

International Inter-religious Peacebuilding and the UN System: Challenges and Opportunities

Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation at the United Nations: a Brief Introduction

Religious life and international relations at the beginning of the 21st century are shaped by and responding to great global changes. After a long dominance of the Western secular model in international relations we find that Western based paradigms, including the relation between religion and the state, are increasingly questioned. The various impacts of globalisation processes, the threats of violent extremism and terrorism, as well as the resurgence of religious movements have strengthened the quest for **complementary approaches to exclusively nation-centred, confrontational ‘realpolitik’ and purely secular diplomacy.**

Religious actors play an increasing role in multi-faceted crises in a fast globalising world, thus highlighting the need for a more objective and in-depth understanding of religious identities, of their local and regional particularities, a new understanding that could inform new national and global policy solutions. We need more inter-religious education, training and research projects (at schools, universities, professional bodies etc.), as well as national and international institutions that are fully able to cooperate on humanitarian and social issues with a wide variety of constituencies, including diverse faith communities.

Seeking alternatives to today’s common experiences of war, violence and loss of meaning can take many forms: engagement in Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) seeking peaceful solutions to conflict and war, joining religious movements for justice and peace, supporting fair trade and global justice movements, **being active in inter-religious initiatives.** These initiatives and movements are part of an emerging global civil society. The ***Charter for Forgiveness and Reconciliation***, a recent example of such international initiatives, is seeking to create an international founding document for a global movement for forgiveness and reconciliation.

How these global civil society actors relate to the United Nations System, the pre-eminent place for nations to negotiate their co-existence on the global level, has to be one of the core issues in developing alternative models for a more humane global governance. The United Nations System is also the pre-eminent global forum where regular interactions of NGOs, transnational civil society networks, and governments take place.

There is a widespread consensus amongst persons engaged in inter-religious work concerning the need to seek inter-religious co-operation and engagement with the world of politics. However, the **structures and processes** to empower this consensus are in most parts of the world **not in existence.** Faith communities, political institutions and inter-religious organisations have not developed the necessary structures and processes needed for **sustainable** regional or global alliances. Together, we have to further explore the relation that exists between seeking sustainable solutions to global problems and the mobilising of faith communities and their spiritual values for the common good in a global age. A deeper analysis is needed to overcome past dichotomies between religion and the state, between secularisation and living a spiritually inspired life, between belonging to a particular community and being part of humanity.

There is a great variety of religious NGOs and communities currently active at the United Nations (UN), ranging from major religious communities to international faith-based NGOs. Amongst the most active are international inter-religious organisations (for example, Religions for Peace, or the United Religions Initiative, and others), often co-sponsoring meetings and acting as facilitators. The Committee of

Religious NGOs has existed since 1972 at the UN and serves as a focal point. It is, however, a voluntary organisation and does not formally represent all religious NGOs at the UN.

Recent Inter-religious Initiatives at the United Nations

In recent years there has been a fast growing amount of inter-cultural and inter-religious activities at the United Nations. During the last decade major, new initiatives and programmes were launched at the UN, next to a series of UN General Assembly resolutions addressing inter-religious issues.

The ***Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace*** (22 June 2005) was a ground-breaking event at the United Nations. For the first time a convening group of UN agencies, governments and religious non-governmental organisations (RNGOs) organised together an official high-level event at the UN. Five years earlier ***The Millennium World Peace Summit*** (August 2000) had been allowed to use the UN Headquarter premises, but it was not an official UN event.

Building on the ***Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace*** (2005), an ongoing working group was established that led to the establishment of the ***Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace*** at the United Nations (launched on 24 March 2006, led by the government of the Philippines).

At the same time, from September 2004 onwards, the ***Alliance of Civilizations*** (AoC) programme was developed at the United Nations (led by the governments of Spain and Turkey). On 26 April 2007 the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon appointed as first ***UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations***, Jorge Sampaio, the former President of Portugal. Over the following years, the ***UN Alliance of Civilizations*** developed into a leading UN programme addressing issues of inter-cultural and inter-religious understanding, with a special focus on the relationship between Islam and the West.

More recently, a major global event was the ***High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace*** (4, 5, and 8 October 2007), the first formal high-level session of the **UN General Assembly** to address issues of inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding and cooperation. The **UN High-level Dialogue** included an interactive hearing with civil society. Over 80 countries addressed the UN General Assembly at this event to speak about their inter-religious and inter-cultural activities and how to increase inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue and understanding.

Then in 2010 the UN General Assembly adopted on 20 October the resolution A/RES/65/5, proclaiming the ***World Interfaith Harmony Week*** to be held each year in the first week of February.

The above mentioned major events, programmes and initiatives are just a very brief selection out of a much larger list of activities that are taking place in the United Nations System, as well as world-wide, concerning inter-cultural and inter-religious issues. UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNEP and UNDP are amongst the UN agencies that are taking religious actors into consideration in their programmes and have developed or participated in inter-cultural and inter-religious activities.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

The nations of the world have made over the last 97 years, since 1920, (first through the League of Nations and now through the United Nations) efforts to move toward a world community, efforts with many setbacks, interrupted by World War II and seriously limited by the Cold War period and today's major economic and ideological differences.

However, even today the United Nations System is seen as rather helpless in the face of global problems and in most cases the political and economic interests of individual nation states determine the decisions or, sometimes, the absence of decisions. In reality we cannot yet speak of a world community, rather of a crises management system trying to address major world problems, most often with too little power and resources, and often too late. Could a renewed United Nations System, which is more democratic in its structures and significantly expanded to cooperate with and empower NGOs and civil society organisations, as well as religious and spiritual communities and movements, be more effective in achieving the stated goal of the United Nations to save 'succeeding generations from the scourge of war' and in addressing the great challenges of our time? The answer is a clear 'yes'. No isolated part of the emerging global community can hope to solve today's global problems on its own. The material infrastructures, and the ethical and spiritual resources of religious, spiritual and indigenous traditions, are needed to address interconnected and global issues like justice, human rights, peace, and sustainability.

Advancing positive global change through sustainable and large-scale multi-stakeholder partnerships must be accompanied by a substantial change within the United Nations System. This would create the capacity within the UN System for meaningful institutional cooperation and alliance building with wider parts of the world community. Religious and spiritual individuals all over the world have already begun to reflect and to act on their global responsibilities, so that we can live in a more peaceful, just, harmonious and sustainable world community. Now it is time for political institutions, locally, nationally, and internationally, to respond constructively and to further develop the necessary structural frameworks and programs to enable sustainable collaboration with very diverse constituencies, including religious communities and organisations. A better future is achievable by human beings united in their respect for diversity.

We need an expanded United Nations System that is institutionally able to cooperate fully with civil society, business, social, cultural, indigenous and religious organisations. A UN Interreligious Advisory Council could provide a much needed permanent platform to enable informed and timely dialogue and cooperation between the UN System and the world's religious, indigenous and spiritual communities.

In addition, we need a *new and permanent World Inter-religious Forum* that is formally affiliated to and co-operating with the UN System, whilst in its own internal functioning remaining independent from it. Such a new *World Inter-religious Forum*, based on an inter-religious network and co-ordinated by a council, could enhance the existing work of inter-religious organisations and support the best insights, aspirations and programmes of the 120-year old international inter-religious movement. Religious traditions, spiritual movements, indigenous groups and inter-religious organisations could find the necessary global organisational structure to foster permanent, effective and sustainable inter-religious dialogue and cooperation, locally rooted and globally connected.