

Unity in Diversity: Interfaith Dialogue in the Middle East

Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Amal I. Khoury, and Emily Welty

Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007. 285 pages.

The field of conflict resolution has rarely been tested so frequently as in the Middle East. Since 1948, internecine conflict has flared in Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq, with neighboring states sustaining the consequences of the tensions. Applying interfaith dialogue (IFD) as a means to promote peaceful relations is thus, by its very nature, fraught with controversy and uncertainty. Yet this unique approach draws on peace-building mechanisms that bear such religious nuances as reconciliation, mercy, and forgiveness. By eschewing secular concepts for religious resources, IFD provides a point from which individuals can transcend the religious divide in search of further understanding and peace. Accordingly, following the activities of IFD organizations in Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon is a complex undertaking for the authors of *Unity in Diversity*. Having previously addressed *Nonviolence and Peacebuilding in Islam: Theory and Practice* (University Press of Florida: 2003) and *Dialogue, Conflict Resolution, and Change: Arab-Jewish Encounters in Israel* (State University of New York Press: 1999), Abu-Nimer, an associate professor with the International Peace and Conflict Resolution Program, lends a revealing insight into faith-based resolution. Alongside Khoury and Welty, this book introduces IDF and analyzes its application, limitations, and recommendations.

Opening with an overview of the “Potentials and Challenges in Interfaith Dialogue in the Middle East” in chapter 1, the authors proceed to elucidate the book’s themes in chapter 2: “Basic Concepts and Approaches.” In

addition to the plethora of methodologies and themes presented, IFD's essence can be reduced to three main points: "dialogue" can be viewed as a set of practices that are not limited to the elites or formal means of communication; religious dialogue is a means of "democratizing otherwise state- and élite-centred peace negotiations, settlements, and processes" (p. xii); and lastly, IFD's "best practices" counteract the negative dimensions of religion and dialogue while kindling the peace-building potential of religious traditions. The lucid narrative introducing IFD's foundations progresses toward a comprehensive exploration of its origins and types, the foremost being Abrahamic dialogue (which forms the crux of the analyses) and the World Conference on Religion and Peace, established in 1968 as a symbol of goodwill among Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus.

Chapter 2 balances IFD's history with the flaws and virtues of cognitive versus affective, joint prayer, and the acceptance/adaptation worldview. While IFD's objectives are portrayed admirably, a significant flaw resides in the authors' unstinting optimism that it could work if regional leaders should adopt a faith-based track of diplomacy. Despite acknowledging that "[t]he religious aspects of the conflict – Jewish, Muslim, and Christian – have been ignored by politicians and decision makers in all formal and informal negotiations, including the 'Road Map for Peace'" (p. 45), they continue to urge the resumption of IFD at the diplomatic and grassroots levels. Yet in order to partake of and bear its fruits, one must anticipate religious affiliation; that many individuals lose their faith during times of conflict is not addressed. Unfortunately, this omission encourages burgeoning skepticism toward the process of reconciliation promulgated within the opening chapters.

Chapter 3, "Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding in Israel and Palestine," commences with a detailed analysis of IFD cases in Israel/Palestine and then explores such interfaith organizations as the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs and Sabeel. Despite their admirable work, their triumphs are countered by the ambivalence toward IFD that permeates Israel/Palestine. According to a Palestinian interfaith community leader based in Galilee:

Jews in these dialogues did not want to discuss these problems [politics] and do not want genuine peace. They want us to do celebrations, dance, and learn Hebrew songs. ... We should say the truth and the things that the other does not like; these are the basis of peace. Not inviting Jews for *mujadra* cooking, teaching them our songs, or learning from them the Biblical or Talmudic songs. (p. 57)

Dubbed “Interfaith: Hollywood and Disney Style” (p. 58), the reluctance to raise political issues is a significant obstacle, as striking a balance between appeasing or inciting participants remains elusive. Nevertheless, that negligible number of partakers emphasizes the need for IFD and the timeliness of the publication.

Chapter 4, “Interfaith Dialogue in Lebanon: A Cornerstone for Healing and Overcoming Sectarian Divides,” reveals the IFD’s positive and multifarious manifestations. In particular, summer camps prove to be an inspiring success, with the National Committee for Christian-Muslim Dialogue, the Arab Working Group on Muslim-Christian Dialogue, and the Middle East Council of Churches attracting large numbers of participants from Lebanon and surrounding states. Chapter 5, “Interfaith Dialogue in Egypt: National Unity and Tolerance,” charts the historical presence of Egypt’s Coptic community and its involvement in IFD with an engaging narrative that shirks the naïveté of the preceding chapters, rendering it one of the publication’s strongest sections. Chapters 6 and 7, “Interfaith Dialogue in Jordan: Between International Host and Local Harmonizer” and “The Nature and Types of Interfaith Peace and Dialogue Efforts in the Middle East: A Comparative Perspective,” respectively, discuss Jordan’s Christian community, which has, to date, enjoyed relative equality amidst a peaceable milieu.

Just as *Unity in Diversity* opens with a series of recommendations for the “best practices” in IFD, it culminates with some advice concerning future IFD activities, such as professional training for staff and directors of IFD organizations, increased youth participation, and further research on IFD’s contribution to conflict resolution. Tucked away in “Appendix B” is an invaluable list of religious and interfaith dialogue organizations in the countries featured for researchers.

Although contentious, interfaith dialogue has enjoyed some success in the Middle East. Such ground-breaking organizations as Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR) in Israel/Palestine show the strength and far-reaching results of interfaith cooperation and counter initial skepticism toward IFD, revealing it to be optimistic yet plausible. Established in 1988 in response to “serious abuses of human rights by the Israeli military authorities in suppression of the Intifada,” RHR comprises ninety Orthodox, Reformist, Conformist, and Constructivist rabbis. In addition to protesting Palestinian home demolitions, the siege of Palestinian villages, curfews, and the plight of the Jahalin Bedouin, its members visit hospitals to be with the injured on both sides, a move not previously undertaken by any other group in Israel/Palestine.

While *Unity in Dialogue* can be viewed as a valuable contribution toward conflict resolution and the promotion of IFD, its applicability remains questionable. As Father Salim Ghazzal, an active IFD participant, observed: “Despite the fact that conflicts, persecutions, and theological debates between Muslims and Christians have taken place throughout history, these wars were not engendered for religious reasons but by political motives” (p. 100). Far from becoming redundant, however, this book provides a laudable account of IFD combined with a compelling insight into those organizations working to improve interfaith relations.

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