

Is interfaith dialogue working?

As activists and government officials call for a bottom-up approach to the issue, academics and students remain sceptical about the realities of its feasibility

By Rania Moussly, Reporter, Campus Notes

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"It is just plain common sense that we need to talk to each other on an individual basis and on a human level."- Sally Kader, President of US Federation for Peace in the Middle East

Image Credit: Illustration by Dana A. Shams/Gulf News

Mira Yacoub is an Egyptian national studying at the American University of Dubai (AUD). The ongoing religious tensions and clashes in her home country, an issue recently revisited by the international media, is an example of a breakdown in interfaith communication.

Karen Lickteig is a study abroad student at AUD from the US. She is also Yacoub's dormitory roommate. At her home university campus in the US, she recently began a cause on campus with the aim of educating people about the Middle East and its affairs.

She aims to dispel what she refers to as common American stereotypes about the region and the religion most associated with it: Islam.

Both Yacoub and Lickteig feel passionately about the state of the world today and the evident religious conflicts. Yet under one roof, an Arab and an American of different faiths

rationally and calmly discuss and debate issues of religion.

This small example of interfaith dialogue is what recent visits to the UAE by peace activist Sally Kader and former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair were all about: promoting the idea of getting youth of different faiths to talk as a first step to re-establishing global religious tolerance and respect.

It is what Shaikh Nahyan Bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, UAE Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, referred to as the creation of "a tidal wave of religious tolerance, respect and understanding around the world."

During recent events at separate functions Shaikh Nahyan, Blair and Kader all called for a bottom-up approach to interfaith dialogue. A situation which they said could become a reality if a new globalised generation of youths bridge wide communication gaps and establish unique forms of interfaith dialogue and cultural understanding.

It's a notion some academics and students are sceptical about, but deep down all hope for. Dr Richard Gauvain, an Assistant Professor of Middle Eastern Studies and comparative religion academically defines interfaith dialogue as "a situation whereby representatives of two or more religions come together to discuss particular issues regarding their faiths with an aim to reach some sort of mutual realisation."

Tricky

However, as perfect as that may sound, Dr Guivan believes that in reality, such forms of high level clerical interfaith dialogues can be tricky.

"It can be very difficult to get at because as soon as you define someone by their religion and put them opposite someone else defined by their religion it can seem like a fight and raise issues," he said.

"I feel interfaith dialogue [in the Middle East] is probably the tenth step in a sequence of events that have to happen," said Dr Guivan.

He believes that successful interfaith dialogue can only happen with honest historical backtracking "and I don't know if we as humans we have that honesty," he added.

Although Guivan makes what some would call a valid point, it does not stop others from trying.

Sally Kader is a permanent member of the United Nations and President of the US Federation for Peace in the Middle East (USFMPE).

She recently held a talk at the University of Wollongong in Dubai (UOWD) on an exploratory visit to the UAE. Kader is an American of Lebanese origin and has hosted various high profile interfaith dialogues with leaders of the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities.

She has also moderated Hindu and Muslim dialogues between the Indian and Pakistani communities following the Mumbai bombings in 2006.

Kader believes that persistence in bringing people together for interfaith dialogue is the key to a break-through.

"It is just plain common sense that we need to talk to each other on an individual basis and on a human level," said Kader. "We have become numb with the news, eating while watching images of people dying and bodies lying on the streets, which doesn't bother us, because it's become part of our everyday life," she added.

Indifference

"This is wrong," said Kader. "We should never allow ourselves to reach that indifferent state, you have to care; either hate or like but have feelings because with indifference

everything goes wrong," she added.

It is the indifference that Kader referred to what UOWD student Subul Tanveer, 19, feels so passionately about.

"This concept of conflict between religions bothers me but I feel it's a topic nobody discusses," she said. "[But] something has to be done about it if we are to continue living in this world because there will come a point where we won't even be able to have people of different faiths working and studying together."

Education

Robert Watts, 20, is also a student at UOWD and believes the media is mostly to blame for religious stereotypes which lead to intolerance.

"The media is a big part of the problem because they need to create stories to get people to watch their shows and telling the truth isn't all that interesting," he said.

"They need to create controversial issues that have been the source of many problems, and people instantly believe what the media says; but they need to be educated and take it with a pinch of salt," added Watts.

Yacoub believes that the bottom-up approach to interfaith dialogue starting with the young will be difficult to achieve because of a predominantly lazy youth.

"We the youth are a lazy generation that don't want to attempt to search for our own information to understand more about the world and have informed opinions," she said.

"Most of us just stick to our preferred biases and prejudices."

Similarly, Lickteig believes dispelling ignorance is a key element to successful interfaith dialogue. "As I watched events unfold over the summer about the building of the interfaith community centre at Ground Zero, it pained me to see Americans say such stupid things about what Islam means and what it's about," she said.

However, in a digital age where a large number of youths solely rely on the internet for information, forming educated opinions, Yacoub believes, can be virtually impossible.

"Most people my age don't read, that's for sure," she said. "They don't read for their own classes let alone read for pleasure; so how are they ever going to understand the whole story when they are simply stuck on one source?"