Interreligious Dialogue as a Contribution to Conflict Transformation – A Practitioners' Guide

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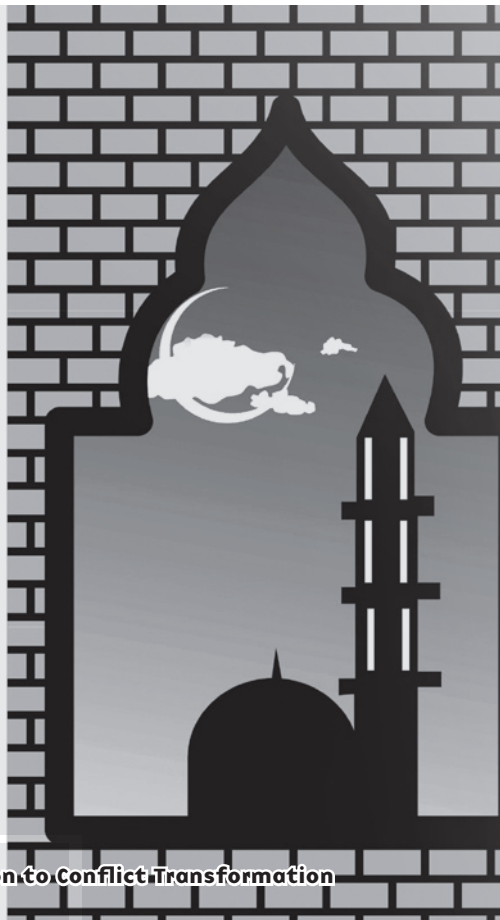
Faith - be it Islam or Christianity or any other - is not peaceful or violent in itself. Only the religious practices in everyday life, formed from the faith, support peace or violence.

Today we witness an increase in the importance of religious belief and, at least since 9/11, religion is again on the agenda of security politics seeking to prevent violent conflict. While official political players mostly invest into institutions to reduce the risk of conflict, track two diplomacy[1] on a civil society level uses tools of dialogue to foster mutual understanding. However, while the importance of interreligious dialogue is clearly recognized by all players, most of them seem to lack practical guidelines about how to create a fruitful dialogue process. The following article explores basic core principles needed to lead a dialogue and also discusses the difficulties of the process.

Dialogue to nowhere?

Dialogue, especially with Islam, is a buzzword in recent debates centering around peace and conflict. However, the high-level conferences held about this topic rarely produce results that go beyond mere abstract concepts of dialogue. Dialogue agencies like the EU funded *Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue Among the Cultures* leave the methods of creating dialogue up to their "clients" to define. Practical concepts explaining how to design an impacting dialogue process are rare. This is not a coincidence. The people who deal with interreligious dialogue are usually those who have specialised in the facets of one or more religions: church professionals, groups of young believers, professors of political science or theology etc. These people possess an enormous amount of knowledge on the historical and cultural background of religious practice, and often its political impacts as well. They know how to convene in dialogue sessions with other academics,



but rarely are they the ones to lead a dialogue with people on the streets. If they do, then they do it only to advertise for their own religious group. If dialogue processes are meant to have a social impact, they need to reach the average believer and not only high profile leaders. The most basic question remains: "what do we want to talk about?"

The dilemmas of dialogue

There are three basic dilemmas in dialogue processes:

- The dilemma of all being equal vs. knowing the truth
- The dilemma of being open vs. the need to restrict
- The dilemma of simplification vs. the need to be accurate

Dialogue is encountering "the other" and her or his beliefs. It is fairly clear that this dialogue always has a certain aim. We lead a dialogue because we want to live in a more peaceful world, to spread tolerance, etc. This implies that every dialogue encounter is ripe with conflict, as the goal is partly also to convince my vis-à-vis of the benefits of my own beliefs. This is not immoral but only a normal implication of human conversation itself. However, it is necessary that the two counterparts that meet in dialogue are on the same level, i.e. that one accepts the other to be equal. If this prerequisite is denied, what reason is there for dialogue? If I believe that my own faith is morally superior, why should I talk with the other and not either shun (as not being worth it) or dominate her or him by force? We face a dilemma here: in dialogue we have to have an equal counterpart (in intellect, social status, education and also religious knowledge), though, at the same time, the impulse to lead a dialogue is to convince the other that one's own belief is better. This dilemma cannot be avoided but the ambiguity should be remembered because it implies a certain dynamic and also danger of dialogue. We can deal with this situation by accepting the other as equal in human rights and dignity, regardless of her or his beliefs and opinions. The content of her or his opinion, however, has to be disputed and the same must apply to my own beliefs. So we should not encounter the other as a child who has not found the right path yet and needs to be disabused but see her or him as a whole person who has been shaped by reasons and history, as we have been shaped.

Again we face a new dilemma: How can I accept that my own beliefs will be questioned when I am sure that I am morally right? Of course, in theory we always willingly state that we want to learn from dialogue, as we hope our counterparts learn from us. I used the same statement when I was faced with a situation two years ago facilitating a dialogue seminar with a very religious man from Jordan. As always when Arabs and Germans sit together, sooner or later the topic of the

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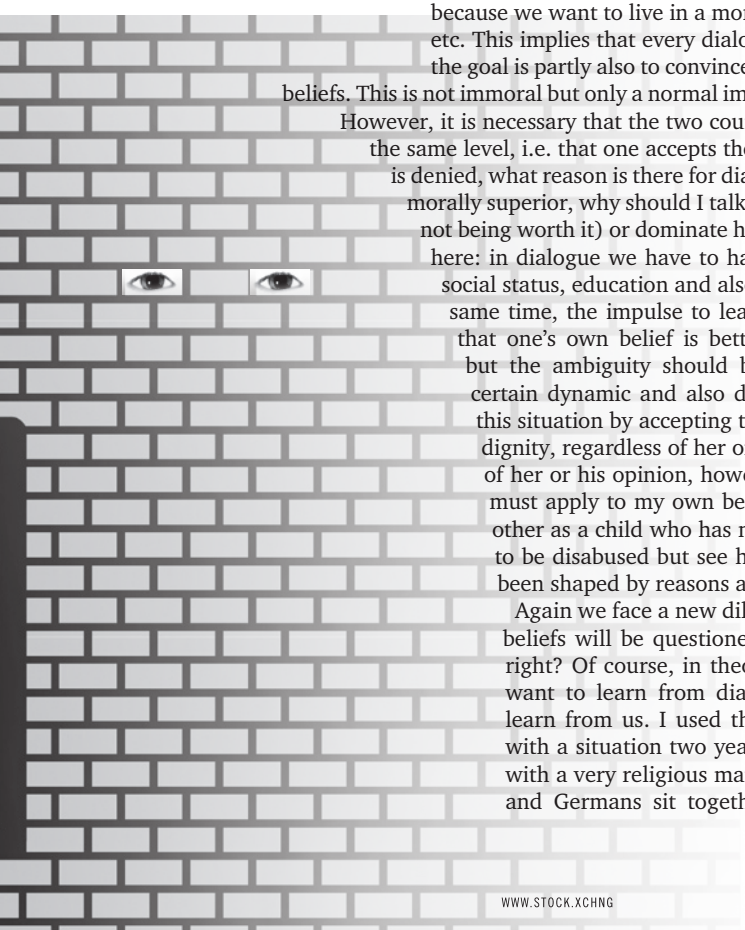

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Holocaust comes up. This man started to question if the Holocaust really happened, stating that he had read books proving the opposite. This is a very sensitive topic in Germany and as I am used to reacting to anti-Semitic statements in a very harsh way, I could not follow the rule I had set before, i.e. to question the truth I believed in to see if I could learn from the other. Of course I still think my point was right as there is plenty of historic evidence that the Holocaust did happen and I should have not thought: "Oh maybe this man has a point". But the dilemma remains; with certain aspects of reality there is no space for negotiation. This means there can be no acceptance of the reality of the other. The problem of course is that this applies also to the other person, when I – for example – questioned aspects of his belief. How can we have a dialogue, when certain important areas are taboo? How can I expect my counterpart to put into question his ideas, if I do not do the same with my ideas? But if I would do so, would that not open the gates to racism, anti-semitism and other degrading beliefs being accepted as equal in the dispute?

The third dilemma occurs because of the need to simplify, we often tend to use analogies to illustrate our arguments in complex topics. This is often done to demonstrate to our counterparts how unacceptable their line of arguments would be if applied to another setting. These analogies, however, imply that one situation is identical to another. This in reality is not the case, as the historical, cultural and social backgrounds always differ. Analogies do a lot of harm to dialogue processes as they simplify situations and discredit the arguments of the counterpart in an unacceptable way. But the dilemma remains, as many of the topics tackled are connected to inner-personal beliefs which are not easy to put into words, resulting in the need for metaphoric explanations.

Dialogue is conflict

As described above, every dialogue has a potential for conflict. My counterpart will feel threatened by my attempt to convince because this means questioning her or his own beliefs. This step is hard to accept, as it means questioning inner moral guidelines that determine right and wrong. Putting this inner-self into question may – if done incorrectly – lead to severe psychological consequences such as a depressive breakdown (however, it should not be mistaken for brainwash or the like). Keeping this danger in mind, it is necessary for every dialogue practitioner to apply certain sensitivity when choosing the approach and surrounding for the dialogue. Such a dialogue is much easier to lead when an atmosphere of trust prevails among the dialogue group and when the physical needs of the individual are catered too (including, if needed, religiously adapted food, helping to ease the feeling of being in an alien environment). Educational methods

(like games) help to confront people with parts of their personality which are otherwise impossible to access, as they are part of the subconscious. Tying the dialogue to one specific topic like gender roles, human rights or prayer helps to speak about needs of people existing in reality and does not allow the dialogue to remain vague. Dialogue encounters are often led about cultural issues like art, dance etc. This can help to break the ice, especially for people coming from countries where political topics are not open to public debate. The danger remains, however, that such discussions stay on the surface, as the critical differences that may cause violence among groups are seldom those of art, music and dance but those in the socio-political sphere. Here two main approaches exist: either starting with what people from different backgrounds have in common or starting with the points where they disagree. The first approach helps to build trust but has the tendency to blur the reason why the dialogue was started in the first place. Because the counterparts agree on so many issues, they might be unwilling to approach the hot topics where conflict lies. And if they do so, the common tendency is to agree on a common quality, "all our religions/ cultures want peace", rather than to question and explain the underlying reasons for a development. In the second approach, however, the danger exists that mistrust prevails and the counterparts barricade themselves in their dissimilarities, often justifying themselves with the sentence: "in our culture/religion it is like this and that".

Dialogue is empathy

Above, you can find some basic guidelines for leading a dialogue. This probably leaves you with more questions than answers and this is in the nature of dialogue itself. The reason why dialogue cannot be learned from a textbook is that the main component needed to set it into practice is empathy. Religion (and also "culture") are only partly rational concepts but are based on what people accept as their inner-truth. Therefore these concepts are also only partially accessible by rational means. For example, for many European Christians, it was hard to understand the outrage of a lot of Muslims after the publication of the Danish cartoons. People in Germany always cited the basic rights to a free press and a free opinion, but what they did not understand was that the outrage was not necessarily meant to question these rights but to gain acceptance that the pictures were felt to be insulting. Developing this empathy is essential. If empathy is developed, *than* the money for many high level conferences on dialogue could be used for better ends.

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