

Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding

Review by Mary Reveal

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In our increasingly diverse societies, we interact with people of different faiths. At times, this poses a great challenge: something deeply sacred and “true” for one faith might be in stark contrast with what is “true” in another religious tradition. How can we share our values in such a way that the true messages of our different faiths benefit people from other religious traditions? Interfaith dialog is a means for achieving this greater goal by persons of different faiths meeting to have a conversation. “But dialog is not debate.” notes Leonard Swindler. “In dialogue, each must listen to the other as openly and sympathetically as s/he can in an attempt to understand the other’s position as precisely and, as it were, as much from within, as possible. Such an attitude automatically includes the assumption that at any point we might find the partner’s position so persuasive that...we would have to change.” There is a need to recognize that differences do exist and the objective is not to “correct” but to hear and listen to the other side.

Religion is usually cited as the cause of or at least a factor to conflict around the world. Drawing upon the experiences of the contributors, the goal of “Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding” is to identify the ways in which we can engage in productive interfaith dialogue. Rabbi Arthur Schneier, one of the contributors of the book, points out that religion is never the real cause of conflict within or between societies, but it is often identified as an excuse for other causes such as ethnicity, economic disparities, and regional differences. The main assertion of the book is that interfaith dialogue can be used as an effective tool to advance peace building around the world.

Based on his experience and studies on conflict resolution, Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer identifies four phases of development in an effective experiment of interfaith dialogue. He suggests that the earlier encounters should focus on individual and group similarities in theologies and scriptures. One example could be to jointly study the sacred texts of each religion. It must be remembered that the goal for these studies is not debate or conversions. Professor Marc Gopin notes that these shared studies should yield deeper bonds through invitations to homes and meetings with families. The second phase is to deepen the relationship through joint prayers that are not contradictory to the other faith and by participating in the other faith’s rituals. Having established trust and an understanding of the other faith, the third phase is to discover and confirm differences in religious values and faith practices. The final step should be exploring the ways in which messages of different faiths can benefit people from other religious traditions in the same community.

Articles in the book encourage us to re-think elements within our religious traditions that call on us to engage in interfaith dialog. It encourages us to breakdown stereotypes we have of the other faiths and reflect critically on the practices of our co-religionists. Contributors’ experiences show that in order to be effective, talks should be accompanied by deeds.

As Professor Diana Eck affirms “One world cannot be built on the foundation of competition and polarization between the superpowers. One world cannot be built on the foundation of science, technology and the media. One world cannot be built on Christian, Muslim, Jewish or Sikh triumphalism. One world cannot be built on the foundation of fear and suspicion....Laying the foundations of one world is the most important task of our time. These foundations are not negotiated statements and agreements. These foundations are, rather, in the stockpiling of trust

through dialog and creation of relationships that can sustain both agreements and disagreements.”

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