

Welcoming the Other through Interreligious Dialogue, Education and Action

By

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Introduction

I am very pleased to be part of this distinguished panel on this important topic, which has been the essence of my professional life for the past 22 years. I founded the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel in 1991, and in all the years that I have served as Director, we have been an active member of Religions for Peace. I like the name and the mission of this organization. It says very clearly who we are and what we are for. By itself, it is an educational statement.

Unfortunately, in my part of the world, this idea is not too well understood. Too often, some religions have supported ongoing war and violence, rather than standing for peace. In contrast, I believe that the values and teachings of the great religions of the world must be harnessed to help their leaders and followers become active practitioners of peacebuilding and reconciliation.

One of the most central ways that we can welcome the other—each in our own country and region as well as internationally—is through Interreligious Dialogue, Education and Action.

Since we have done this successfully in Israel for a long time, I will share with you some of the insights and best practices of our work in the 10 minutes that have been allotted to me. To learn more, click "here" to get to our website, or go on Facebook and twitter to "like" us, and to "share" with others our insights from our blog posts—including our "stories of inspiration" series -- and our best practices! (www.icci.org.il)

A new model for interreligious dialogue in the service of peace

Over the past 22 years ICCI has developed a model for substantive, serious and sensitive interreligious dialogue, as a result of its work on the ground rather than through a theoretical laboratory of a university. In other words, it came about after many years of trial and error in Israel and Palestine, especially during the last twelve difficult years, since the eruption of the second "intifada" (uprising), which began in September 2000.

Our model is comprised of four major elements:

- Personal interaction—getting to know each other as individual human beings
- Interreligious, text-based learning
- Discussing core issues of the conflict
- Taking action, separately and together

1. The Personal element

All of our dialogue groups bring together a diversity of people from various religious and national groups. Each comes to the dialogue with his or her own personal identity, which he or she shares with the group. The group learns to understand and respect the identity and narrative of each of its members, by listening carefully and genuinely seeking to come to know a lot about each participant. Through this process, people in the group come to recognize the human dignity and integrity of each other.

We have come to call this process "de-demonizing the other". In our part of the world, due to the ongoing violent conflict of many decades, Palestinians and Israelis who have never met each other before coming to our dialogue group usually see the other through the prisms of the conflict and the negative media stereotypes which dominate our print and electronic media. In our dialogue groups, we shatter these stereotypes by asking each person to share their identities and life stories with the other. When this is done over time—at least a year—we find that people are actually quite shocked to discover that the other, who is supposed to be "the enemy", is actually a human being!

This first layer of our dialogue process builds an important foundation of trust, which is essential for the rest of the dialogue. It often creates lasting friendships or at least much collegiality, which is a critical component for constructive, honest, and fruitful dialogue as the year progresses.

2. Interreligious Learning

We have discovered over many years, to our sorrow, that individuals often know very little about the cultural practices and theology of other religions in Israel and Palestine. Accordingly, Israeli Jews know almost nothing about Islam or Christianity. And, what they do know is usually negative and was learned in courses in Jewish History in which they learned that Muslims or Christians either oppressed or massacred Jews throughout the centuries. Nor do Muslims or Christians who live in Israel or Palestine know much about Judaism. Much of what they do know is negative, as they learn it mostly from their print and electronic media and from the "street" and the family.

Therefore, a little education—properly and sensitively taught by good teachers—can go a long way in a short time to breaking down ingrained negative stereotypes of each other's religions. These teachers choose good texts with a positive message—from the sacred canons of each religion, such as the Bible and later commentaries (The Midrash and Talmud), the Koran and the Hadith, or the New Testament and the Church Fathers--and teach them in a way that can be readily understood and appreciated by "the other side".¹ When this is done well, another very important level of trust is developed. Participants who

¹ This educational component to our dialogue process was especially important in our work with religious leaders from the three Abrahamic faiths, as in our KEDEM Program (Voices of Religious Reconciliation) from 2003-2008, for which we received a major grant from USAID via Religions for Peace. In dialogue groups conducted by the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, Muslim, Jewish and Christian religious leaders not only brought texts with positive messages in text study sessions, but they also re-interpreted problematic texts in creative and beneficial ways in the spirit of reconciliation.

have gone through this process in our dialogue groups can talk about common humanistic values shared by the three major monotheistic religions, and they can sense a spirit of religious partnership, which motivates them to continue the dialogue and to seek meaningful paths of action together.

3. Discussing Core Issues of the Conflict

Since our dialogue process takes place in Israel and Palestine (mostly in East Jerusalem), in the midst of an ongoing and often violent conflict, we cannot ignore the contemporary context in which we live and function. More accurately, we choose not to ignore the conflict (whereas other organizations actively seek to prevent "politics" or "the conflict" from entering into the discussion).

We believe that in a genuine dialogue process the core issues of the conflict can be discussed in an open, honest, and sensitive fashion, guided by careful and consistent professional facilitation, without creating animosity or acrimony. In fact, we have found that participants in our dialogue groups continue to come back to the group year after year precisely because the discussion is frank and forthright. This means that the discussions in this part of the dialogue process are often very painful and difficult. But when significant levels of trust have been developed beforehand, most people find this phase particularly meaningful and enriching as a way to genuinely get to know the other. It leads to deep mutual understanding of the other's religious, cultural, and existential reality, even if it also delineates where people fundamentally do not—and often cannot—agree with the other.

4. Taking action, separately and together

Many years ago, one of my Muslim colleagues said to me when we were preparing to convene a dialogue group: "Dialogue is not enough!" It is not enough for us to learn and undergo personal transformation. As responsible members of society, we must take our learning to heart and create change. We are obligated to work for peace, to influence others, and to cause a ripple effect. As a result, we strive for our groups to experience both dialogue and action. In other words, all of our participants – religious leaders, women, youth, young adults, educators -- are asked to take some action – separately or together—as a result of the personal transformational processes that they go through within this intensive experience.

Action can take many forms—personal, social, educational, and/or political, but it is agreed that every person who is moved by the dialogue process is obligated to share their experiences with others in whatever ways possible. From our experience, we have found that often simple human gestures of reconciliation, such as visiting the sick or the bereaved, can go a long way towards cementing personal relationships and creating genuine trust and profound relationships among friends and colleagues (former “enemies”) who are involved in long-term dialogue processes. Moreover, each person—through personal and professional networks and associations—should be committed to acting in such a way as to bring the insights and lessons of their dialogue processes to the attention of people in their own communities. In this way, each person in each dialogue group is a "multiplier" who can

spread the message of the possibilities and benefits of peaceful coexistence, and the method of dialogue and education, to many other people in his or her society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to make 4 recommendations for the Religions for Peace worldwide community:

1. We should continue to share best practices and hold training workshops about our unique work in Interreligious Dialogue for Peace, with our members all over the world, and with like-minded organizations
2. We should become more active in EDUCATING FOR PEACE via the internet and social media—Facebook , twitter, blogs , YouTube, etc. -- especially if we want to get our message and our method out there to the younger generation
3. We should continue to focus heavily on youth and young adults, who are our future for the generations ahead, by promoting regional and international workshops and seminars for young people to constructively engage in interreligious dialogue, education and action, now and for the future
4. We should produce a book of "Sources for Peace" which will contain the most important sources for our many religious traditions, which can help us educate for peace in our own local settings and around the world.

About the author

Founder and Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI) since 1992, Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish is a noted rabbi, educator, author, lecturer and speaker. Educated at Brandeis University (BA), Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in New York (MHL, rabbinic ordination) and the Harvard Graduate School of Education (doctorate in philosophy and history of education), Dr. Kronish has represented ICCI at the Vatican and at many international meetings and conferences, and is frequently consulted by media representatives for background information and briefings. Dr. Kronish is the editor of *Towards the Twenty-first Century: Judaism and the Jewish People in Israel and America*, an anthology in memory of his father, Rabbi Leon Kronish. In addition, he has edited two books of essays: *Toward the Third Millennium* and *Pilgrimage in a New Millennium*, and is currently editing a third book of essays. Rabbi Kronish blogs at The Huffington Post <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-kronish> and The Times of Israel. <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/author/ron-kronish/>