

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND INCLUSION

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UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

When talking about religious identity and inclusion, it is perhaps apt to start from the perspective of exclusion. Globalisation has disrupted the social fabric that helps individuals define themselves and assess their social roles.¹ The shifts of the 21st century have upended traditional structures of authority, relocated centres of power and allowed a flood of perspectives on how life should be lived. These shifts have unanchored lives, challenging the traditional structures and networks that guided peoples' behaviour in society, such as learning from the teachings of our forefathers and following the models of others. In times of rapid social change, these networks are erased or shifted to a degree that they become unrecognisable. The frantic pace of change has unsettled people to such an extent that they yearn for agents of constancy to provide an oasis in the shifting sands of today. At a time when we are, in some ways, more interconnected than we have ever been, ironically we are also disconnected, with exclusion taking place on a variety of levels. In particular, exclusion is reinforced by the following:

- **The search for social identity:** The increasing mobility of people and the ease of global communications seem almost to make it possible for everyone to live everywhere. As a result, huge new multicultural populations are emerging around the world that have mixed identities, grounded in their new homelands but in touch with countries of heritage. Thus today one's social identity is fluid and often determined by changing global circumstances, and remains a paradox. The paradox arises from the fact that unlike before, people have multiple competing factors around which their social identity is formed. This can in some cases create challenges, particularly for those who comprise the second and third generation of migrants in the west.
- **Accountability:** There is a global issue of authority. As the concept of the nation state becomes diluted with globalisation, it is no longer clear who is in charge. This phenomenon is further exacerbated by disaffected nationalist regimes and movements that claim, but at the same time have seemingly lost, moral bearings.

¹ See 'God in the Tumult of the Global Square: Religion in Global Civil Society', Mark Jurgensmeyer, Dinah Griego and John Soboslai, University of California Press, 2015, for more details.

- **Security:** We see mass disillusionment with the system of sovereign, secular states. National unities have been challenged by division based on religious and tribal identities, and new ideologies of nationalism have emerged based on the sectarian interests of religion.

Consistent with these feelings of exclusion, we have seen that the beginning of the 21st century was marked by predominantly civil conflicts.² Challenges to the established order are arising in different places around the world, linked to diverse causes such as political change, regional and national autonomy, urbanisation, climate change, faith and cultural identity, and the struggle to secure the basic conditions of life. In many cases, politics, faith, identity and rights are the foreground factors for conflict. Consequently, conflicts manifest themselves in rumour, hearsay and generalisations, which are often the first steps towards the stereotyping of people, on the grounds of their faith, culture and identity, and the denial of a diverse, lived reality. In some cases faiths - encompassing beliefs, culture and identity - become judged by the attitudes and actions of small and aberrant minorities.

It is precisely in this scenario that there are calls for new solutions. These new solutions will have to challenge people to create equal opportunities for diverse communities of ethnicities, traditions, cultures and faiths. This challenge also starts with the premise that whilst faith is seen as a cause of turmoil and exclusion, it can also be used as an antidote. As the sociologist and Islamic reformer Ali Sharyati put it, "Religion is an amazing phenomenon that plays contradictory roles in people's lives. It can destroy or revitalise, put to sleep or awaken, enslave or emancipate, teach docility or teach revolt."³

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The North East Interfaith Reconciliation Forum, Sri Lanka

The North East Interfaith Reconciliation Forum (NEIFR) was constituted in 2009 by religious leaders who felt that spirituality and common human values founded and strengthened by the different religious teachings should be used as a force to promote inter-ethnic understanding and social cohesion in post conflict Sri Lanka. Faith leaders have come together from different religious backgrounds throughout Sri Lanka to convene multi-religious and multi-cultural awareness programmes to adopt common societal values and plans for upholding public goods. The forum believes that if religious leaders and institutions can provide an opportunity to apply their harmonising principles to post-conflict situations, the process of reconciliation can benefit. NEIFR was invited to present their findings to the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) set up by the Sri Lankan government in 2010, where they talked about the benefits of faith-based diplomacy, including:

- Conscious commitment to respect and abide by spiritual principles, and preparedness also to use prayer, fasting and forgiveness as resources of peacemaking.

² An authoritative estimate from World Bank data is that 1.5 billion people - a little over 20 per cent of the world's population - live in countries under the threat of large-scale, organised violence, whether perpetrated by terrorists, state forces or, mostly, by criminal gangs.

³ See 'The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere', Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor and Cornel West, Columbia University Press, 2011, for more details.

- Faith-based diplomats to have a firm rooting in a particular religious tradition, and they should also understand and respect the essence of other faith traditions.
- Conviction that transcendental approaches and principles are derived from sacred texts and spiritual experience, and that applying these to conflict resolution adds value to other diplomatic efforts. Therefore, there is a need to institute and preserve a combined approach to reconciliation efforts.

NEIFR requested the following as ways for faith leaders to engage in reconciliation in Sri Lanka:

- Constitute a National Committee of Conscience rooted in spiritual guidelines of the right to life and the sharing of common space and resources. This will be an apex body to advise the government on human rights, resource access and allocation, and the ethical harnessing of natural resources. It will also function as an advocate for the safety of endowments passed down to the next generation. The Committee will also advise on the inclusion of spiritual teachings of human and family values in schools. The Committee will monitor divisionary or extremist publication or pronouncement that could incite divisions.
- Constitute Reconciliation and Peace Committees at district and local levels, to include clergy from different religions. These Committees will hold meetings, seminars and workshops involving public officers and the public as ways of strengthening inter-ethnic relationships, with a focus on a common Sri Lankan identity. These Committees will be linked to the National Committee of Conscience.
- Encourage the formation of community councils at the village level, including two members of clergy as ex-officio steering members. The responsibility of the steering members would be to guide the work of the councils, prevent excesses and corruption in public life and inculcate resource conservation as a spiritual requirement for posterity. The councils will promote respect for human values, including the right to life, as a platform to building a peaceful society.
- Religious leaders should be role models and focal points for forging peace and harmony in the society by providing incentives and recognition for humanitarian services and *community* reconciliation work.

The LLRC considered the recommendations, which were eventually highlighted in clause 8.274 of the LLRC final report as a recommendation for the government to pursue.

NEIFR still works on bringing faith leaders together to tackle humanitarian crises while creating platforms for communities to discuss issues of social concern. It still advocates for the role that religious leaders can play in reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

THE ROLE OF FAITH

For many people around the world, faith is embedded in cultures, practices and communities. Religious practices and perspectives continue to be sources of values that nourish an ethics of multicultural citizenship, commanding both solidarity and equal respect. Historically, spiritual heritage has often provided humanity with the capacity for personal and social transformation.

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Today we are experiencing dark moments, and in the tumult, religion appears to shine like a beacon of hope and reliability. Religions provide trusted institutions that have their bases of legitimacy in the divine order of the universe and in the societies they have nourished and been nourished by. As a repository of symbols, a system of belief, a convergence of cultural rights, a structure of morality, and an institution of power and one that challenges old systems, people often find religion offers them a sense of community, a trusted authority and meaning for their lives. Religious institutions can also be mediums for inclusive engagement, as they offer simple and easy access to communities, and a simple language to express the commonalities of existence, such as:⁴

- **Common values:** Major faith traditions are united in values that espouse the notion of a shared humanity. These fundamentals help to define a framework for dialogue, constructive debate and joint action, to confront that which is an affront to civilisation, namely the persistent scourge of material poverty, and the malaise of bigotry, intolerance and inequity, whether based on religion, nationality, race, culture or gender, and to address creatively the challenges of exclusion and take advantage of the opportunities commonalities may offer.
- **Social responsibility:** Diversity, like creation itself, is purposeful. The reality of its prevalence is reason enough for people, whatever their origin or background, to come together in an effort to know one another. This coming together and dialogue can only be sustained if merit or virtue is associated with the quality of one's conduct, irrespective of one's creed, race, colour, gender or material status in society. Abstractions of good, and protestations of righteousness, are of no avail unless translated into practical, good deeds. Without active social responsibility, religiosity may be seen by some as merely a show of conceit, and be divisive.
- **Social justice and ethics:** Justice, compassion and ethics generally only endure when they are part of a lived spirituality, mirroring a soul at peace. Justice, thus defined, is the bonding principle of our common or universal ethic that is the only way to ensure a human dimension to policies and strategies pertaining to inclusion.

⁴ See 'Religion and Globalisation: Perspectives for the New Millennium', Shams Vellani, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 1 April 2001, <http://bit.ly/24M2nqF>.

The Imam and the Pastor, Nigeria

Nigeria has roughly equal numbers of Christians and Muslims, and with a population of 140 million, is often said to be the country that contains the greatest number of Christians and Muslims in one nation. Violence is seen as having its origins in the adoption of extremist positions by some local religious leaders in the 1970s, which intensified as a result of debates over Sharia law in the 1990s. It was against this backdrop that the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum, and subsequently the Inter-Faith Mediation Centre, was founded by two religious leaders, Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa, themselves former leaders of violence and militancy.

They first came face to face to talk about a common problem in their communities, drug abuse, in 1995, and agreed to begin a tentative dialogue between themselves to try to find a shared understanding. This personal interaction and reflection, originally charged with suspicion and doubt, eventually led to public-facing activity which aimed to develop trust and begin collaborative relationships to build reconciliation over time. The main objectives of their work are to reestablish relationships that have been damaged due to violence; attempt to minimise the likelihood of the reoccurrence of violence; offer projects which require the involvement of both Christians and Muslims, such as cultural events and workshops; and help support the capacity development of partners involved in peacebuilding. Activities have a particular focus on including women, as the chief transmitters of and educators about values in the home, and young people, who are vulnerable to religious calls to violence.

Part of the follow-up to this has been the development of a cadre of religious leaders who can be rapidly deployed to defuse tension in times of crisis.

The work has since been applied to contexts other than the strictly religious, such as ethnic contexts, with the skills developed in Christian-Muslim peace-building used to bring together opposing Fulani and Berom tribes. The work of the two leaders has also been showcased in a film launched in 2007, *The Imam and the Pastor*.

This experience demonstrates the need for processes of reconciliation to start from personal and apparently modest roots. A process of personal acceptance and understanding gradually broadened out into something that could reach and engage with others.

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND INCLUSION

The concept of inclusion around religious identity works on the premise of building an understanding of religious pluralism, based on common features in a language spoken by most people, setting the agenda for creating a new, improved environment. As a concept for espousing inclusion, religious pluralism is the interaction of religious actors with one another and with society and the state around concrete cultural, social, economic and political agendas. It denotes a politics that joins diverse communities with overlapping but distinctive ethics and interests.

Globalisation has challenged the familiar national/international polarity by transforming relationships between what were considered global and local aspects of politics, culture and society. As religion can cut across class, ethnic, geographic and cultural divisions, religious leaders can serve an important, if sometimes informal, representative function. Members of a religious community, anchored in different parts of the world, have an enormous latent capacity to increase their cultural, social and economic links with one another and with other religious and secular partners in other parts of the world. Religious identity also serves as a powerful bond amid the vicissitudes of globalisation, and one reinforced by ethical commitments embedded within a particular tradition.

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Despite this role, there has been a certain reluctance to recognise and acknowledge this and subsequently engage with faith organisations on such measures, with much of the rhetoric of ‘engagement with faith’ being done in the realms of inter-faith forums. While these have their importance and have a role to play, it is increasingly being felt that these forums are limited in mandate, scope and sphere of influence, with insufficient interest in leveraging the basic tenets of faith for the good of the wider, multi-faith society; they are seen as being more about talk than action.

Reluctance stems from the fact that, despite the importance of inclusion in principle, there is a character to the religious playing field that can complicate matters. Faith communities, whether they are numerous and powerful, a minority struggling for a voice, or even an influential tiny cadre, undeniably have as strong a history of internecine strife and struggle as they do of cooperation and collaboration. Yet given the challenges faced, and the opportunities posed, there is a need to engage with faith and faith organisations to build and sustain links with them, purely for the reason that communities can be engaged on a faith basis. This is of course something that political figures and conflict entrepreneurs know well, and have used for negative ends throughout history and today. It is important that civil society with the right intentions learns how to engage with faith for more positive ends.

The role of diaspora interfaith groups in reconciliation in Sri Lanka

International Alert has been working with the Sri Lankan diaspora in the UK over the last six years. The premise is that as long as diaspora have an interest in their countries of heritage, they can be utilised for peacebuilding and reconciliation. A new phase of this initiative has been to use the inter-faith platform amongst diaspora communities to open up a space for a discussion on reconciliation on Sri Lanka.

International Alert believes that the Sri Lankan communities living abroad have a positive and important role to play at this juncture for the country, and by responding in a systematic and committed way can help to secure a positive change in Sri Lanka, characterised by an inclusive identity where all people can live in dignity and security. As such it has been constituting inter-faith gatherings with communities in Australia, Norway and the UK to enable the perspectives of diaspora Sri Lankans who, through the commonality of faith teachings, can develop a collective vision and action for Sri Lanka.

Using some of the principles and values for religious pluralism discussed above, International Alert has succeeded in creating spaces for conversation for diaspora Sri Lankans, so that they can overcome political differences while looking towards the future with some underlying ethics and values.

REFLECTIONS

Faith identities will continue to be part of the picture, and faith based organisations will continue to thrive as part of civil society. Virtually all faiths have a common purpose, which is to serve humanity and aid the disadvantaged, which thereby addresses exclusion. Despite this, faith has been often side-lined by secular civil society organisations due to its potentially sensitive nature.

However we ignore faith at our peril, especially in a time when traditional understandings of identity, accountability and security are being continuously challenged, as is the way we belong to a community, which has changed due to increased mobility, improved communication technologies and the weakening boundaries of communities and the nation state. There is thus a need to find new ways to anchor us in a globally connected world. In the turbulent waters of the global era, religion, which has its basis in the past, can provide solid ground and protection, but also inspire creative ways to aid transition. Civil society needs to recognise the role that faith can play and provide a seat at the table for faith organisations.

Kwame Anthony Appiah writes eloquently of the urgent need for “...ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become.”⁵ The roots of all global crises can be found in human denial of the eternal principle of peace. In order to fight this denial there needs to be self-critical reflection. The 19th century explorer Sir Richard Burton once wrote that, “All Faith is false, all Faith is true: Truth is the shattered mirror strewn in myriad bits; while each believes his little bit the whole to own,” by which he meant that you will find parts of the truth everywhere and the whole truth nowhere.⁶ In Appiah’s words, the shattered mirror concept enables us to see that “...each shard reflects one part of a complex truth from its own particular angle.”⁷ Our mistake in the world today is to consider that “our little shard can reflect the whole.”

5 ‘Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers’, Kwame Anthony Appiah, W W Norton, 2006.

6 ‘The Kasidah Of Haji Abdu El Yezdi’, Sir Richard F Burton, 1924, available at <http://bit.ly/1WpRCbR>.

7 In developing this analogy, Appiah draws on the ideas of the 19th century adventurer and polyglot Sir Richard Francis Burton. Among other exploits, Burton managed in 1853 to gain entry to Mecca and Median as a pilgrim, helping to communicate the complexity and richness of Islamic culture to Victorian Britain.

This is the current problem with some thinking about exclusion. Many people misinterpret their little truth as being the whole truth and are not inclusive enough to consider the other ‘shards of glass’. True inclusivity can only be obtained when we carefully position all the ‘small shards of glass’ to create a compelling cosmopolitan mosaic. This will never be easy, but remains vitally important because, as Kwame Anthony Appiah illustrates, it involves creating the very “ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become.”