

Interfaith Dialogue:**The Peace Process (Challenges & Obstacles)***By: Zoughbi Zoughbi*

The following lecture was given at the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies in Jordan

Folktale: *The Coming of Peace (Basotho Tribe, Africa)*

This is a story that the old people tell.

One day the hen flew to the top of the stack of wheat to find food. From where she stood on the top, she could see far over the fields. Across the fields a jackal was approaching. When the jackal came near, he spoke to the hen.

"Good morning, mother of mine," the jackal greeted her.

"Yes, I greet you." "Are you still living?" he asked according to customary greetings.

"Yes, I am still living. And you? Are you still living also?" she asked.

"Yes, I am still living, mother. Did you wake well this morning?"

"Yes, I woke well," she answered as is proper.

While he was talking, the clever jackal was admiring the hen, seeing that she would taste very sweet. But he could not reach her. So he asked her, since he was a man of many plans:

"Mother, have you heard that there is peace among everybody on earth? Now one animal may not catch another animal anymore, because of that peace."

"Peace?" she asked.

"Yes, mother, peace." "The great chiefs called together a big meeting, and at that pitso they decided this business of peace on all the earth."

"Oh yes," said the hen, but she wondered if this jackal could be telling the truth, since his many clever stories were many times nothing but lies. "You say there is peace now?"

"Yes, mother, the big peace. There has never been such a big peace. You can safely come down from that stack of wheat. Then we can talk about the matter nicely. We shall take snuff together. Come down, mother! Remember the peace."

But the hen was not as stupid as the jackal thought. She wanted to be sure of his story, and she turned and looked far over the fields.

"What is it you see from up there that you stare so?"

"What do I see? It does not matter, for there is no more danger to any animals on earth. Is it not peace among the animals? It is only a pack of dogs that is running toward us."

"Dogs! A pack of dogs!" he cried. And his fear was very great. "Then I shall have to leave you, mother. I am a man who has a lot of work waiting."

"Kekekekeke," the hen laughed. "Remember the peace. I thought it was peace among all the animals. Have you forgotten it? Why do you run away, grandfather?"

"I don't think this pack of dogs was at the meeting of the peace." And the jackal ran so fast that dust rose in great clouds behind him.

"Kekekekeke," laughed the hen. She knew that the story of the peace was a lie. And if she had taken

snuff with that fellow he would have caught her. Instead she had caught him. "Kekekekeke!" she laughed. "I caught the storyteller with another story!"

And this is the end of this story. (Postma 1964, 115-117, abridged)

Our story starts with the Middle East Peace Process. The peace process was not a myth and hopefully is not a lie. It was a quantum leap that has not yet resulted in a qualitative leap toward justice and reconciliation. Historically speaking, the Peace Process should not be a one-time event, otherwise it shows that it is a specific irrelevant incident.

It seems it is neither peace - nor a process. As Palestinians we have not gained anything from the peace process. We are interested in peace- not only as an option, but as a strategy to regain our rights. The Israeli government tries to use the peace process to perpetuate the status quo. As Wes Granberg Michaels in Reformed Church in America says, "There is no rigid distinction between peace among nations, economic justice, bodily health, and a spiritual right relationship with God. "

Yes, when we talk about right relationship with God- we are talking about sisterly and brotherly relationship among people. All the monotheistic religions believe that we are created in the image of God. Is it possible to emphasize this principle as a base for enhancing our relationship with each other? Despite the political stagnation or dead lock of the Peace Process, is it possible for Jews, Muslims, and Christians to talk about this principle as a social contract for Interfaith Dialogue?

There are two levels of interfaith dialogue happening: the Christian & Muslim dialogue among Arabs in the Middle East, the Christian & Jewish dialogue in the West. As Arabs, we have a long history of healthy relationships between Arab Christians and Moslems despite the obstacles and difficulties imposed by colonial powers. I would not even call it dialogue; it is a way of living that has not been disrupted since 614 A.D. We should also note that this relationship has been enhanced as a result of the Arabs being displaced and victimized by the Zionist movement since the turn of this century. So therefore, there is a sacred unity in struggle.

On the other hand, the other dimension of dialogue, the Western Christian- Jewish dialogue has not grown out of the Middle East. We are not part of such dialogue because one of its main aims is to perpetuate guilt feeling in the West and enhance the victim mentality of Israel.

It is worth mentioning that interfaith dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Moslems in the Holy Land represents a stray of hope. We have dozens of conferences, workshops, and joint meetings. We are still discovering each other and trying to understand each other's feelings, fears, and emotions. We have already crossed some borders with certain groups, moving from the surface to talk and work in depth in circles of justice, solidarity and understanding.

As far as I am concerned, the stagnation of the peace process has negatively impacted the Interfaith Dialogue among Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Holy Land! For an effective meaningful continuous Interfaith Dialogue the following points should be regarded:

1. No Hidden Agenda- "for conversion" or unclear messages that might trigger suspiciousness,

- mistrust, and fear.
2. Mutual respect and accepting each other as they are. Celebrating the differences and enjoying the varied rituals and traditions is the call of Interfaith Dialogue.
 3. Imagining the other in the Palestinian/ Israeli case is not enough, but imagine each other's religious presence and political entity, side by side without infringing on each other's identity.
 4. Co-existence is the heart of the Interfaith Dialogue "Co-existence of different cultures, different groups is compatible only with the abandonment of a dialectical mode of thinking and its replacement with a dialogical one. "
 5. Respect for Human Rights on all levels. We can't build a vivid dialogue until we create a philosophy and practicality to uproot the causes of misery. "Peace cannot suddenly descend from the heavens. It can only come when the root-causes of trouble are removed " and the injustices created by war and occupation are addressed.
 6. Clean up the "dirt" and work together through cooperation and understanding. Let us Walk the Talk.
 7. Understanding justice, as "the result of justice is peace and the fruit of justice security and prosperity forever" (Isaiah). Here I am not talking about absolute justice. Let us examine the notion of relative justice as a vehicle to regain rights, pay reparation and acknowledgement of crimes and mistakes.
 8. Inclusive security for all. No one can have security at the expense of others. Good neighbors make good fences and not vice-versa.

In the absence of progress in the peace process, the Interfaith Dialogue should face the following challenges. The Interfaith Dialogue should be the safety button to stop the demonization process, which will lead to legalizing the killing of others. So therefore we need, -

1. The ethical tools of "recognizing and cognizing the face of the other, -making the other concrete and not abstract. "
2. Humanize each other- fighting negative stereotypes, myths, and broad over generalizations. One can know about someone without really knowing the person. We need to go beyond the perception to the substance of the person.
3. Give room for each other to practice one's religion and tradition and to cooperate together to fight injustices. We are not seeking uniformity rather we are looking for pluralism in unity.
4. To address the fears of all parties involved. Understanding the psyche and the feelings of each community is the driving force behind sustaining the Interfaith Dialogue.
5. To de-theologize conflict and work to resolve conflict based on redressing the injustice rather than avenge it. Otherwise both sides of the conflict will fight endlessly. Either they win a seat in heaven or conquer the other side. We should admit that God is God of All Religions. We shouldn't reduce God into a tribal god or a Real Estate agent who favors one nation and deprives another. God is the merciful, compassionate redemptive Lord of all Human Beings.
6. To shift from being inactive to pro-active, from blaming and guilt- to responsibility.

I would not like to minimize the importance of Interfaith Dialogue but also I would not like to exalt the image of Interfaith Dialogue. For me Interfaith Dialogue should be the bridge among cultures, civilizations, and religions where we hopefully create a masterpiece of beauty, authenticity, and retaining the identity. Like the rainbow sends a message of peace, not only through its appearance but, through the harmony of its colors. Otherwise, Interfaith Dialogue will be a luxury that has no depth, substance, and life.

Let us conclude on a note from the Koran that is calling us not to exploit the cultural and religious differences, but allow them to be instruments for developing healthy relationships among individuals. "O humankind! Behold We created you male and female and We made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another" (Koran, sura 49:13).