



Transforming Tolerance into Empathy: Cultural Imperatives in the Interfaith Dialogue

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“There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.”

Hans Küng

“Interreligious dialogue is simultaneously an intercultural dialogue.”

Marcello Zago, OMI

Introduction

The 2012 *Peace and Conflict Executive Summary* of global conflicts reports that conflict per se has decreased but there has been a trend in the past fifteen years where recurring conflicts outnumber new conflict onsets. One observation regarding this trend is that there needs to be better understanding of the issues involved in post-conflict transitions that more adequately insure stability during periods of reconciliation and reconstruction. International peace building efforts have discovered the usefulness of interfaith dialogue as a tool for shifting group differences into a shared, value framework for sustainable peace. Although religious differences are often exploited for political gain, interfaith dialogue can help religious groups discover mutual or “third culture” values (Patal, Li, Sooknanan, 2011). “Interfaith dialogue can unlock the power of religious traditions and provide the inspiration, guidance, and validation necessary for populations to move toward non-violent means of conflict resolution” (Garfinkle, 2004, p.2). However, when religious groups are broadly defined or categorized, the many variants between subgroups may be overlooked and the peace building efforts of interfaith dialogue hindered. Several theorists (Avruch, 1998; Augsburg, 1992; Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 1997, 2005) propose that culture and religion are inextricably connected and should be explored in peacebuilding efforts as such. Culture has both a transparent and hidden presence in everyday activities of human affairs. “Human beings generate culture naturally like spiders spin silk” (Abd-Allah, 2006, p. 358). Like religion, it shapes values and behavior and provides the basis of individuals and groups’ paradigm or world view. It also plays a critical role in identity of self and “other”, behaviorally shapes the “dos and do nots” of human interactions and conceptually frames and reframes what one sees and communicates. Culture is also “..situational, flexible, and responsive to the exigencies of the world..” (Avruch, 1998,p. 20). Awareness of such cultural factors and their impacts on the communication processes in general and in interfaith communication in particular is critical (Abu-Nimer, 2001). Too often distinctions between religious subgroups are overlooked by reductionist categories. Grasping important cultural variants is essential to establishing meaningful



dialogue and realizing peace keeping goals like forgiveness and restorative justice. Peacekeeping efforts that stop short of transforming the conflict may only achieve a level of tolerance at best. While tolerance is certainly an important short term goal between conflicting parties, peacemaking should strive to move parties towards a greater level of empathy and understanding as tolerance alone may in reality only support “..the conservation of the status quo of inequality and discrimination” (Marcuse, 1965).

The purpose of this paper is to strengthen interfaith dialogue as a peace making tool by exploring the transformative potential of cultural conversations on achieving empathy, meaningful “third cultures” and lasting peace. It attempts to do this by highlighting the contributions of the work of authors on cultural dialogue in the 80s and 90s to the current body of works on the same subject matter. Our effort is guided by our assumption that if parties to a conflict can truly appreciate each other’s cultures and identify meaningful commonalities a third culture can be created that replaces tolerance with empathy, a state of being in the shoe of the other person. We argue that under such conditions forgiveness, reconciliation and restorative justice processes (Wiesenthal, 1997; Tutu, 1999; Lederach, 1997, 2005; Henderson, 2009) are transformed in to healing that addresses the needs of both victims and perpetrators of atrocities. The paper proposes a cross-discipline strategy for constructively handling the mosaic of cultural diversities and their manifestations in interfaith dialogue.

Cultural Imperatives and the Role of Culture in Peacebuilding

The term “cultural imperative’ is used in both cross cultural and conflict analysis studies and references the often unconscious cultural dictates that distinguish one group from another. Cultural imperative has defined as those aspects of daily life that shape identity of self and other (Ellis, 2006); the aspects of group life that contextualize social, political and economic realities (Cohen, 1991); and the inherited experiences that are constantly locally transformed (Avruch, 1998). The view that cultural distinctions create deep seated differences is not universal. Some theorists (Burton, 1990; Zartman, 1993) minimize culture in conflict resolution processes and suggest that the role of third party negotiation or mediation should be to filter out cultural differences to get to core, shared basic human needs. Others like (Cohen, 1996; Bercovitch & Foulkes, 2012) acknowledge the important role that culture has as a source of influence over people that should be taken into consideration in peace making strategies. A third group of theorists, however, (Avruch, 1998; Avruch & Black, 1987, 1991; Lederach, 1997; Galtung, 1981) view cultural variants as fundamentally significant and critical to the peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes. Cultural variants are seen as central rather than peripheral to conflict resolution and a simplistic analysis, theorist of this orientation argue, that it may eschew in favor of one which considers how cultural complexities might aggravate differences and stimulate conditions for conflict rather than its resolutions. Lederach (1997) joins this school of thought that considers culture to not only be central to establishing lasting peace, but a variable that needs to be honored and understood most by those working directly with peace building efforts. This view places cultural variants at the center of the analysis framework and provides “the grammar” (Vayrynen, 2001) for meaningful dialogue and conflict transformation.



Instead of being ignored or broached in polite, superficial terms, differences become the main topic. This shifts cultural difference onto center stage and through a process of deep engagement, a level of cross-cultural understanding occurs.

The Need for Cultural Competency

Meaningful dialogue that honors cultural variants requires a level of cultural competency which is the ability to see and understand cultural differences. Cultural competency prevents oversimplification of difference and is essential to effective peace building work. Avruch (1998) warns against several pitfalls of cultural oversimplification including, thinking that culture is homogeneous, reifying culture as if it is independent of people, ignoring intercultural variations, assuming an individual only possesses one culture, incorrectly identifying culture as simply custom and etiquette, and assuming that culture is timeless instead of seeing it as dynamic and constantly transformed. Knowledge and respect of cultural complexities encourage a systemic, multilayered view of culture. Instead of viewing people as part of a single cultural dimension, they are viewed in the context of multiple cultural layers of influences. These distinctions define the dynamic way in which people see themselves as well as others.

There are four primary layers of culture: national, regional, racial/ethnic and religious. Each of these four layers may have differing degrees of influence. For instance an American, Southern, White, Baptist person may identify primarily with the cultural values of his Free Will Baptist tradition that are quite distinct from those of an American, New England, and White Anglican person. Certainly persons are likely to share similarities as both would profess common Christian values but subtleties in their religious backgrounds may be the basis for significant differences in worldviews. The term “Christian values” has multiple meanings depending upon the context, without actually specifying a set of values held by all people believing in Christ. To place both fictional persons in a category as broad as ‘American Christians’ or ‘Christians’ overlooks a range of different beliefs about salvation, worship, lifestyle choices and political views and more importantly in the context of this paper how the view “other”. People possess more than one “culture” (Avruch, 1998) and different arena’s influence which particular “culture” is dominant.

Cultural competency helps create greater understanding of people as multidimensional and distinct. All Buddhists, Christians, Jews, and Muslims are not the same. As Figure 1 below demonstrates, religious groups are clearly embedded in national, regional and ethnic culture which has varying degrees of influence, creating mosaics of difference and uniqueness. This embeddedness suggests that multilayer’s of culture cannot be separated from one another, but are instead provide a framework for a systemic analysis. The implication then, is that each group has distinct differences that make them unique and hence requires an individualized approach to conflict resolution. A one-size fits all approach is going to be less effective than one that acknowledges their inimitable qualities.

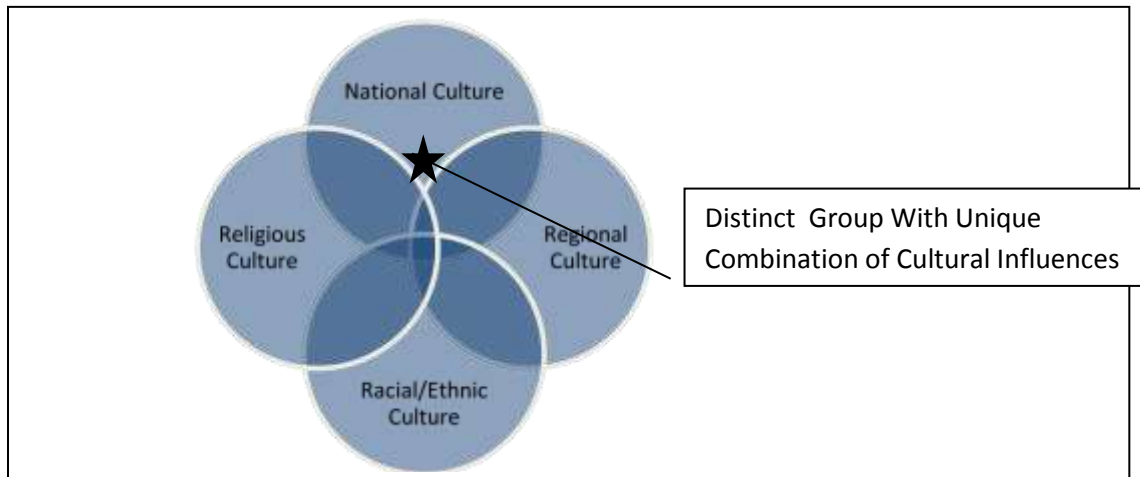


Figure 1: Embedded Analysis of Cultural Variants

Cultural competency and fluency in cultural distinctions encourages a more elicitive rather than prescriptive problem solving approach (Lederach, 1997) and prevents culture-blind imperialism (Avruch & Black, 1987). The elicitive approach honors the expertise and of indigenous people and seeks to facilitate empowerment of their abilities and resources (Lederach, 1997). Unfortunately, peacemaking has often relied on more prescriptive interventions where outsiders are the experts offering solutions.

The elicitive approach cautions peace makers who are outsiders to avoid making broad generalizations about others that risk offensive stereotyping . The ability to see cultural distinctions also prevents the type of dichotomous thinking about Other such as White/Black, Christian/Muslim and Occidental versus Oriental that generate prejudice (Said, 1978; Galtung, 1981). Finally, cultural competency allows for bracketing assumptions, meaning those engaged in peace keeping efforts must take assumptions and biases about others out of play and put them aside (Yankelovich, 1999).

Interfaith Dialogue and Peace building

In peace building theory and practice there has been an increased focus on moving conflict intervention from an outsider, neutral, expert approach to a partnership-facilitator approach. This newer approach is designed to empower people of goodwill to help in the development of resources such as wisdom, courage, compassion & non-violence (Curle, 1971). Interfaith dialogue is one of the many tools reflective of this approach with the goal of local level empowerment. Interfaith dialogue is part of an array of grassroots peace building strategies. This view considers peace building to be a multi-level process requiring efforts at various societal efforts, each with a different goal in mind. In this view of conflict resolution, top political officials work towards the goal of stopping violence and negotiating cease-fires and peace agreement. At the middle level, leaders and problem solvers work together to identify community needs and rebuild the infrastructure of the community to include such community essentials as roads, schools, government services, health care and industry. At the lower, local level



are the community and indigenous leaders that work on establishing co-existing community relationships. It is at this grassroots level that appreciation of culture is so critical because it requires those who interact daily with each other to understand the fundamental worldview differences between them. Grassroots leaders at this level include those involved in peace monitoring and interfaith dialogue.

This shift in peace building theory developed in response to post 1990's protracted conflicts and the acknowledgement that outside national experts are often less successful than grassroots level leaders in conflict resolution. While national level leaders have the power and means to negotiate peace, local level leaders have the motivation to either keep the peace or sabotage efforts. Religious differences have often been identified in conflict analysis as playing a critical role in conflict formulation and generating intractable differences. However, the tiered approach to conflict resolution views religion quite differently and explores the potential of faith traditions to maintain peace. Interfaith dialogue has emerged as an important tool in this tiered peace building process with the goal of increased cooperation, understanding and participation in creating sustainable peaceful co-existence. Although interfaith dialogue can occur at any level, it is most often used and most effective as a peacekeeping tool at the grassroots level.

Zago's (1998) conceptualization of different types of interfaith dialogue is incorporated into Lederach's (1997) tiered approach to peace building as shown in figure 2. below.

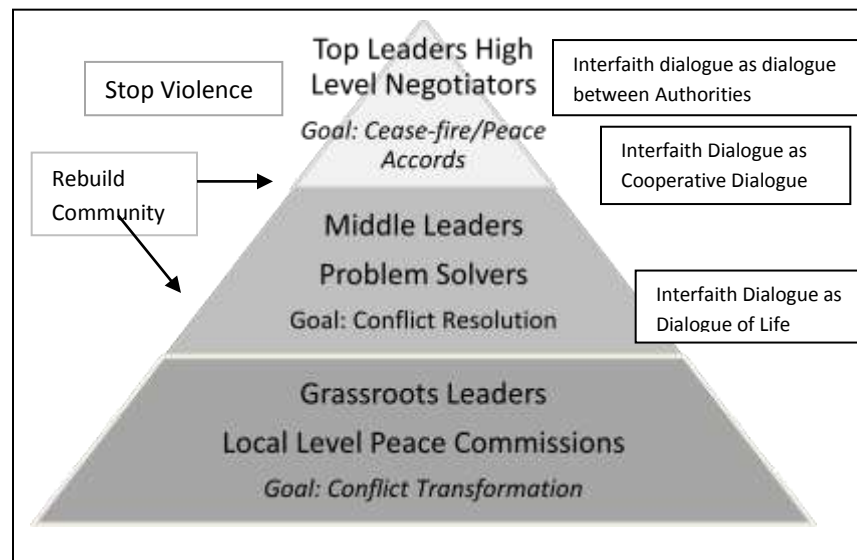


Figure 2. The Interfaith Dialogue and the Tiered Peace Building Approach Adapted from Lederach, 1997; and Zago, 1998

The goal of Lederach's (1997) approach is to elicit the potential of transformation at the grassroots level. Local leadership that is more attune to psycho-social needs and the relevance of cultural variants are more likely to guide a transformative process than



outside leaders. Top level leaders have a distinct and critical role but their role is often limited to political and military arenas. The task of rebuilding community and transforming a conflict into cooperative relationships is given to the local level leaders, who have the most insight into the causes and triggers for violence. Figure 2. inserts a corresponding typology of interfaith dialogue (Zago, 1998) to Lederach model of peace building. Zago (1998) identified five types of interfaith dialogue which include dialogue of life, cooperative dialogue, dialogue of religious experience, theological dialogue and official dialogue between religious authorities. The dialogue of life which focuses on social justice issues and mutual concerns of daily living is the form most likely to create understanding and empathy.

Cultural Competency and Criticisms of Interfaith Dialogue

The inclusion of cultural variants would ameliorate many criticisms of interfaith dialogue. Criticisms comprise theological warnings from orthodox groups that such processes are thinly veiled tools attempts at conversion, as well as less severe complaints that interfaith dialogues are little more than superficial discussions without clear goals or purpose. Some orthodox groups have expressed concern that interfaith dialogue is often convened by Christian groups seeking to provide a platform to express their own brand of faith or worse yet, preach the necessity of conversion to achieve their own interpretation of salvation. Haney (2004, p. 40) suggests that Christians, Jews and Muslims have yet to learn to “..cross the boundaries of difference to appreciate pluralism and to affirm diversity..” instead fighting each other for centuries, often out of fear and misunderstanding. Crossing the boundary of difference would require developing a level of comfort with difference. This would mean acceptance and respect of different beliefs and customs without feeling that such acceptance waters down or dilutes core beliefs. Some interfaith efforts have been accused of trying to universalize individual faiths, finding common denominators where goals are ontologically and experientially incongruous (Rynhold, 2003) or forcing “...the different mountains under one sun approach” which translates to many orthodox groups as religious imperialism.

Markham (2009) addresses this criticism of interfaith dialogue and argues that many underlying assumptions of modern interfaith dialogue are terribly misguided when focused on conversion instead of building understanding. He recommends adopting the approach of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, (1877-1960) a Turkish Muslim theologian who urged the faithful of different religious traditions to embrace pluralism. Nursi was a deeply religious Muslim whose writings and preaching in the early twentieth century urged members of both the Anglican and Muslim faith community to reconcile themselves to an ethic of inclusion. Nursi suggested that the Enlightenment based reliance on rational thinking which rejected religious authority was absurd and produced social moral failure. Nursi urged religious leaders to adopt an ethical system of morality based on common religious values. He challenged the either/or thinking of both Christians and Muslims and argued that atrocities could only be avoided through religious pluralism and inclusion (Markham, 2009).

Additionally, critics have often cited a lack of specific goals and purpose in interfaith dialogue as leading to meaningless and superficial discussions. The practice of gathering people of different religious background together to talk without a clearly



stated purpose can result in superficial and civil discussions where attempts to quickly establish common ground gloss over and demean significant differences (Markham, 2009). Group differences may be broadly categorized and participants are unable to move beyond tolerance (Takim, 2004), a dangerous and fragile state of limbo for groups with grave differences in belief systems and customs. It also produces the reductionist tendency to discount difference. Christian-Muslim dialogue is often hampered by the common habit of taking shared Abrahamic roots of both faiths and attempting to 'Christianize' Islam or 'Islamize' Christianity which only negates and neutralizes the integrity of the others' faith in order to find room for own tradition/worldview (Ayoub, 2004). Interfaith dialogue as a peacemaking and conflict transformation tool is enhanced when the dialogue allows for discussion of difference, when it becomes more discourse than conversation.

Interfaith Dialogue as Discourse

There are three very different types of communication in conflict resolution practice, each with different desired goals or outcomes and include Interactive conflict resolution, dialogical conflict resolution and discursive conflict resolution (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2009). Interactive Conflict Resolution, which is based on the adversarial, reflexive, integrative (ARI) framework (Rothman, 1992) is based on the principles of mediation and guides participants through a series of staged communications designed to search for mutually acceptable outcomes or agreements. In the adversarial state, parties share their grievances and positions. In the reflexive stage of the process, parties to the conflict participate in communication processes designed to acknowledge and confront differences and establish trust and misunderstanding. The third stage, which is the most critical is the integrative, where participants integrate their understanding of the problem as a shared condition into a mutually acceptable solution.

The next type of communication process is based on Gadamerian hermeneutics where the goal is to interpret and gain understanding by exploring the view of a conflict from the position of the other. The differences and the source of disagreement are acknowledged but discourse focuses on establishing empathy via participants exploring the conflict from the other's perspective. The third communication process utilized in conflict resolution is discursive conflict transformation based on Habermasian discourse ethics to establish a shared world of meaning, in particular, a critical theory-based shared meaning about peace. Through this process participants reconstruct the meaning of disagreement and threat and move towards a shared and co-created meaning of peace with diversity.



Type of Communication/Discourse	Desired Goal or Outcome
Interactive Conflict Resolution	Mutually acceptable agreements
Dialogical Conflict Resolution	Overcome prejudice and build trust
Discursive Conflict Transformation (Based on Habermasian discourse ethics)	Deconstruct discourses which foster violence and create dialogues which foster non-violence

Figure 3. Types of Conflict Resolution Discourse (Adapted from Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2009)

While interactive conflict resolution style of communication is useful in mediated disputes, it has limited utility in transforming conflicts. Conflict transformation is much more likely to occur through communication that allows for discourse, reciprocity, wrestling with ideas of difference that are not always civil or polite. Disputing parties have to engage in a dialogue process about their differences and disagreements and dialogical conflict resolution and discursive conflict transformation offer communication frameworks encouraging such processes. Dialogue is a process “..and the outcome is not always harmony” (Yankelovich, 1999). Zago (1998, p.98) suggests that dialogue is not the act of talking together, “but a cultivation of interpersonal relations among individuals and groups to gain a better understanding and appreciation of one another, working together and enriching one another and thus promoting greater unity among people and religions”.

Conclusion: The Role of Culture in Changing the Dialogue and Moving Towards Transformation

Deep, culturally competent interfaith dialogue generates trust and builds relationships. When dialogue includes discourse on difference and cultural variants it allows for distinction between groups to emerge and be affirmed. Such a process assumes that culture defines and shapes people that cultural is multilevel and that understanding role of cultural differences can lead to deeper discussion. In this type of communication, participants not only share their values and beliefs without risk of being ridiculed or shamed, but share the depth of their faith and commitment. Interfaith dialogues should have clarity of purpose that extends beyond show and tell testimonies. They should invite discussions about common life and community issues, women's leadership, praxis theology and faith in action (Haney, 2004). Interfaith dialogue should acknowledge that God's love and forgiveness extends to others (Ayoub, 2004) and adopt the wisdom of Nursi urging people of faith to rediscover the that the universe has a purpose and humanity is part of that purpose (Markham, 2009). Meaningful interfaith dialogue can help achieve religious pluralism and inclusion as well as facilitate transformative cross-group understanding.

Nursi envisioned a world saved from horrible atrocities by people of faith who developed a common system of ethics grounded in the truths of religious traditions not in the doubt and skepticism of the Enlightenment (Markham, 2009). South Africa is an example of how conflict can be potentially transformed when guided by a restorative processes (Tutu, 1999). Sustainable peace is possible but only if there is a paradigmatic shift in relationships between disputing parties in how they define



themselves and others (Ellis, 2006). Such paradigmatic shifts occur when pluralism is allowed and encouraged. People of faith are in a unique position to facilitate such a paradigmatic shift and realize Nursi's unified code. Faith traditions have the capacity to transcend violence by mobilizing a shared "moral imagination" which helps people to see and honor divine connectedness in diversity and complexity (Lederach, 2005). Interfaith dialogue has the potential to actualize deep transformative peace processes if it embraces discursive communication and delves deeply into subjects of difference and disagreement.

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