



# **The Importance and Purpose of Interfaith Dialogue in Global Affairs**

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## The Importance and Purpose of Interfaith Dialogue in Global Affairs

Throughout the history of mankind religion has played an important part in politics and international relations. In 1893 during the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the world witnessed not only the birth of the Ferris wheel, but also the birth of interreligious dialogue. A formal meeting during that Chicago Fair brought together religious leaders and theologians from different faiths marking the beginning of global interreligious dialogue. This first "Parliament of the World's Religions" set the foundation for discourse and cooperation among different faiths that is essential in helping maintain open lines of communication and peace in today's unpredictable Post-9/11 world.

With the world becoming increasingly interdependent as a result of globalization, migration has led to more interaction—and friction—between different cultures and faiths, fueling such theories as Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. It has become easier to erroneously identify and categorize people's intentions, political affiliations, and the like based on their religious identity. As a result, people are now focusing more on what differentiates, for example, Muslims from Christians and Jews, Shiites from Sunnis, Protestants from Catholics, Sikhs from Hindus, while overlooking the common values that unite them.

Forums such as those in 1893 provide opportunities for religious leaders to exchange ideas and develop peace initiatives using their respective religious teachings to influence their faithful. These types of gatherings help to protect "society and territories from violence, extremism and terrorism, and to eliminate chances of clashes and warfare."<sup>[1]</sup>

Increasingly, international governments have witnessed the need to understand religious sensitivities as a way to maintain international relations and cooperation with different states. A number of recent conferences have strengthened this point. While it is impossible to highlight all of these initiatives, there are a few that stand out.

In June 2008, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah hosted a three-day gathering in the Saudi Arabian holy city of Mecca, to promote reconciliation among Shiite and Sunni Muslims. The Interfaith Conference in Mecca began with King Abdullah, a Sunni, entering side-by-side with Shiite Iranian politician Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to show that Sunni and Shiite Muslims are able to coexist.

King Abdullah announced in March 2008 that he wanted to support an interfaith dialogue among the three monotheistic religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. This was a diplomatic breakthrough from a nation that does not have ties with Israel, and that follows a strict Wahhabi version of Islam. In July 2008, around 300 delegates representing Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism, among other faith groups from around the world, attended the Global Interfaith Dialogue Conference in Madrid. This conference was again hosted by King Abdullah with the backing of Spain's King Juan Carlos and Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero.

The conference rejected the idea of a clash of civilizations, and called for an international agreement to combat terrorism. It adopted 10 principles including unity of humankind and the equality of human beings irrespective of their color, ethnic background or culture; purity of the nature of humans; avoidance of injustices; and promotion of the diversity of cultures and civilizations.<sup>[ii]</sup> It urged the United Nations (UN) General Assembly to support its recommendations and called for a special UN session on dialogue.

In November 2008, the UN General Assembly met on King Abdullah's initiative for a debate on interfaith issues. U.S. President George W. Bush, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari were among over 60 leaders that took part. This gathering was a milestone in interfaith relations because it brought together groups of people who have been historically separated by religious differences. For the first time, King Abdullah dined in the same room with Israeli President Shimon Peres at a private, pre-conference banquet hosted by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon.

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), another recent initiative formed in 2005, strives to explore and address the roots of polarization between societies and cultures. The goal of the Alliance, led by the former President of Portugal Jorge Sampaio, is to promote cross-cultural relations.

The UNAOC recently held its second annual conference in Istanbul, Turkey. One of its outcomes was the launching of the Education about Religion and Beliefs (ERB) Clearinghouse, which houses resources on the world's religions and beliefs, and promotes tolerance through education. The Istanbul forum was preceded by a Youth gathering which brought together around 70 young people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds to plan the UNAOC's youth platform for the upcoming year. This was an example of how youth can come together across lines of faith and culture to agree upon future initiatives, to serve the greater good.

In 2003, the Republic of Kazakhstan added its name to the growing list of countries hosting and endorsing interreligious dialogue. The Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in Kazakhstan is a triennial dialogue among various world religions with a pledge to "continue dialogue in the name of peace, harmony, and prosperity,"<sup>[iii]</sup> among different cultures and faiths. The Kazakhstani President, Nursultan Nazarbayev called these dialogues a "meeting of civilizations"<sup>[iv]</sup> to counter Huntington's theory. In July of 2009, this Congress will reconvene to address such topics as moral and spiritual values and world ethics, while strengthening previous declarations of commitment to the maintenance of "cultures of peace" through dialogue and cooperation.

These global forums of interfaith dialogue and others like them provide strong foundations for a greater understanding of different religions in an effort to promote peace. Considering the rising influence of non-state actors in international relations, and their interpretations—or misinterpretations—of religion, it seems logical that by continuous and unified calls for peaceful coexistence, society can ensure that acts of violence will not be misrepresented under the guise of religion.

Despite the differences in worship and theology, all religions share a common teaching: peace. International interfaith dialogue forums serve a key role in highlighting the role religions in global affairs can serve by promoting shared values as a means to achieve peace. Sadly, it seems as though this dream has not come very far since 1893.

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**C. Eduardo Vargas** and **Sara Reef** authored this publication and are both Project Managers working in conflict issues and political advocacy, and intercultural relations respectively, at *Intersections International*. This article was published in the *Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue*.

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### **Intersections International**

274 Fifth Avenue

New York, NY 10001

T. +1.212.951.7006

[www.intersectionsinternational.org](http://www.intersectionsinternational.org)

[www.changethestory.net](http://www.changethestory.net)