Book Reviews


The book is divided into three parts. Part I deals with the promises and challenges of Interfaith Dialogue (pp. 13–60). The second part deals with the Practice of Dialogue presenting some cases of interfaith dialogue (pp. 61–101). Part III deals with peacebuilding through Interfaith Organizations (pp. 103–131). Richard H. Solomon, President of the United States Institute of Peace has written a foreword to the book while its introduction was written by the editor, David R. Smock. In the foreword it is stated that despite the attacks of September 11, 2001, “The world is not wracked by war between Muslims, on the one side, and Christians and Jews on the other side. Nor... is the world convulsed by a “clash of civilizations” (p. vii). The attacks on New York and Washington were not greeted by Muslims and efforts to eradicate terrorism have come from all faith traditions.

It is also stated that interfaith dialogue is difficult and it brings no guarantee of success due to its limitations and shortcomings. The book, therefore, comes forth with suggestions as to how to make interfaith sessions productive (p. ix).

In his “Introduction,” the editor David R. Smock vehemently argues that “Religion is a factor in international conflict” (p. 3). He quotes Hans Küng’s statement that “most fanatical and cruelest political struggles are those that have been colored, inspired, and legitimized by religion” (p. 3) to support this stance. The editor stresses the need for dialogue with the Muslim world so as to defuse the current tensions and forestal wider religious conflicts (p. 4). The editor has the United States Institute of Peace and the World Conference on Religion and Peace made efforts in this regard. The objectives of these efforts were to produce greater understanding of varieties of Islamic thought, to support moderate scholars in the Muslim world, and to ensure that US action against terrorism is not directed against Islam and Muslims, to provide a vehicle for religious violence, to reach a peaceful resolution of the Middle East.
conflict and finally, to engage religious leaders in the constructive
development of policies relating to international peacemaking (pp. 45).

The main idea expressed in the book is that interfaith dialogue can be
used as an effective tool to advance peacebuilding, and indicates the difficulty
of organizing and conducting meaningful interfaith dialogue in situations of
serious conflict. When two religious groups face an armed conflict, they
usually confront a history of hostility which stands in the way of any serious
dialogue.

The book starts with an article by the Muslim scholar Muhammed Abu-
Nimer, a Professor at the American University in Washington DC who
specialize is peace and conflict resolution studies. In his article entitled “The
Miracles of Transformation through Interfaith Dialogue: Are you a Believer?”
(pp. 15-32), he focuses on interfaith dialogue as opposed to other
peacebuilding strategies and tries to lay down some of the requirements for
effective interfaith dialogue. He also tries to differentiate between interfaith
dialogue and non-religious or non-faith-based dialogue, in other words, secular
or interethnic dialogue. He emphasizes the importance of spirituality in
making a deeper human connection through the spiritual encounter of the
participants. The change of attitudes in interfaith dialogue is deeper than the
change which occurs in a nonreligious context. The spiritual, moral and
ethical components of any religious identity are a powerful source for
generating change.

Marc Gopin, an associate professor of international diplomacy at the
Fletcher School for Law and Diplomacy, writes on “The Use of Word and its
Limits: A Critical Evaluation of Religious Dialogue as Peacemaking” (pp. 33–
46). In his view, religious encounters can be rich in word, deed, and symbol,
and it is essential that the costs and benefits of these options be understood by
religious peace makers (p. 36).

Religious dialogue is an act as well as verbal communication. The act of
dialogue must be honourable: “Relationships of respect, sympathy and dignity
genender trust, stimulate novel solutions, and enhance the possibility of
moving from good thoughts and words to deeds” (p. 45).

In his article “Building Bridges for Interfaith Dialogue” Jaco Cilliers bases
interfaith dialogue on involvement in projects and initiatives related to
humanitarian relief, development, and peacebuilding undertaken by groups
with different religious backgrounds. His perspective is not that of a
theologian or a religious official. Meaningful dialogue can be fostered through
a process in which groups and individuals first seek a deep understanding of
their own religious traditions and then share their religious convictions and
traditions with others (p. 48). Pillars of interfaith dialogue are justice,
reconciliation, forgiveness and truth. Deep commitment to these pillars can build bridges that support interfaith dialogue. It is important to build relationships across various levels to strengthen opportunities for interfaith dialogue and collaboration in zones of peace (p. 58).

Ronald Young in his article “American Jews, Christians and Muslims Working Together for Peace in the Middle East” (pp. 63–71) argues that the pursuit of peace is fundamental to doing God’s will in Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. But interfaith cooperation is nonexistent in working for peace between Arabs and Israelis. He tries to answer the questions: Why is cooperation so difficult, and what are the possibilities for interfaith work in the Middle East conflict? What are the challenges and how can they be solved and what is the role of Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities in USA in peacebuilding efforts in the Middle East?

David Steele writes about the contributions of interfaith dialogue to peacebuilding in the former Yugoslavia (pp. 73–88). He has given a number of examples of successful cooperation between peoples of faith in former Yugoslavia in peacebuilding efforts.

Joseph Liechty discusses the role of religion in the conflict in Northern Ireland, and suggests a strategy for living in peace when truth claims are in clash (pp. 89–101). Negotiation and mitigation are both presented as means of achieving peace in religious conflicts. Mitigation is understood as the “capacity to lessen or eliminate possible negative outcomes of a belief, commitment, or action while still upholding it” (p. 94). Mitigation maintains the problematic belief or practice but seeks to nullify its destructive consequences. What cannot be negotiated can sometimes be mitigated (p. 94). Mitigation was the prevailing spirit in Northern Ireland through the practice of forgiveness as an important form of mitigation (p. 100).

The article by Arthur Schneier (pp. 105–114) discusses the contribution of religions to peace. No religion condones genocide or brutality (p. 105). A crime committed in the name of religion is a crime against religion (p. 106). Religious leaders must play a role in advancing tolerance.

Charles Gibbs’ article “The United Religions Initiative at Work” (pp. 115–126) discusses the establishment of an organization in June 2000 dedicated to interfaith peacebuilding around the world under the name “The United Religions Initiative.” The article mentions some of the activities of the organization in conducting interfaith dialogue in some areas in the world where there is a religious conflict.

The book ends with a conclusion by the editor stressing the fact that religion is not the cause of conflict, but it is misused in many conflicts. He states that interfaith dialogue must have a clear purpose and should consist of
the right participants who are committed to peace, well grounded in their own faith. Smaller groups can conduct an interfaith dialogue with better results than larger groups. The selection of language is important. Knowledge of similarities and differences, addressing misconceptions and breaking down stereotypes is essential for interfaith dialogue. Building relationships between participants, openness to share the suffering of the other side, recognition of sins and shortcomings, apology and forgiveness are all powerful components of interfaith dialogue. Justice issues must be addressed in dialogues that contributes to peacemaking. It is essential also to teach participants conflict resolution skills, and to move away from a cycle of revenge. Lay persons should be given a role in dialogue besides religious leaders. Continuity of the dialogue is important for its success.

The contributors to this volume belong to the monotheistic religions, and they all agree that religion is essential in promoting understanding and reconciliation, and that interfaith dialogue is an invaluable instrument in peacebuilding. The book is a welcome addition in the interfaith dialogue discourse.

Muhammad Khalifa Hasan Ahmad


Concentric Circles is a delight for me as a parent as well as an educator. The foundational purpose of the book is to construct a holistic educational-spiritual experience for the young child. The book explicitly addresses the issue of educational worldview. In the introduction, Muzaffar Iqbal argues that much education today proceeds from “a consumption-oriented secularized worldview” wherein the Creator does not exist and which assumes a West-centric perspective on the world, civilization and history (p. xiv). The materials — toys, books, audio-visual materials, and teaching aids — produced by the multi-billion dollar educational industry emerge from and perpetuate this worldview. Secularized educational materials are being used worldwide by