

# Interreligious dialogue

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Interreligious dialogue is a process of communication and an attempt at establishing mutual respect and understanding between people from different and even no religious affiliation. The desired outcome of interreligious dialogue is to promote peace, create understanding, work towards cooperation in multi-religious societies, and if at all possible, social cohesion. This endeavour requires persistence, patience and a commitment to finding common ground while respecting the diversity of religious beliefs and practices.

The manner in which religions engage has been analysed and categorised over time. Traditionally, there are three models according to which religions interact: Exclusivist, Inclusivist and Pluralist models. Whatever form the engagement takes on is framed by one of these theoretical considerations. Religions can view one another asymmetrically as superior and inferior or as complete equals. Traditionally, the criteria applied to determine this relationship were whether religions know God and whether religions can provide salvation. The debate has however changed. It is no longer appropriate to gauge religions in terms of their validity and ability to provide salvation, but rather to engage phenomenologically since religions express themselves in the lives of ordinary people. Religions then value one another in terms of the joined effect religion has on society.

People belong to religions. Therefore, it is people who interact and not religions that engage. Of course, the different religions can engage formally and officially as belief systems. This often happens when leaders and scholars of religion meet to discuss and address common challenges. Authentic engagement rather takes place where people from different religious backgrounds interact. Dialogue should, however, not be reduced to one level of engagement. Multiple levels of engagement produce more opportunities of engagement.

There are several challenges religions experience when it comes to the possibility to engage:

## Doctrinal differences

The theological and doctrinal disparities between different religions can be a significant challenge. Participants may struggle to reconcile fundamental differences in beliefs, which can hinder meaningful dialogue. This may be exacerbated if a stance of intolerance towards alternative doctrinal views is held.

## Cultural and historical baggage

Cultural and historical factors often influence the way in which people perceive and interact with other religions. Lingering prejudices, historical conflicts and cultural biases can create obstacles to open and constructive dialogue. Divisive relations created in the past may still influence the way in which people from different religions view one another in the present.

## Secularism and pluralism

In societies where secularism and pluralism are prominent, some may question the relevance of interreligious dialogue, seeing it as less significant in an increasingly diverse and secular world. Secularism as the ideology governing society causes the absence of religion from the public sphere. In extreme cases, secularism can even vilify religion, proclaiming it to be obsolete.

## Extremism and fundamentalism

Extremist or fundamentalist elements within religions can oppose interreligious dialogue, viewing it as a threat to their orthodoxy or authority over a religious community. These groups may actively resist efforts to engage in meaningful conversation with other faiths. This biased

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approach leads to unfair profiling and stereotyping of religious communities. In such cases, conflict resolution becomes a challenge. In regions with a history of religious tension or conflict, interreligious dialogue can play a crucial role in promoting peace and reconciliation. By bringing together leaders and members of different faiths, it can contribute to conflict resolution and the prevention of violence.

### **The politicisation of religion and hidden agendas**

Religions can become subject to political manipulation. Religious communities are mobilised to support a particular political position held by politicians. This becomes especially clear during times of election. The manipulation contributes to polarisation of society. Political leaders or interest groups may exploit religious differences for their own gain, using religion as a tool to incite division rather than promote dialogue and unity. This may result in a stance of exclusivity where some of the voices in society within a religious tradition are deliberately silenced and excluded from decision making forums. Some individuals or groups may feel excluded or marginalised, which can undermine the effectiveness of the dialogue process.

Interreligious dialogue has the following goals:

### **Promoting understanding**

Interreligious dialogue seeks to facilitate a deeper understanding of the beliefs, practices, and values of different religions. It encourages participants to learn about one another's faith traditions, rituals and worldviews.

This understanding can help dispel stereotypes and misconceptions. In understanding the other a common goal or concern can be identified and together religious communities can work towards achieving social cohesion and shared ethical values.

### **Building relationships**

Dialogue fosters the development of personal relationships between individuals of different religious backgrounds. These relationships can lead to increased trust and cooperation, which are essential for social cohesion in multi-religious societies. Dialogue can never have the aim to convert the other, but at most can work towards establishing amicable relations and becoming good neighbours.

In this collection of contributions to Interreligious Dialogue, different perspectives are captured to enrich the understanding of the multi-faceted element of dialogue between religions. The inter-religious activity of communication can take on different forms as becomes clear from the article on 'Nathan der Weise'. Communication between religions need not be in words. Acts of charity often speak louder than words. The way in which ancient religions 'talk' to us today are just as important as to how religions in the present communicate to one another. Several contributions address the relation between dialogue and mission as it has become an important aspect of interreligious dialogue. The interplay between religion and politics in determining the relations of communities is also addressed in some contributions. This edition sourced contributions from an African perspective to allow local voices to contribute to the international debate on interreligious dialogue.