

The Second Emory Conference on Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding: Local Peacebuilding and Religion: Context, Practices, and Models
June 17–19, 2011 at Emory University, Atlanta, GA
by the Initiative in Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding

The Second Emory Conference on Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding was a follow up to the inaugural conference in 2007, which focused on theoretical issues of how “the religions of the world can work together to reduce violent conflict and build peaceful, pluralistic societies” (The proceedings of the first conference can be found here: <http://www.dalailama.emory.edu/2007/RCP.html>). This second conference intended to build upon and move beyond that conference by focusing “more concretely upon application and praxis within specific local and global contexts.” The conference achieved this goal; it was an exercise in what presenter Clayton Maring, representing the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, dubbed “translocal” learning: we together learned lessons from a multitude of local contexts and conflicts that brought insight into potential practices of religious peacebuilding and conflict transformation that we could take back and experiment with in the various contexts participants journeyed from.

Conference participants and presentation topics covered nearly every continent and major religious tradition. North Americans, Asians, Africans, Europeans, and Israelis were present. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, traditional religions, and Buddhism were discussed. The diversity and breadth of the conference can best be demonstrated by the differences between the four plenary speakers. Kiran Bedi, former Indian police officer and national activist for prison reform and against political corruption, spoke about her career drawing on the spiritual resources of multiple religious traditions, Hinduism and Buddhism most notably, to both motivate and inform her various attempts at social reform, including bringing Vipassana meditation into one of the country’s largest prisons. Mama TumehSieh, leader of Liberia’s Traditional Women for United Peace, and Malinda Joss, Executive Director of the Women and Children Development Association of Libe-

ria, described their work in post-conflict Liberia bringing healing and restoration to the women and children traumatized by the civil war and breaking gender stereotypes in hopes of preventing future violence. Bernard Lafayette, Jr. discussed his role in the Freedom Rides during the United States Civil Rights Movement—what he claimed should be known as “The Nonviolence Movement,” because it was deeper and more spiritual than a simple struggle for rights—and the work he has done to “internationalize and institutionalize” what he has dubbed “Kingian Nonviolence” in places like a Colombian prison and a former Nigerian guerilla military camp. Finally, Yehuda Stolov discussed his work in Israel and Palestine as Executive Director of the Interfaith Encounter Association building bridges, understanding, and relationships between Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land.

While presentations varied according to religion, timeframe, region, type of conflict, and social practice, there were some themes that emerged throughout the three day conference.

Activist-Academic Alliance

The first key theme or defining feature of the gathering was the necessity of collaboration and mutual learning between academics and activists in fully understanding the multiple dynamics in religious peacebuilding. There were several instances of fruitful conversation between theorists and practitioners that illuminated both theory and practice. For instance, religious scholar Atalia Omer presented a paper discussing the concept of “diaspora” and its role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the same session, Evangelical Christian activist Nancy Huff presented her work in Sahrawi refugee camps in Western Sahara/Southern Morocco. The discussion after these presentations made connections between Omer’s theoretical presentation and Huff’s practitioner report that illuminated both the applicability of Omer’s theoretical proposal in another context and the complexities of development and peacebuilding amongst a Sahrawi people who are both displaced and settled.

Looking towards the Future vs. Focusing on the Past

A second consistent theme was the necessity of looking towards the future in peacebuilding work rather than dwelling on the past. Bedi, for instance, said multiple times that a driving motivation for her prison reform work was “to save the next victim” rather than simply punish those who committed crimes. Interestingly, I heard no less than three separate occasions when practitioners, or scholars quoting practitioners, in east Africa say that the International Criminal Court’s (ICC) issuance of arrest warrants for Lord’s Resistance Army leader Joseph Kony, a move applauded by many western activists, was a mistake that severely hindered the peacebuilding efforts in the area. By focusing solely on “backward-looking retribution” the ICC failed to have the forward-looking vision of local religious peacebuilding groups that recognized the obstacle such a move would make in that specific situation. Grassroots religious peacebuilding, for many at the conference, included a unique gaze to the future that international politics often ignores.

Social-Cultural Change over Policy Change

Another area of significant agreement between presenters was the insufficiency of national and international politics and policy to establish peace in areas embroiled in conflict. As important, if not more so, as public policy is social and cultural change. This was raised in unique ways by each of the keynote speakers and was a recurring theme in the paper sessions I attended. Several key themes emerged about the types of cultural change needed to establish and maintain peace: the development of social trust, a culture of human rights, a desire to seek reconciliation, a sense of connectedness between people, respect of gender equality, and interreligious cooperation rather than competition were among those mentioned. Perhaps the most common cultural norm presenters raised as necessary to peacebuilding is the ability for people to humanize rather than dehumanize their enemies, political or religious. If it is true that social and cultural change is more important than policy in peacebuilding, and I am inclined to believe it is, the study of conflict and peace must be more than a sub-field of political philosophy and law. It must be the study of on-the-ground practices and experiences that make public policy capable of having any lasting influence in the first place.

Issues of Measurement

One common source of frustration for presenters, especially peace activists, was the difficulty of accurately measuring their work. As Emily Welty, a scholar whose presentation was on the work of the Mennonite Central Committee's efforts in Uganda, so plainly asked, "How do you measure something that didn't happen?" In other words, how does one measure the number of people who are still alive that would have been killed in violent conflicts, or how does one measure the number of people who have become more tolerant of people of another faith? These questions are quite difficult, if not impossible, to answer. One presenter, Janet Penn, Executive Director of Youth LEAD Inc., is in the early stages of trying to measure the impact of her organization, but her presentation raised even more questions rather than providing any clear answers. Finally, nearly all presenters viewed this as a serious concern, because funders often seek concrete numbers to justify their investment. This is an area for serious research and practical improvement in the field of religious peacebuilding.

Various Modes/Multiple Practices

Finally, perhaps the most evident lesson for those who attended the conference was that there is no one approach to doing or studying religion, conflict, and peacebuilding. Context—religious, political, cultural, historical, legal—matters in peacebuilding work. While lessons can be learned from specific practices in a specific place, no one strategy from one conflict can simply be implemented in another without any contextualization and expect to achieve the same ends. While "translocal" learning was one of the results of the conference, global practices of peacebuilding were hard to determine based on the presentations given. While restorative justice practices, for example, were discussed in reference to three continents, the specific practices described were

quite different in those three contexts. Again, interreligious dialogue practitioners from the Philippines, Israel, and the United States presented, but their programs look quite different. Religious peacebuilding, as represented at this conference, is a wonderful panoply of practices that is impossible to boil down into any general theory or practice. This is partly why the practice and study of religious peacebuilding is so invigorating, challenging, and, in the end, worthwhile.

James W. McCarty, III
Emory University