peaceful relations between people and peoples in Israel and the Middle East.

The ICCI programs have included multiple women's dialogue groups, Jewish-Christian dialogues

for English-speaking expatriates, Jewish-Christian dialogues for Arabs and Jews of East and West Jerusalem, and Jewish-Muslim dialogue groups for religious leaders and educators. ICCI's most ambitious and most important program to date is a new program entitled "Kedem," a Hebrew acronym for "Voices for Religious Reconciliation." This project offers a new model for interreligious reconciliation and peace-building which can have a long-range impact in Israeli society.

From July 21 to 27, 2003, ICCI took 14 Israeli grass-roots religious leaders to Ireland—Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in the south – for an intensive seven-day seminar on the theme of Reconciliation. The group was comprised of seven orthodox rabbis and seven Arab religious leaders— five Muslim and two Christian (representing the percentages within Israeli Society). The seminar was part of ICCI'S "Kedem" program, which began in May 2003, which was made possible by a major grant from the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Tel Aviv.

The 14 local religious leaders were all carefully chosen for their participation in this unique, ground-breaking dialogue process. Never before within Israeli society had Muslim and Jewish grass-roots religious leaders met over a sustained period of time to learn about each other and each other's history, tradition, and contemporary concerns, and also to see what could be done together in the area of reconciliation between Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews within Israel society. Each person was selected because of his openness to the process of serious and sustained dialogue on this theme and because he represented a local community in Israel, where the lessons of this dialogue process could be applied in a practical, concrete way in the years ahead. In other words, the participants come to this process willing to undergo both personal as well as communal transformation and to eventually become voices for religious reconciliation within Israeli society.

The first stage of the project – which included two full study days in a conference center outside of Tel Aviv in the spring of 2003 – as well as the week together in Ireland in July of that same year – focused systematically on getting-to-know-one-another on a personal basis and building relationships of trust and respect. Through active listening to each other's personal stories – which were all particularly poignant and meaningful – these 14 religious leaders came to know each other as persons, rather than as media stereotypes.

More than this however was achieved during the week in Ireland. In addition to getting to know each other well on a personal basis – a process which took place over coffee breaks and meals and on the field trips on the bus and walking together to see a waterfall in Northern Ireland, near the sea, as well as in the formal group discussions – some rather amazing special moments occurred, which brought the group together as a group and opened up possibilities for concrete acts of reconciliation during the time spent together in Ireland and in the months after this.

After focusing both on personal stories and on the conflict in Northern Ireland during the first two days of the seminar, the group decided on the third day to focus more on itself and less on the Irish experience of reconciliation. By the third night of the trip, a group decision was reached to cancel all discussions with outside experts on the Irish problem, and to focus the discussion on internal issues among the rabbis and the Arab religious leaders. This was the turning point that led to some rather remarkable results in the days ahead.

By the end of the third morning of dialogue – in which each person in the group had a chance to share his personal story with the others in the group – it was clear that the group was beginning to be a cohesive entity. Two remarkable and surprising developments occurred on that day. The first episode occurred when one of the imams told his personal story about the massacre of Palestinian Arabs in Kfar Kassem in 1956 (a well-known episode, which has been well documented in Israeli history). He told the story of the massacre as he had heard it in his family from his aunt. It was a very personal and gripping telling of the story. Very personal. Very sincere. Very human. Not in any way to masquerade as the one true version of history, but simply his story. There was very active listening going on in the room – you could hear a pin drop.



When he was finished, one of the Arab religious leaders, told the group that each year a memorial service is held in Kfar Kassem to commemorate this massacre and he invited one of the rabbis to come this year, on a specific date at the end of October. The rabbi thought about it for a moment and then said that he would come if the event was solely an event to commemorate their pain and suffering and to express solidarity on the religious and human level and if the Arab religious leader could guarantee that the event would not be manipulated for political purposes. The sheikh fully understood what his friend the rabbi was saying, and therefore he responded sensitively and sincerely by saying that he would invite all of the rabbis to attend a special memorial ceremony on the day after the communal one, so as to guarantee that there would be no misunderstandings and no manipulation of religion at the event. The response was immediate, sincere and to the point: "If that is the case, I'll be there," the rabbis said. This was the clearest indication so far that the religious leaders were carefully listening to each other and at the same time seeking genuine opportunities for religious reconciliation and active peace-building.

Later that day, a second opportunity manifested itself in a surprising way.

The plan was to go to Dublin for the weekend, where the group would be hosted by the local religious leaderships for a meal, for study and to attend worship services together in a mosque on Friday, in a synagogue on Friday night and Saturday morning, and then in a church on Sunday morning. It had all been worked out carefully in advance, with the help of a good contact, deeply involved in interreligious dialogue in the Republic of Ireland. However, that Thursday morning, I received a fax at our hotel that indicated that there was going to be a problem with our visit to the mosque in Dublin the next day – the rabbis would be required to remove their kippot (head-coverings) and that the Christian religious leaders to remove their crosses before entering the mosque. This was a sensitive matter, one that I felt that I needed to discuss with the group, to ascertain their reaction and guidelines for a response. Therefore, I brought the matter up over lunch with the group. At first, one rabbi said that the rabbis could wear hats but not "kipot" and asked if this might solve the problem; but another rabbi said that he was not prepared to do this, that the kippah was too central to his identity.

And then, all of a sudden something very dramatic and unexpected happened: two of the Palestinian Muslim religious leaders rose to their feet and said: "We will not go to the mosque. If our brothers and friends, the rabbis, will not be welcome as they are, we are not going. Our solidarity is with them. They are our partners in this dialogue – our destiny is with them in Israel, more than with the Muslims in Dublin or in other places in the world." This was a moving and genuine response to a real dilemma, which left its mark on the group in a profound and lasting way. Indeed, one of the rabbis, who had to leave to go back to Israel after lunch, said to the Arab religious leaders: "You have given me a wonderful gift to take home to Israel for Shabbat."

After this occurred, one of the other Muslims in the group pointed out the difficulty that would arise since they would need to attend Friday prayers in Dublin. During the brief discussion which followed, it was quickly decided that the whole group would not go to the mosque for Friday meal and hospitality as originally planned, but the Muslim members of the group would go just to attend prayers.

On Friday, another problem had arisen whereby the synagogue leadership requested of the Muslim and Christian religious leaders to wear head-coverings in the synagogue, which led to another crisis. This led to a Muslim boycott of the worship service and the Shabbat dinner on Friday night (the Christians, however, did join the rabbis for the Shabbat dinner at the synagogue, and one of them even joined for the worship service and donned a kippah for the occasion!). On Friday night, and for the worship services on Saturday morning at the synagogue, the Muslims stayed away.

But after many hours of careful listening and active dialogue, a group decision was reached for the

Arabs to join the rabbis for the Shabbat lunch, which follow the Shabbat morning worship service. And at noon on that Saturday, the Muslim and Christian religious leaders joined the rabbis and the members of the Jewish community of Dublin for kiddush and lunch, where they were warmly welcomed by the Chief Rabbi of Ireland. It reminded me a bit, with all the differences involved, of the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers in the Bible. It was apparent from the way that the group came together again, that some real bonding and some genuine relationships had developed over the past several days.

The group then enjoyed its first and only Sabbath meal together, but it was a moving spiritual occasion – not only because the religious leaders were able to break bread together and share a religious meal together, but also for the act of coming together itself in religious fellowship. Moreover, one of the Muslim religious leaders spoke eloquently on behalf of the group to the Chief Rabbi of Ireland and indicated how much he and his colleagues appreciated this rare opportunity to share these special moments together in the synagogue in Dublin. He also spoke positively about Kedem's dialogue process, with the hope that this would lead to more dialogue and genuine acts of reconciliation in the future. This coming together over a simple Shabbat meal was unquestionably one of the spiritual highlights of this journey on the path towards reconciliation that this group was able to experience together in Ireland.

At the concluding summary and feedback session on Sunday morning, all participants spoke about the need to continue the process of dialogue, reconciliation and peace-building that had begun in a very deep and meaningful fashion in the intensive week together in Ireland. While there were some crises, large and small, which were encountered during the week as part of the process, the high motivation by most of the members of the group to continue the process was very definitive and positive. This intensive human encounter apparently was important to them. It was a good beginning, and even though many obstacles had to be overcome, they were indeed dealt with in a positive and constructive manner throughout the week under the leadership of Dr. Yitzhak Mendelsohn, the facilitator of the group. By engaging the group in uni-national and bi-national group process and decision-making, he had involved the participants successfully in determining how the group would proceed. In so doing, the participants felt that they were partners in a developing process of interreligious reconciliation.

Following the seminar in Ireland in July 2003, plans were developed to continue the process back in Israel. The group continued to meet at each other's homes. The October meeting took place at the home of one of the rabbis in his family sukkah (booth) during the holiday of Sukkot (this was the first time that the Arabs in the group had ever been invited to sit in a sukkah). And in November, the group shared a Ramadan dinner (perhaps the first kosher Ramadan dinner in Israeli history) in the home of one of the Muslim leaders. Moreover, in December, the rabbis visited the village of Kafr Kassem – as a follow-up to the discussion that had taken place in July in Ireland – and stood at the memorial to the massacre in the center of the town, in solidarity with their brothers in dialogue in a poignant gesture of genuine reconciliation which was deeply appreciated by the Arab members of the group.

The "Kedem" group is now in its second year of an ongoing process of learning, dialogue and acts of reconciliation. This summer they will travel to Bosnia where they will be hosted by the regional office of the World Conference of Religions for Peace and the Interreligious Council of Sarajevo, which was active in peace-building in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the civil war and which remains involved in interreligious reconciliation to this day. During this summer seminar the group will engage in intensive study and dialogue on the theme of "Reconciliation" and prepare themselves – as individuals and as a group – to be "voices of reconciliation" in their home communities and society upon their return from Bosnia.

It is hoped that in the future such voices for interreligious reconciliation and peace-building can be extended to the West Bank and Gaza as part of "track two diplomacy" that will be needed in

Palestine as well as Israel if there will be peace in our region. We know now that peace between governments will not be enough; we will need peace between peoples (national collectivities) and people (as individuals), in order for their to be a lasting peace. Religious leaders—Jews, Christians and Muslims—will have a significant role to play in this peace-building process.

#### Notes

- *ICCI Brochure*. Jerusalem, Israel: The Interreligions Coordinating Council in Israel, Fall 2001.
- Martin, Marty E. "Is Religion the Problem?" *Tikkun*. March, 2002.
- [Abu Nimer, Mohammed. "Nonviolent Voices in Israel and Palestine." Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies: Policy Brief June 2002.](#)
- [Lederach, J.P. \*Building Peace-Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies\*. Washington DC: USIP Press, 1997.](#)
- Gopin, Marc. *Between Eden And Armageddon: the Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 234.
- Notter, James and McDonald, John. "Track Two Diplomacy: Nongovernmental Strategies for Peace" [U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda](#). USIA Electronic Journals, Vol. 1, No. 19, December 1996.
- [Abu Nimer, Mohammed. "Nonviolent Voices in Israel and Palestine." Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies: Policy Brief June 2002.](#)
- Smock, David R, ed. *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*. Washington DC: USIP Press, 2002, p.77.
- Smock, p. 29.
- Gopin, Marc. *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*, Oxford Univ. Press, N.Y., 2002. p. 104.
- Landau, Yehezkel. "Healing the Holy Land: Interreligious Peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine." *Peaceworks* No.51. USIP, Sept 2003. p. 48.
- Gopin, 2002. p. 19.
- World Conference of Religions for Peace Website, Mission and Activities.
- Smock, p.9.
- "Can Faith Based NGOs Advance Interfaith Reconciliation?: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina" USIP, Special Report 103: March 2003.
- *Ibid*.
- Fitzduff, Mari. *Beyond Violence: Conflict Resolution Process in Northern Ireland*, N.Y.: United Nations Univ. Press, 2002. p. 161.
- *Ibid*.
- Corrymeela Online: the website of the Corrymeela community. "Who Are We?"
- "Williams, Trevor "The Battle Against Fear," Website of the Corrymeela Community.
- Marks, Susan Colin. *Peace X Peace e-Newsletter* (formely at: [www.peacexpeace.org/peacepapers/collinmarks.html](http://www.peacexpeace.org/peacepapers/collinmarks.html)).
- Tutu, Desmond. PBS Online News Hour: 6 OCT, 1999 (formely at: [www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/africa/July-dec99/tutu\\_10-6.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/africa/July-dec99/tutu_10-6.html)).
- Smock, p. 52.

Dr. Ronald Kronish, a rabbi and educator who has lived in Jerusalem for the past 24 years, is the Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI). He was assisted in the research for this article by Anna Levin, a former intern with ICCI.

First printed in *Ecumenical Trends*, published by the Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute, 33/8, September 2004.