

Notes From
The ReImagining Interfaith Conference
July 29-August 1, 2018
George Washington University, Washington, DC
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The ReImagining Interfaith Conference was held at George Washington University from July 29-August 1. My preparation to attend the conference included thinking about what questions I have about the role of interfaith as we move into the future. I tried to think of questions that people from around the world who have been active in interfaith work might help me answer. Because I was scheduled to participate in a panel with the title, “What does Government Have to Do With It,” some of my questions related to interfaith and government.

- 1) Is the interfaith movement about organizations working together or is it about individuals participating in a movement?
- 2) Is the goal of interfaith to discover “common ground” and “understanding” so faith-based organizations can contribute to the development of government policy with a united front?
- 3) Is taking action across faith lines a better way for faiths to engage with each other than dialog?
- 4) Is it an appropriate or important role for government to ensure that students are taught “about” religion? And the related question, should the future include theocracies like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel where the government supports one religion?
- 5) Should interfaith in the future develop policy consensus about issues like human rights, economic justice, the use of war and violence and other issues that are global, universal, and impact all of humanity?
- 6) Or should interfaith in the future focus on policy issues that directly impact faith-based organizations like freedom to practice religion and insuring that all faith-based organization have a voice in the consideration of government policy and practice?

Is the interfaith movement about organizations working together or is it about individuals participating in a movement?

During the opening plenary session Rev. Jennifer Bailey, the founder and executive director of Faith Matters Network, asked the questions: What is interfaith? Is it a movement? She proposed “interfaith question mark.” Many of the presenters returned to her suggestion. As the conference proceeded, I became convinced that one of the difficulties with the word ‘interfaith’ is that it is used to describe several very different activities at various levels of society. It may be useful to use the word ‘interfaith’ as an umbrella noun, but in most cases ‘interfaith’ is an adjective for activities and organizations.

Another issue with the language of interfaith is that people who lead value-based lives, but do not identify with a historical or traditional faith organization feel excluded by faith language. In this report I use the words ‘faith-based’ and ‘interfaith’ to include all individuals and groups that are value based.

I am the most interested in how faith-based organizations impact the future. During the conference I became convinced that the most interesting and potentially powerful interfaith change agent is local interfaith groups. This local work was represented by a large number by people who have been organizing groups in their cities and towns with a variety of agendas. They were from different countries—each with a unique interfaith configuration. There are discussion groups, educational programs, opportunities for interfaith socializing, interfaith service work, advocacy, and more.

I also became convinced that this local activity is the foundation for a movement. The interfaith strategies varied greatly, but a commitment to interfaith engagement was universal. My question about whether the future of interfaith involves organizations cooperating or individuals becoming involved disappeared. It all depends on the context. In some places leaders of faith groups bring a commitment to work with other faith leaders. While in other contexts, individuals from different faith groups are creating interfaith opportunities for their community.

Is the goal of interfaith to discover “common ground” and “understanding” so faith-based organizations can contribute to the development of government policy with a united front?

At the panel on government, Melissa Rogers explained that when people from the faith community come to the government with what might be an excellent idea, it will only be embraced by the government if it satisfies a number of criteria. These include that the idea must be something that the government can actually accomplish. And the idea must have a broad base of support.

As the conference progressed I heard people talking about government policy like immigration and realized that many people at the conference, particularly young people, did not think that common ground is necessary for interfaith action. In fact, I heard some of the young people talking about the search of common ground as an impediment to interfaith action to impact government policy. They wanted interfaith to search for shared commitment to a particular policy or action that did not depend on each faith group or individual agreeing to the same faith-based reason. So, people of all faiths could participate in a refugee resettlement project in their community without first engaging in an interfaith dialog about what their faith taught them about welcoming a stranger.

Is taking action across faith lines a better way for faiths to engage with each other than dialog?

This question grew out of my experience working on a project that President Obama initiated called The President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge. With that project institutions of higher education were encouraged to develop programs where students participated in a community service project with a component of interfaith engagement.

As noted in my comments about the question above, particularly younger people, seemed to have little interest in starting with dialog. I came to suspect that part of the reason for their opinion was that the people who come to a conference about interfaith have already developed a healthy respect for faiths that differ from their own. Sometimes this is because they know a great deal about different faith traditions. Sometimes this is because they have a healthy, non-judgmental respect for difference.

It seems to me that this rush to action overlooks the fact that there are some very religious people who have prejudices against people with a different faith tradition. As Rabbi David Saperstein pointed out during his opening keynote remarks, “Many of the older religious traditions have passages of scripture which are a problem.” They make interfaith more difficult and need to be faced. The bullying or bias

experiences by some religious groups can become very personal. While there may be some people ready to engage in shared action across faith lines before they abandon long held prejudices, others will probably be reluctant to become active without first understanding more about other faith groups in an educational or dialog context.

As I learned about various interfaith initiatives, I began to think that the important question is not whether people start with action or dialog. What is important is that there is a safe context for people of different faiths to begin to engage with each other. In some contexts, people will find that the rules of dialog insure that everyone has an opportunity to express themselves. While in other contexts a requirement to discuss faith makes people uncomfortable. In that case participating in shared action is a better place to start. There are other possibilities. For example, sharing a meal together may provide a safe setting for people to begin interfaith engagement.

This returns me to the comments about the first question. It is only in a local or face-to-face setting that people of different faith traditions can come to know, respect, and even love each other. It is, therefore, only at the local level where the best strategy for interfaith work can be determined. I was encouraged by the wide range of national and international resources that are available to people at a local level. People who are looking for an action, dialog or other strategy to use have a large menu to choose from. Local interfaith work is very contextual.

Is it an appropriate or important role for government to ensure that students are taught “about” religion? And the related question, should the future include theocracies like Saudi Arabia and Israel where the government supports one religion?

During the conference I did not hear presentations or engage in conversations that addressed governments that teach about religion. But I did make an observation that relates to this question. As people talked about their own experience of and commitment to interfaith, it never seemed to grow out of an interest in comparative religion. Sometimes their commitment to interfaith grew out of their understanding of their own faith tradition. At other times their interpersonal experiences with people of different faiths brought them to a commitment to interfaith work. Some were driven by a civil rights concern for religious minorities. And people from minority religions want to address prejudice and bullying.

The faith traditions that differ from our own become real only as we experience those faith traditions expressed by a living person. We can learn about the gods of the Greeks or Romans, but we can only experience them in their objectified existence. At the conference I was reminded how much more I understand about Buddhism by talking to a Buddhist than by reading about Buddhism. This leads me to the opinion that a helpful role for government may be to encourage and support interreligious experiences for students rather than teaching “about” religion. What I have in mind is that schools would create opportunities where students and/or families would be given an opportunity to share their religious (as well as cultural) practices with other students. I have in mind programs like those designed by Ralph Singh. (<http://www.wisdomthinkers.org/>)

In situations where there are not sufficient diversity or people from particular religious traditions are uncomfortable sharing about their religion, then programs like those developed by ING could be used. (<http://www.ing.org>) In this program people are trained to share about their religious tradition as part of program that includes presentations by people from several different traditions.

I raised the issue of theocracies at our government panel. While there was not discussion about it during the panel, several people talked to me about the issue during informal time. While I didn't talk with anyone who thinks that theocracies should be promoted by the interfaith community, I came to the opinion that my question properly belongs as part of the following question. I would now rephrase the question as: Should interfaith in the future develop a policy consensus that condemns the theocratic form of government and encourages the form of government that is a popular democracy with respect for the rule of law and protection of human rights?

Should interfaith in the future develop policy consensus about issues like human rights, economic justice, the use of war and violence and other issues that are global, universal, and impact all of humanity?

The purpose of this conference was to reflect on the future of interfaith. The purpose was not to develop an agenda for action or to create a structure to address global, universal issues that impact all of humanity.

The World Parliament of Religion came up in conversations because many participants plan on attending the next Parliament in Toronto the first week of November 2018. (<https://parliamentofreligions.org/parliament/2018-toronto/2018-powr>) I have only attended one Parliament. It was a lot of fun. I met very interesting people. I learned a lot about the passions that people have related to interfaith. And there was a great deal of discussion about issues that are global, universal, and impact all of humanity. But the goal of the Parliament is to “create harmony” among people of faith. In many ways my Parliament experience was very similar to my experience of the ReImagining Interfaith conference. At both I learned a lot about what people are doing and I grew personally, but there was no consensus or commitment to common action.

One of the sponsors of the ReImagining Conference was Religions for Peace. (<https://www.rfpusa.org/>) I was not aware of any recruitment of participants to become involved with Religions for Peace. Although it may have happened. Compared to the grassroots success in bringing peace like examples in Liberia and Mozambique, I don't see evidence that people of faith are doing very well in influencing governments, international economic meetings, or inter-governmental organizations. Sadly, the religions appear to have the greatest impact, not in democratic nations with the rule of law, but in theocracies like Iran.

This leads me to the belief that any global interfaith impact will not come from the leaders of traditional faiths. Leaders of faith traditions have a first priority to protect, preserve, and promote their organization. At the local level people committed to interfaith cooperation can align themselves with global issue movements and in this way bypass the leaders of traditional faith organizations while bringing the insights and energy of interfaith.

Or should interfaith in the future focus on policy issues that directly impact faith-based organizations like freedom to practice religion and insuring that all faith-based organization have a voice in the consideration of government policy and practice?

Again, I was not part of discussions that directly addressed this question. But I did hear stories from individuals about their experience of bigotry, prejudice, and bullying because of religious beliefs. I was also particularly troubled by conversations about President Trump's Muslim ban and his immigration policies. It does not require religious leaders to commit to cooperation for them to stand up in defense of the human rights of others.

One form of interfaith in the future, that I hope for, is for religious leaders to always work to protect the rights, freedom of expression, and freedom of persecution of other religious groups. Of course, this is also an activity that local groups can and are actively engaged in.

Final Note

I am glad that I attended the conference, but I am disappointed that the design didn't take full advantage of the international participation. There were a large number of people from Japan and smaller numbers for other countries. The opening plenary had four speakers. All were from the US. The panel I was part of included some global perspectives, but all most everything else that I attended was focused on the United States and American issues. There were opportunities for discussion, but I was sad when a woman from the Netherlands told me during a final discussion that the situation in the Netherlands is very different from the United States. It was hard for her to relate to much of the discussion.

This was another reminder that religious faith is personal and that interfaith is very contextual.

I was glad to see the involvement of college students and college chaplains. One of my roommates was Kamruz Zaman Hosein who is a chaplain at Florida International University. The other was Tarunjat Butalia who teaches in the Ohio State University, Center for the Study of Religion. The session on education focused on interfaith in higher education. I find it encouraging that at a conference on the future of interfaith, higher education was fully participating.