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Setting the Scene: Interreligious Dialogue in Plural Societies

By Paul Hedges

Synopsis

Many see interreligious dialogue as a way to promote social cohesion and increase societal resilience. However, what potential barriers or worries stand in the way of implementing it?

Commentary

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE is increasingly discussed as a tool not just for understanding between religions, but also as a way to improve community cohesion and increase societal resilience. While there is evidence that it can be of benefit, there are caveats in implementing it. Despite these concerns it seems an increasing necessity, both in the increasingly multifaith context of the West and in traditionally multifaith societies in South East Asia.

Given that a recent PEW Forum report named Singapore as the world's most religiously diverse country, the need for interreligious dialogue should be clear. There are, however, issues that can be seen as barriers to developing interreligious dialogue. The key ones include levels of religious literacy; a fear and reluctance around dialogue amongst religious groups; and logistics.

Types of Dialogue and Religious Literacy

It is often assumed that a high level of religious literacy is needed for interreligious dialogue. Certainly some meetings of leaders, academics, and monastics involve detailed discussions. However, this is not the only model. Scholars often speak of four types of dialogue (variously named): theological exchange; spirituality; action; and life. While the first two, which involve sharing

concepts and prayer, may sometimes be the concern of elite groups, all members of society can be involved in the others. The dialogue of action, for instance, involves religious communities working together for some common goal. This may be ecology, social welfare, or poverty alleviation.

Most members of the respective religious communities have a pretty good sense of the ethical imperatives of their traditions that underpin these. However, to really strengthen such dialogue, participants should reflect upon these across the religions – if they just meet, act, and then part it may be shared activity but not really dialogue. As noted, this does not require deep religious literacy, just an ordinary understanding of why social action is important to you in your tradition.

Meanwhile the dialogue of life is about the daily meetings between members of different religious communities, which may be at the school gate, in the office, or on the commute to work. Learning ways to live alongside religious differences does not necessary entail a detailed knowledge of theology, philosophy, or history.

Nevertheless, religious literacy helps people within each community have the confidence to engage with others, and also to have some sense of what other religions do. This can be encouraged both by education and interreligious exchanges. At the basic level this may involve visits to other communities to get descriptive account of festivals or rituals. While many want to gain a greater understanding, lacking a high level of religious literacy does not stop dialogue beginning. Religious leaders, when religiously literate and equipped with a deep understating of interreligious dialogue, can help lead the way and allay concerns amongst their own communities.

Reluctance and Fear of Dialogue

Reasons for fear and reluctance to dialogue are manifold. They vary within and between religions. Some, for instance, fear that without due understanding their members, and young people in particular, are at risk of conversion. Some believe that certain traditions come to dialogue with nefarious agendas, to actively convert and not to engage in irenic exchange and encounter. Others may see it as a move towards liberal syncretism and so not compatible with their tradition. Such fears, common worldwide, actually have very little substance. Evidence suggests that engaging in interreligious dialogue actually makes people more deeply committed to and aware of their own tradition.

Ground rules, well established in many dialogue organisations, prevent proselytising. Again, for over a hundred years dialogue has been a component of almost all major religious traditions but there are no signs of a new syncretistic religion emerging. This, of course, is not to deny that some people do convert, some abuse dialogue for mission, and some people form their own syncretistic ideas; however, all of this happens with or without dialogue.

Logistics

Always a perennial issue: money. Most dialogue initiatives rely upon volunteers, individual enthusiasts, and goodwill to support such work. Dedicated volunteers,

particularly for the youth, are needed to encourage and facilitate activities. Mundane things like refreshments, facilities, and visits all need funding.

Two of the world's oldest surviving interfaith organisations, Singapore's Interreligious Organisation (IRO) and the United Kingdom's World Congress of Faiths (WCF), each over 60 years old, have strived to promote better relations between religions and communities, but with greater funding could have done more. Within Singapore, people often see a mix of religious leaders present for events like the F1 racetrack blessing and to pray for soldiers at their passing out parade after national service, but stronger support could be given for more cogent and long-term relations between religions.

Proposals to Improve Interreligious Relations

Having addressed these issues we can ask what can be done to improve interreligious dialogue activities. Actually the answers are quite simple; however, none may be easy to put into practice. Firstly, an increase in religious literacy at all levels is needed to improve understanding of each other and one's own tradition – this should not simply be academic learning, but practical understanding as well.

Secondly, work is needed amongst youth groups because if the young (those most at risk of radicalisation and liable to be involved in rioting or tensions should these arise) can be brought together it bodes well for the future. Thirdly, dialogue skills and experience needs to be put in place which will help overcome worries and ensure that good practice can inform the relations between religions and communities.

Certainly much good work already exists in places like Singapore so it is not building from ground zero, but more can be done. Fourthly, this work should not be led in a top-down way but most come from and be owned by the communities at a grassroots level. Inspiring and creating this groundswell will need work. A fifth is that with an increasing number of people of no religion, or atheists, such groups should also be included in the discussion. Much of this is common sense, but implementation will need a lot of skill and experience in practical and theoretical areas, all of which will require adequate resourcing.

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