

The Vital Role of Interreligious Dialogue in the Israel-Palestine Conflict



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The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, deeply rooted in political, historical, and territorial disputes, is further complicated by religious identities. With Islam, Judaism, and Christianity all intertwined in the region, interreligious dialogue can provide a unique, powerful pathway to ease tensions and foster peace. The current escalation of violence has shown the urgent need for open, empathetic dialogue among religious leaders and communities, emphasizing peace, shared values, and the profound need to understand the suffering on all sides.

In this critical moment, interreligious dialogue offers more than just a means to discuss theological differences—it can serve as a foundation for empathy, mutual understanding, and even tangible peace-building efforts. By working toward bridging the religious divides, dialogue can foster an environment where political solutions might finally take root.

The Historical Role of Religion in the Israel-Palestine Conflict

Jerusalem, revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, has been a focal point of religious significance and contention for millennia. This convergence of sacred spaces and religious histories in one location has heightened sensitivities among believers. Each community perceives a deep, non-negotiable attachment to these places.

Consequently, the region's conflict is not only territorial but existential, with each side feeling that their religious identity is intrinsically linked to the land. This is why religious dialogue is so essential: it provides a way to address these deep-seated attachments peacefully.

The Role of Interreligious Dialogue in Peacebuilding

Interreligious dialogue brings people of different faiths together to discuss not only theological views but also shared human values, ethics, and social justice principles. For Israelis and Palestinians, such conversations can humanize each side, counteracting the dehumanization that often accompanies prolonged conflict.

Bridging Divides Through Shared Values: Religion, at its core, emphasizes values like compassion, forgiveness, justice, and mercy. When faith leaders from different religious backgrounds come together to emphasize these universal teachings, they can reach communities on a deep, personal level, inspiring individuals to see beyond political rhetoric and recognize the shared human experience.

Building Trust and Understanding: Through sustained dialogue, participants begin to view each other not as “the enemy” but as fellow humans with legitimate aspirations and fears. Dialogue can reveal common values and beliefs, enabling communities to find common ground and start building a foundation of trust that's essential for any lasting peace.

Recent Efforts and Successes in Interreligious Dialogue

Over the years, multiple interfaith initiatives in Israel and Palestine have demonstrated the power of religious dialogue. Organizations like the *Interfaith Encounter Association*, *Rabbis for Human Rights*, and *The Parents Circle*—a group of bereaved Palestinian and Israeli families—have shown that, despite differences, individuals on both sides are eager to seek peace and understanding.

These efforts have sometimes led to powerful breakthroughs. For example, during times of intense conflict, Muslim and Jewish religious leaders have come together to pray for peace, jointly condemn violence, and stress the need for dialogue over hostility. Such acts, even if symbolic, have a far-reaching psychological impact on both communities. They provide a powerful counter-narrative to the perception that religion is only a source of division and violence in the conflict.

The Challenges Facing Interreligious Dialogue

Despite the promise of interfaith efforts, there are significant obstacles to meaningful dialogue. Extremist groups on both sides often reject any notion of compromise, framing religious differences as irreconcilable and urging their followers to adopt adversarial stances. In some cases, religious leaders who advocate for peace are accused of betrayal or face threats to their personal safety.

Another challenge is the pervasive mistrust fuelled by decades of violence, displacement, and broken agreements. Religious communities are often sceptical about the intentions of “the other side,” seeing dialogue as a political tool rather than a genuine attempt at peace. Overcoming this distrust requires sustained, grassroots-level engagement where communities can see the benefits of dialogue and peacebuilding in their daily lives.

Practical Steps for Strengthening Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue needs institutional support and a clear framework to be effective in the long term. Here are some actionable steps that can be taken:

- **Create Safe Spaces for Dialogue:** Communities need safe, neutral spaces where they can come together without fear of backlash. Whether through community centers, online forums, or interfaith gatherings, such spaces allow people to express themselves freely, learn from one another, and foster mutual respect.
- **Engage Youth in Dialogue:** Young people are often the most affected by the violence and political instability. Introducing interreligious programs in schools and universities, where young Israelis and Palestinians can meet and discuss their beliefs and experiences, is crucial for breaking the cycle of mistrust.
- **Promote Religious Literacy:** Misunderstandings and stereotypes are often exacerbated by a lack of knowledge about each other’s faiths. Religious literacy programs, where people learn the basic tenets and practices of the others, can dispel misconceptions and foster respect.

Conclusion: A Path Forward for Interreligious Dialogue

The Israel-Palestine conflict is a deeply complex issue that requires multifaceted solutions. While political agreements and diplomatic negotiations remain crucial, interreligious dialogue provides an essential layer of grassroots peacebuilding. It fosters understanding, empathy, and respect, laying the groundwork for a society in which peaceful coexistence becomes possible.

In this volatile moment, religious leaders and communities have a responsibility to lead by example. By promoting interreligious dialogue, they can help reshape the cultural narrative from one of enmity to one of shared humanity. Though it may not solve every issue, interreligious dialogue is an invaluable tool for breaking down barriers, healing wounds, and creating a future where Israelis and Palestinians can live side by side in peace.

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