

**POTENTIALS AND PITFALLS IN INTERFAITH COOPERATION FOR AND WITH
CHILDREN**

**ROUND TABLE REPORT, 13TH OCTOBER 2010
ARIGATOU FOUNDATION
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List of participants

Dr. Mustafa Ali
Rabbi Hillel Athias-Robles
Mr. Kul Chandra Gautam
Dr. Heidi Hadsell – Moderator
Mr. Vinod Hallan- Rapporteur
Rev. Hitoshi Jin
Mr. Jagannath Kandel
Dr. Linda King
Rev. Dr. Ofelia Ortega
Dr. Alberto Quattrucci
Prof. Anantanand Rambachan
Ms. Charanjit Ajit Singh

Rev Keishi Miyamoto, opening remarks

Myochikai is striving for world peace through inter-faith cooperation and working with children and its 60th anniversary offers an opportunity to bring together friends sharing their visions and hopes at this roundtable meeting, possibly identifying some steps for action. My earnest prayer is that the divine presence will support this meeting.

Rev. Dr Hans Ucko, introductory remarks

The Arigatou Foundation has launched three different initiatives

1. The Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC)
2. The Ethics Education for Children Program
3. The World Day of Prayer and Action for Children (DPAC)

The foundation has brought together people of different faiths, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and others for a sharing of thoughts and experiences on potentials and pitfalls in interfaith work on children.

The thrust of Arigatou Foundation through GNRC, Ethics Education and DPAC is unique – it is interreligious and already this makes it more complex than if it were just people from one religious community. It further involves people from secular organisations; we come from several frameworks, communities, worlds and histories.

When religious and non-religious people come together, there are values we all share and some that we do not share. In a context, where faith and values are at stake, there are potentials but also pitfalls; there will be challenges and the issue of cooperation will make us realise that there always is more than one way to address issues. There is a risk that ideas will be misunderstood, and one may ask: “What is the other asking of me? ‘Is there a hidden agenda? Am I only invited to be here as a decoration or only to rubber stamp what has already been agreed?’”

We are about building bridges, nurturing cooperation and offering hope for children. The thrust of Arigatou Foundation could, it is my hope, lead to an affirmation of an old principle

as guiding vision for all those involved: *“That which we can do together, we should not do separately”*

There are many excellent examples of interreligious cooperation. I am thinking of San Egidio’s work in Mozambique and Religions for Peace’ work for peace in Sierra Leone. There are regional examples that could be mentioned, e.g. the efforts of Hindus and Muslims to counter the outburst of communalism in Gujarat. Let us not forget the many efforts of Jews, Christians and Muslims in the US in the aftermath of 9/11 to counter violence and seek ways of understanding each other better.

But sometimes the expectations on dialogue are too high. We need to recall that inter-religious cooperation is not an ambulance (to be called in moments of crisis) but more the result of a long term friendship and established trust.

Globalisation of media has both positive and negative outcomes. Negatively, there is risk of stereotyping. e.g.; the Mohammed cartoons in Denmark were seen as an attack on Islam in many places and in the USA, the idea that Islam was behind 9/11.

There are in inter-faith dialogue invisible participants on all sides; there are open old wounds which need to be addressed and there may be suspicions of a hidden agenda.

Participating in interreligious dialogue, one sometimes experiences that the dividing lines are not always between religions but run within religions. Allies are sometimes rather found outside one’s own faith community than inside. Some of my worst detractors are in my own community. A Jewish philosopher said: *“The people I can pray with, I can’t talk to, and the people I can talk to, I can’t pray with.”*

Dr. Heidi Hadsell reminded the meeting that the speakers were speaking in their individual capacity and not as a representative of any faith group or organisation.

Ms. Charanjit Ajit Singh

Quote Dalai Lama: *‘If you want inter-faith cooperation start with the children’.*

There is potential in inter-faith dialogue for faith organisations to do good work. In the UK schools the local Religious Education (RE) syllabus is locally agreed by a committee made up of religious representatives from a diverse range of faiths.

There are many challenges; Parents can withdraw their children from RE lessons, many fear that their children may get mixed up if they learn about more than one faith. Some religious leaders want the uniqueness of their religion taught and not just general aspects. Most teachers have a secular background and find teaching RE difficult. Those that do teach RE are mainly from a Christian background and feel uncomfortable teaching about other religions. Parents shy away from teaching about religion as they are insecure in their own knowledge of their faith. In a quiz, children could answer more questions about their religion than their parents.

Quote Dalai Lama: *‘keep faith in one’s own religion but respect all religious traditions’*

Prof. Anantanand Rambachan

There are many grounds for inter-faith dialogue for children and with children, but there is something distinctive and different, when we base our dialogue on faith, as we are committing ourselves to act on what we hold to be ultimately true and valuable. Actions motivated by concern, infused with energy from a deep religious source, therefore has tremendous potential when we discover a shared concern.

Possible pitfalls:

- Dialogue without inter-faith action.
- Dialogue enriches and informs but without action dialogue is meaningless.
- Since the purpose of cooperation is the well-being of children, faith based organisations partner with non-faith organisations such as UNESCO and UNICEF bringing about shared commitments.
- Non-faith based organisations may assume values that are contrary to faith values.

In relation to partnerships between faith and secular groups we need to ask:

- What is our need for each other?
- What are mutual fears?
- What do we gain?
- What do we risk?
- Where do our commitments differ?
- Where do these overlap?

Dr. Alberto Quattrucci

'Prayer without action is like a body without arms. Similarly, action without prayer lacks spirituality. The values in *Learning to Live Together* are in deep alliance with all our behaviours. Everything we do relate to children.

We are preparing a future world for children, because Jesus said 'let the children come to me'. With dialogue we are preparing a future world for children, the new generation. The first Millennium Goals- to eradicate hunger and poverty is a good starting point for action. There is not only an economic crisis but a moral crisis; we need to build alliances with the most vulnerable in society. Religious organisations can give voice to the poorest in society.

Rev. Dr. Ofelia Ortega

Potentials:

- We need to live a life that connects us to children. We have the opportunity to make children 'visible' and make them full participants;
- As religious communities are rooted in the daily life of people, they have the potential to develop inter-faith dialogue that is connected to the real needs of people and to mobilise their capacity in solidarity with others;
- All religions have sacred texts which support the dignity of our children, this strengthens our work in relation to the Arigatou manual *Learning to Live Together*;
- The GNRC as a network has the ability to create space for sharing experiences and developing common strategies for the wellbeing of children and young people.
- The work of the GNRC also has the potential to create spaces for healing and reconciliation for children where there is or has been conflict as exemplified by recent workshops in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where young people from Catholic, Muslim and Orthodox background came together for a workshop. They continue to work together for the Day of Prayer and Action for Children in Sarajevo.

Some pitfalls and challenges:

- Some religious communities are only concerned with their own identity emphasising only that which divides us;
- Regional issues such as land rights may divide communities and divert their attention;

- Children need to be connected with their communities, dialogue therefore is only valid if it relates to the daily life of children;
- The GNRC work needs to more widely spread to introduce *Learning to Live Together* into the curriculum;

Linda King

The term “*Learning to live together*” was coined by the UNESCO commission *Education in the 21st Century*. One of the outgrowths of this is the term “*Learning to learn*”. Coming to inter-faith dialogue from a human rights approach emphasises the right to be different and to have a different religion and express it freely. We don’t have to agree with each other but agree to listen and understand and respect where we are coming from.

Inter-faith dialogue revolves around modernity and tradition. Religions are founded on tradition but we live in a modern world. How are we incorporating this in inter-faith dialogue? An example is the changing role of women. Many religions are patriarchal more than matriarchal. As more women become more educated, they demand more space. How do they feature in inter-faith dialogue? Another challenge is that inter-faith dialogue comes across as something for the elite alone. How do we give voice to those who do not have a voice, e.g. women and social class issues that cut across all religions?

Jagannath Kandel - Youth Representative

When I meditate I don’t think of Hindu gods or lord Buddha, I am just meditating and it’s not faith related. Because of secularisation people are trying to separate each other. When we do programmes, we try to teach ‘Soham’ that is ‘me’; each individual is me. I see a potential and future as exemplified by GNRC youth meeting. The meeting never asked, “Which religion are you representing?” We have been trying to live together and learn together.

In Nepal we say ‘Namaste’ – the gist of Namaste is that we take our hands to our heart, we bow our heads to say, our thoughts are pure. I don’t look at things but look through things and look for same, same and same.

Rev. Hotoshi Jin

The *Learning to Live Together* manual is now available in Japanese to be used in Sunday school.

The collapse of the global economy in 1991 made society more focused on cost effectiveness. There is in the Japanese society an increasing level of relative poverty, especially among children. In Japan 15% of children live in poverty compared to 5% in Scandinavia. There is three times more poverty in Japanese in one-parent families with 50% of one parent families classified as poor and entitled to public assistance. Many children have their school lunch as their only meal. Children living in poverty lose self confidence and are unhappy. In a survey 30% of Japanese children said they were lonely.

Adults have a tendency to be self righteous; therefore inter-faith dialogue may not take place. As a Buddhist I make it a point to pray in a church, mosque and Buddhist temple. Children are pure and innocent; it is we who imprint ‘difference’ in children. We need to ensure we pass on love and not hatred. We need to listen to the voices of the poor (and youth) and support them.

Kul Gautam

My experience is of advocating children’s rights in a secular situation. I am a strong advocate of inter-faith dialogue and secular organisations and believe that the potential for collaboration is higher than the pitfalls.

Yet we need to consider that secular organisations base their actions on evidence, faith based organisations base their actions on great teachings, on intrinsic values, not evidence or value for money. For faith based organisations some things are absolute, right or wrong; for secular organisations, actions are relative e.g. family planning or abortion. Faith based organisations may be opposed to this; secular organisations may support it in certain circumstances, faith based may forbid it under all circumstances.

There may also be confusion between what is religious and what is cultural tradition, e.g. the Taliban's views on the right to educate girls, female mutilation (circumcision), polygamy, jihad, etc.

Quote from Desmond Tutu

You can use a knife to cut bread for your friend or cut his throat

You can use fire to cook him a meal or set his house on fire

We need to identify areas of commonality. UNICEF's greatest achievements have been its partnerships with faith based organisations and there is tremendous potential for more.

Rabbi Hillel Athias- Robles

One third of the world population is made up of children, the majority of whom follows a religion in greater or lesser form. An implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child should be done in conversation with religious communities. Inter-faith dialogue is mostly carried out in a spirit of congeniality and understanding focusing on common ground and respecting our differences. However discussions on human rights can be difficult as children's' rights may not be seen to be respected and religion seems to justify practices such as female genital mutilation or child marriages, which have a more cultural basis rather than religious.

Another point to consider is cultural relativism. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is seen as a Western concept influenced by Christian concepts and may be seen as not applicable in non-western contexts. In 1990 the Organisation of Islamic adopted the *Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam* stating that the Islamic Shari'ah was the only reference. This document does not call for freedom of religion or equality between men and women.

We need to ensure a cross-cultural application of rights in relation to behavioural expectations, child labour, and educational issues. There can also be challenges in relation to children and parents' rights. Parents may feel justified to bring up their children in a particular way that is validated in their own religion.

In involving children, we have the opportunity to let children shape religious institutions in the same way as women and other marginalised people, who were once denied a voice, now have compelled us to rethink our frameworks.

Dr. Mustafa Ali

'If we are to ever achieve real peace, we will have to begin with children' Mahatma Gandhi

Inter-faith dialogue has the potential to shift the mindset of the young, helping them to understand that despite the differences in culture, ethnicity and religions, we are one humanity.

Religious traditions have spiritual and moral assets, helping children understand themselves and their relationship to others. Spirituality is a source of strength and hope. Morality is a source of inner peace through positive relationships and engagement with social issues, based on the golden rule 'judge and care for others by the same standards as they would judge and care for themselves'.

Inter-faith dialogue contributes to the shared security of all, basically that we all share and we all depend on each other. In the African tradition of *Ubuntu* – I am because we are.

Dr. Heidi Hadsell Summary

Emerging themes

1) The importance of context - local and global

Here we see elements such as the gap between rich and poor, the power relationship, the economic crisis and crises of moral authority. The relationships between faith communities and the secular world in our various contexts and the dialogue and action between faiths, shaped by their histories in their contexts.

2) The uniqueness of faith as a starting point.

Religious people act and speak out on what they take to be ultimate truths. The moral content is closely connected to these ultimate concerns; faiths are not just moral content, and moral content cannot be separated from ultimate beliefs.

3) Religions want to work with others in secular, NGO world, but they also want to be taken seriously on their own terms. Secular organisations appreciate the value of faiths but need to separate what is religious and what is superstition, understanding how religions have mistreated children. Religions have great connections with people in their daily lives, they are willing to share and build on these connections but they don't want to be used in an instrumentalist fashion.

4) The importance of learning in our religious communities and other organisations learning to live together (as in the title of the manual). Learning to work together across nations, religions, and with the secular world. What we are attempting is not easy, we all need to learn, to agree to listen and try to understand.

5) Challenges of Modernity and Tradition

How do we incorporate that in inter-faith dialogue? The changing roles of women and children, and the fear that only the elite and leaders engage in inter-faith dialogue.

Questions and contributions from the floor

- There is a potential in working with the family, since the personality of a child is set already in the first six years and in the context of the family.
- We must not forget the potential of the child in breaking barriers. Kids playing together can form the basis for parents of different backgrounds to meet. The example could be taken from the Peace clubs in Tanzania, which have enabled Christians and Muslims addressing common concerns.
- Poverty makes children vulnerable to extremists.
- Shared values of all religions and the need of all children is a great entry point for inter-faith dialogue.
- Learning to Live Together is a reference book; it has much potential and some pitfalls; in some countries, the separation between religion and state makes it difficult to introduce a curriculum on interfaith cooperation, which is taken to be the same as religious education.

Summary of Potentials and Pitfalls of inter-faith dialogue

Potentials

- Strengthens one's own faith
- Is a vehicle to organise joint work with other faith groups and organisations
- Is a vehicle for developing a society where there is respect and tolerance, cooperation and social action
- Reflects the multifaith nature of our cities
- Can lead to shared concern and to motivated actions
- Helps us prepare children for the future and a future world for children
- Provides the opportunity to focus specifically on children
- Provides opportunity to learn from and learn about sacred texts that relate to children
- Provides opportunity to embrace diversity
- Has the potential to create spaces for healing and reconciliation in conflict areas
- Allows us to share common values and common issues
- Allows us to be different and our differences to be respected
- Has the potential to shift the mindset of the young, helping them to understand that despite the differences in culture, ethnicity and religions, we are one humanity
- Contributes to the shared security of all, basically that we all share and we all depend on each other

Pitfalls

- Sometimes expectations of dialogue cannot be achieved. Interreligious cooperation is not an ambulance (to be called in moments of crisis)
- In inter-faith dialogue there are invisible participants on all sides, some with open wounds, and some with old wounds.
- There may be suspicions of a hidden agenda
- Inter-faith dialogue without action is meaningless
- Non faith based organisations may assume values that are contrary to faith values
- Inter-faith dialogue may not be a panacea for all that is wrong in our world
- Inter-faith dialogue must consider cultural differences as potential obstacles
- Some adults can be self righteous, preventing progress
- Some secular organisations base their actions on human rights, which may clash with some religious traditions having as a foundational perspective, which is less on rights and more on responsibilities
- Inter-faith dialogue must seriously consider the impact of religions at times being associated with violence and extremism