

The Pandemic & The Challenges of Multilateralism Among Religious Communities

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The following article is adapted from the presentation by Professor Azza Karam at the ICCOS 2022. It was presented as part of the panel on entitled ‘Enhancing Social Cohesion and Active Citizenry’, with a focus on how religion, through the various religious organizations and leadership, could enhance social cohesion and active citizenry at the institutional level by working together with institutions of similar interests, such as government and international bodies. Professor Azza Karam presented on the role of religious organizations during humanitarian crises and the value of working together in a coordinated manner.

*There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy
[Hamlet, Shakespeare]*

Faith-based and faith-inspired NGOs are among the top global humanitarian responders. Some of these have long shed their faith-inspired capes (e.g. Red Cross and Red Crescent), and others have names that reveal various levels of religious affiliation (e.g. Caritas, World Vision and Islamic Relief). When New York City became the epicentre of the COVID pandemic in the US in March 2020, Samaritans Purse, a large Christian faith-based NGO (FBO) set up an Intensive Care Unit in Central Park. They undertook this because the needs far surpassed the supply which both governmental and private sector entities were serving at the best of their respective abilities. But when two other FBOs (from a different religious background) approached Samaritan’s Purse to offer support, they were turned down. The bodies were still piling up in makeshift morgues and the need for ICUs was immense but the support was turned down. Why?

While faith-based actors are on the frontlines of COVID relief efforts, as they are on all humanitarian emergencies whether natural or man-made, they are not renowned for their collaboration. Too often it is a case of to each his own.

Examples of Intra-Faith Collaboration

There are important intra-faith – mainly Ecumenical – collaborations taking place in these spaces. I note here a sample only as a long and detailed list would require far more space and time. The ACT Alliance midwifed through the efforts of the World Council of Churches less than two decades ago. The creation of the ACT Alliance was a unique moment of Protestant and Orthodox Church solidarity specifically around humanitarian efforts. Prescient about the frequency and size of humanitarian needs and having worked to align their efforts over many decades, the World Council of Churches saw fit to support a concerted effort to rally their significant church resources around and for humanitarianism. Thus was created the Alliance of Churches Together – the ACT Alliance. Today, ACT Alliance has grown beyond humanitarian relief and is forging ahead in mediation and peacebuilding, democratization, as well as progressive gender equality agendas, including sexual and reproductive health and rights issues. It's an impressive and striking path of church alignment around progressive needs, which also successfully seeks to engage with non-Christian counterparts.

Also of note is the rapprochement between the Lutheran and Catholic Churches and another between the Holy See and all of the Orthodox and Protestant communities represented by the World Council of Churches. It seemed to onlookers that the seas of the Christian world, parted centuries ago, and now led by two enlightened Popes (one a Catholic and the other an Orthodox) were merging, and that a healing of sorts between the theologians and institutions was taking place. A joint thesis on the value of Christian collaboration in Covid times was also issued – providing theological and lucid treatises that called for a 'whole of Christian ethos' response to healing this troubled and wounded world. Significant uptake of joint practical responses, however, has yet to be seen.

And even were this collaboration to be seen, the fact will remain that these are Christian responses. The realms of faith far exceed Christianity. There are more faiths on earth—I am constantly told by my more than 100 leaders on Religions for Peace's 50-year-old World Council (governing board) – than all of the realms of the Christian Churches. And yet even these Churches and their institutions are not all working together.

“ Trying to look at such examples of intra-religious work for the common good within the Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu and other realms is an enterprise for many a thesis of multiple years of research. ”

While most religious bodies are institutionalized and centralized in some way in the Christian world, and can be easier to trace ultimate affiliation or oversight body, the other religions are multipolar and tend to be largely non-centralized. For instance, it is not uncommon to find multiple Hindu Ashrams, mosques, and synagogues, in one neighborhood, in any given country, each existing without being affiliated to a central body or unit that oversees them. If intra-religious collaboration can be challenging when centralized bodies are available, one can only imagine how much more monumental the task is with the disparate entities in this space.

Institutions and their Challenges

Why is it the case that when the Catholic Pope speaks, the world's media reports, but when many other religious leaders speak, not one global newspaper reports? Why is it the case that when a handful of terrorists kill hundreds, the world's media and academia report and analyze, but when representatives of all the world's faith traditions convene to urge for health justice for all populations, no one appears to be listening?

The answers to that question take us to the very heart of what ails all civic and political institutions in contemporary contexts. It would be wrong to assume that religious institutions (of whatever faith tradition) are out of character with all other institutions. Humans, after all, populate and manage and intersect in each and all institutions. Our religious institutions – be they churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, or NGOs, community-based or regional or global, all reflect the wider simultaneous institutional crisis of competence, coherence, and efficiency. All of which leads to a crisis of legitimacy. If we realize for a moment the enormous consequences that Covid-era lockdowns and social distancing guidelines have had on all faith institutions – whose primary function is to congregate – we begin to appreciate the severe impact Covid is having on the very *raison d'être* of religious institutions.

Small wonder then, that from the very beginning of the Covid crisis, many religious leaders (with some of them finding strong support from certain politicians around the world) refused to adhere to the science-based advocacy to avoid congregating. One American church leader slammed social distancing requirements for churches and other religious institutions by saying “Jesus did not appear virtually.” This sentiment finds strong echoes in Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist contexts around the world.

Indeed, faith actors have much to offer, beyond being first responders, they are the oldest social service (development) providers known to humankind. They are also the strongest behavioural change agents (and moral gatekeepers) in the world. And even as they feel the restrictions of pandemic lockdowns, the influence of their respective pulpits – and the demand for them in hard times - remain hard to rival. Nevertheless, religious institutions, religious leaders and religious NGOs are as territorial about their reach, their visibility, their resources, and their “unique added value” as any other actor in contemporary civil society and political arena. None of this abated during the Covid crisis. Rather, all of these ‘features’, increased. In fairness, faith actors are also struggling for resources at a time when many are also lamenting serious reductions of their regular income streams. But some are also boasting that they have more resources due to more giving. So, there is no across the board generalization of loss of income.

In April 2020, Religions for Peace set up the Multi Religious Humanitarian Fund in record time after the global lockdown to pool financial resources of diverse faith communities to serve the shared needs together. However, the responses varied. From utter silence to murmurs about already having “our own humanitarian mechanisms and work”, to an outright lament that coordination and collaboration are a luxury few have time for, as it was difficult enough to manage the mechanisms already at hand.

And yet, at no point in time have more UN bodies (including UNICEF, UNHCR, UNEP, WHO, UNAOC, UNOPG, UNAIDS) and other multilaterals (e.g. World Economic Forum, G20) reached out - almost simultaneously - to FBOs, seeking collaboration to spread health and educational messaging among wide constituencies, and documenting the unique roles of FBOs, than in these last 2 years. A recent World Health Organization report, for instance, outlined the important role religious institutions played in the past in getting Turkey's refugee population vaccinated against many other diseases. They noted that these faith actors were important in reaching out, informing, and directing the millions of people that make up the country's refugee population. Religious institutions have long been doing this.

The number of global consultations (virtual and in person) with FBOs and governmental and intergovernmental entities, and between diverse FBOs, around almost all conflict, social inclusion, health, and humanitarian matters, are innumerable. Some are now inviting His Holiness Pope Francis and His Eminence the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, among their list of distinguished leaders. In November 2022 alone, there are five global interreligious meetings (two in the UAE, one in Bahrain, one in Oman and one in Spain). In short, there are myriad efforts of governmental, intergovernmental and non- governmental entities to convene faith leaders and FBOs around their efforts. Indeed, they are as numerous as they are disparate, and some even appear to be competing with one another in terms of how many they invite, how expensive the venues they book for these meetings, and how expensive the banquets are.

“ Putting aside a sense of discomfort and concern, the fact is that we have an unprecedented opportunity today. The shared voices of all faith leaders, including but not limited to the Catholic Pontiff, are required to raise awareness, remind of the human and planetary imperative, hold themselves accountable to serve the needs of all and hold politicians and political institutions accountable to justice, and ensure we follow ways to live and act healthily, beyond business and political interests. ”

Many religious leaders, on the 'right side' of science and steeped in their theological and practical intricacies of service to all barring none, are keen to influence worldwide awareness, and to insist on reaching all those currently marginalized.

The Necessary Litmus Test

At the same time, in the midst of an emerging 'circus' of important and multiple convenings, we must have a litmus test for concrete efforts which are geared towards genuine social cohesion. Is it good enough to convene more times, albeit in different cities, on diverse themes, and with a peppering of new faces' in each meeting? I contend that this show of good intentions – by all convenors alike – is also a path to a hell of our own making.

“ Our world needs faith leaders to come together for sure, and indeed to hold each other accountable to always being in dialogue. But our world cannot afford the dialogues alone. We have too much suffering that is not resolved by dialogue. ”

Dialogues are necessary, as are laws are, but on their own, they are insufficient. Instead, we need more of these religious and faith leaders, and their institutions, to work together by doing two things that remain critical gaps: investing in joint work (at national, regional, and global levels), and speaking together as one on all matters, with a view to upholding the human rights of each and all.

Given a fair chance of being reported, the impact of multi-religious actors collaborating at community, regional and global levels, can and will shift the mindsets of individuals and policymakers alike. After all, before holding other policymakers accountable to social justice, cohesion, coordination and efficiency, faith leaders need to lead by example.



About the Author

Professor Azza Karam is the first female elected as the Secretary General of Religions for Peace International. She is currently a member of the United Nations Secretary General’s ‘High Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism’. She served in the United Nations (UNDP and UNFPA), including as a Coordinator of the Arab Human Development Reports, a Senior Advisor on Culture, and Lead Facilitator and Trainer for the UN Strategic Learning Exchanges on Religion, Development and Diplomacy. She was the Founder and Convenor of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development of its Multi-Faith Advisory Council and has engaged over 500 faith-based organizations worldwide.

Professor Karam holds a Professorship of Religion and Development at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, Netherlands. She taught and lectured in various academic institutions in Europe, North America and in the Arab region, and has published widely on international political dynamics, including democratization, human rights, gender, and religion and development. She is a recipient of several awards including an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from John Cabot University, Italy.

About RPCS

The Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) is developed as part of Muis' efforts in advancing religious thought leadership for the future. The programme seeks to develop contextualised bodies of knowledge on socio-religious issues that are typical for Muslim communities living in secular states and advanced economies. The RPCS focus will be on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges.

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