

Interfaith Dialogue Organizations as Actors of Peace Building: Case of Rumi Forum

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, religiously motivated peacemaking and reconciliation efforts have begun to draw the attention of scholars, journalists, diplomats, various governmental and nongovernmental agencies, and funding organizations as these efforts have become more numerous, more visible, and more needed. Despite stress on an international organization's efforts in academic literature, it is much harder to find great number of studies discussing the grassroots movements and initiatives led by religiously motivated peace builders. Case studies highlighting faith-based peace building actors will shed light on the discussions addressing the role of the faith-based actors in peace building among a great range of activities such as prevention, early warning, advocacy, conflict management, conflict resolution, mediation, and education. Interfaith activities as a method of peace building are the foci of this study. I address the question of whether interfaith actors should be viewed as credible actors in peace building. My second question is to how and to what extent do these actors engage in peace building? The last question I will seek to answer is what are strengths and weaknesses of them?

I argue that the role of interfaith dialogue in the peace building should be defined within the context of four social functions. First, interfaith dialogue provides a transformative dialogical process at a perceptual level. Second, interfaith dialogue

between and among different groups provide a ground for respecting the religious freedom of each other. Third, it could provide collective interfaith endeavours of cooperation to emerge to address the common needs of humanity.

The last argument is that interfaith dialogue would have an impact on the institutional changes in terms of theology, politics, and social cooperation on the ground. This paper relies on the qualitative field research on two organizations which concentrate on interfaith activities in the U.S., namely the Pacifica Institute in Los Angeles and the Rumi Forum in Washington D.C.

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Peace is not the product of terror or fear.

Peace is not the silence of cemeteries.

Peace is not the silent result of violent repression.

Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all.

Peace is dynamism. Peace is generosity.

It is right and it is duty.

Oscar Romero

In the last two decades, religiously motivated peacemaking and reconciliation efforts have begun to draw the attention of scholars, journalists, diplomats, various governmental and nongovernmental agencies, and funding organizations. These efforts are more in need; their benefits are more visible, and more needed. High-profile organizations such as the World Conference on Religion and Peace, the International Association for Religious Freedom or United Religious Initiative work hard at building peace. Many of their initiatives are well known and studied through several studies. But it is much harder to find great number of studies discussing the grassroots movements and initiatives led by religiously motivated peace builders. Regarding to grassroots movements, the most prominent and comprehensive study mapping faith-based peace building organizations is conducted by Tsjeard Bouta, S.Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana and Mohammed Abu-Nimer in 2005. Funded by Clingendael Institute

and Salam Institute for Peace and Justice, Bouta et.al. Reported to the comparative analysis of 27 Christian, Muslim and multi-faith organizations. They conclude that faith based actors contribute positively to peace building with varying levels of success and in various ways. As pointed by Bouta et.al, case studies highlighting faith based actors will shed light on the discussions addressing the role of the faith based actors in the peace building. Strategies implied by faith based actors, the strengths and weaknesses of actors raise significant questions regarding to different dimensions of these actors. I believe that among different case study methods, particularly, Alexandar George's method of "structured, focused comparison of cases" will lead to build new theories in religion and peace building. Furthermore, measuring impact of these actors will provide promising insights for theory testing.

Among great range of activities such as prevention, early warning, advocacy, conflict management, conflict resolution, mediation, education; interfaith activities held by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will be examined. I address the general questions of whether interfaith actors should be viewed as actors in peace building and how these actors engage in peace building. In this regard, the specific questions I am seeking to answer in the case of Rumi Forum located in the Washington D.C. as following: How do organizations perceive the role of it in peace building? What are the desired objects in people's knowledge, attitudes and behaviors? What does the community look like when it is successful?

A. SCOPE OF FAITH-BASED PEACE BUILDING AND FAITH-BASED ACTORS

Incorporating definitions of Harold Coward and Gordon Smith used to refer religious peace building; I use the concept of faith-based peace building throughout the paper. The concept of faith-based enables us to incorporate rich array of spiritualities into groups of different religious traditions. Faith-base peace building refers to

range of activities performed by actors inspired by faith; and institutions established by these actors with the goal of ending deadly conflicts and promoting nonviolence in both social relations and political institutions. According Coward and Smith, these activities can be categorized as conflict management (prevention, enforcement, peace keeping), conflict resolution, structural reform (institution building, civic leadership). Discussing by Scott Appleby and Bouta, Kadayifci-Orellana&Abu-Nimer, education, transnational justice and intrafaith and interfaith dialogue deserve to be incorporated as additional activity categories. Although they may be considered as the subcategories of structural reform and conflict prevention, peace building includes both conflict management and resolution efforts on the ground and the efforts to people working at a distance from actual sites of deadly conflicts. In this context, legal advocates of religious human rights, scholars conducting research relevant to cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue and theologians and ethicists within religious communities who are probing and strengthening their traditions of nonviolence, organizations constitute to wide range of actor spectrum. (Coward and Smith 2004)

As Appleby (2000) stated religious leaders and organizations are more willing to play a defined role in an integrated, multilayered approach to peace-building. This tendency is closely related to opportunity structures provided by states and international organizations. They show the signals of occurrence for a fundamental shift in their attitude toward religion and beginning to tap the resources of religious communities to transform conflicts. It is acknowledged that the collaboration with religious communities complements and strengthens the work of secular organizations. For instance, the United Nations highlights role of religious networks because of their ability to reach vast numbers of people and their capacity to affect change. (William Wendley 2005)

Nevertheless, linguistic tension is very vivid in terms of the definition and scope of faith based actors. Religious peace builders conceptualized by Coward and Smith, peace militias used by Scott Appleby, and faith based actors employed by Bouta. Kadayifci-

Orellana&Abu-Nimer are used to refer similar actor type engaging with the peace building and getting their motivations from their faith. In a broader sense, the linguistic tension about these concepts reflects the ongoing dialogical process about the religion and peace building. The concept of faith based peace building actors will be used for the coherence of this study.

The conceptualization of faith based peace building actors requires identifying of indicators. I argue that three indicators show whether any actor could be identified as faith base peace building actor or not. The first indicator is its involvement in one of peace building activities ranging from prevention, early warning, advocacy, education, transitional justice to intrafaith and interfaith dialogue. The second indicator is the carrying out their peace building activities in religious and nonreligious conflicts, and thereby targeting not only beneficiary that share their own religious convictions, but also beneficiary from different religions communities and secular one. (Bouta et.al 2005) The third indicator is the whether the activists - participants and/or organizers- take their faith into consideration by involving this kind of activities. Discussing by Appleby (2000), these activists as people who have been formed by a religious community and who are acting with the intent to uphold, extend, or defend its values and precepts. These indicators will be used in examination of interfaith dialogue organizations including Rumi Forum.

B. INTERFAITH DIALOGUE ORGANIZATIONS AS FAITH BASED PEACE BUILDING ACTORS

Faith based actors attempt to establish several institutions to promote dialogue, non-violence, interfaith activities to deepen and strengthen the peace inside conflict zones as well as non-conflict zones. They aim to involve in peace building processes. Thus, examination of faith based organizations dealing with interfaith dialogue would be extremely promising to address topic of religion and peace-building.

Although the interfaith movement formalized for about a century with the emergence of Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893, it has recently experienced rapid growth, specifically after September 11. Around the world, the need for interfaith dialogue was identified as an urgent solution to counter balance extremist religious violence. (Patricia Brodeur 2005) It has been crystallized that both secularization and the increase of global religiosity do not necessarily contribute ever increasing peace. To contribute to peace, religions should engage in interfaith dialogue to find new avenues as well as cooperating with the secular domains.

There are variations on the definitions of interfaith dialogue. As cited from Kayaoglu (2007), Turkish Muslim scholar Fethullah Gulen defines dialogue as "coming together two or more people to discuss certain issues, and so the formation of a bond between these people." According to the Catholic Church the dialogue refers the co-witnessing each others faith for mutual growth and enrichment. Kayaoglu reports that the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Britain, Sack says that interfaith dialogue is not a deliberate about winning an argument or changing one's own beliefs, but a deliberation for an inclusive identity formation with the 'other'. (Kayaoglu 2007 514) As exemplified in the works of Gulen, Catholic Church and Sack, for many religious leaders and scholars, interfaith dialogue is approached a moral dimension to globalization which has to be added for the common good of humanity. (Kayaoglu 2007 514) Accepting religion as an integral part of global politics, urgent political incidents also cause these leaders and scholars to call for dialogue. In addition to the religious actors, several parties view religion as the missing component of the peace building. It is accepted by numerous parties including the UN, some policy makers and politicians that it is vital to allow religions to involve solution and to promote interfaith dialogue as part of the peace-building process. As Ledesna (2002) pointed, the ongoing experiences affirm that instead of being sources of conflict, authentic religious traditions can be harnessed as solid foundations of peace.

C. GLOBAL FUNCTIONS OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

The discussions on interfaith dialogue rarely center on peace-building. To some extent, addressing an organic tie between faith and peace is viewed as naïve idealism. I argue that the examination of functions would pave the way for more systematic approach to its role in peace building. I argue that four global functions of interfaith dialogue manifest its contribution to peace building. Interfaith dialogue, first, provides transformative dialogical process at a perceptual level. It helps to explore overlapping theologies of different faiths about the legitimacy of interfaith. It starts at individual level by affecting perceptions regarding identity similarities and difference. Then, perceptions led change in attitudes, especially regarding religious others. The old historical places of mistrust and fear could be transformed. At the organizational level these possible changes might be result in articulating their visions, missions, and goals. Second global function of interfaith dialogue is linked to religious freedom. Interfaith dialogue provides a ground for respecting the religious freedom of each other. Thus, religious attitudes towards religious other will shift from exclusivism and inclusivism to the pluralism. (Kayaoglu 2007 512) Third, interfaith dialogue could provide collective interfaith endeavors of cooperation to emerge to address the common needs of humanity. (Patricia Brodeur 2005) Organizations, particularly non-governmental organizations, could fulfill this type of function. As William Wedley (2005) discussed once religious communities are able to become bi-lingual, retaining the language of their own religious tradition, even as they learn to use public language which is the language of cooperation, they initialize the ground for multi-religious cooperation. In this stage, the resolution of conflict arises as an appropriate possibility. Different faiths have vast social infrastructure, the moralities and the spiritualities which would be mobilized asset for cooperation. The last global function indicates broader change. Interfaith dialogue would have impact on

the institutional changes in terms of theology, politics, and social cooperation on the ground. (Patricia Brodeur 2005)

Interfaith dialogue activities starting with the personal encounter levels have been rapidly institutionalizing in the last decades in order to become transformative force. They take diversity of forms and pursue wide range of overlapping goals at governmental, community and the international levels. In many cases, they are called themselves as federations, associations, councils, alliances, and forums. They announce their main purpose as to establish and strengthen co-existence and religious tolerance. As an example of international organization, World Conference of Religions for Peace, founded in 1970, aims to prevent conflicts from developing, to mediate peace negotiations among warring parties, and to rebuild peaceful societies in the aftermath of violence. Inter-religious councils have been established in Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Ghana, Bosnia, Iraq and West African conflict zones. They serve as bridges between the religious communities, building trust and reducing hostility in areas of conflict. (Wedley 2005)

In terms of the institutionalized interfaith activities, it has to be clarified that they are no longer approached themselves not as the alternatives to the what the governments and international organizations are doing about peace, but as the doer of missing component in the peace building. As Ledesna (2002) argues in his case study focusing on Catholic-Muslim Forum in the Philippines, while government and warring groups pursue peace through political treaties and socio-economic development, the bishops and ulama focus on the convergent spiritual and cultural bases for peace.

D. RUMI FORUM AND ANALYSIS OF GLOBAL FUNCTIONS OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN PEACE BUILDING

1. The Description of Case

The goal of paper is to discuss the validity, probability and vitality of the interfaith actors in the peace building. The global functions of

interfaith dialogue constitute theoretical focus. The set of question will provide both description and the explanation of the case and enable conducting comparative studies in the future. The questions are as following: How does organization identify itself? Is it faith-based organization or secular organization? What are the characteristics of organization? What is the impact it want to achieve? To what extent and how does it engage in peace building? What are strengths and weaknesses of the organization? How would it know it achieved its objectives? The data collected by using various qualitative data collection methods. Organizations` documents such as website, flyers, published books; visual sources such activity's photographs, and video records were examined. Participatory observation was made between July and August 2008. Qualitative interviewing was conducted with president, vice president and the Board Director of the Center for Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue.

Since the main goal in this study is to examine global functions of interfaith in peace building, the universe of this study is the interfaith organizations. In order to provide deeper understanding of topic, this paper relies on the qualitative field research of one interfaith organization, Rumi Forum, engaging in the peace building activities in the US after September 11. By examining the Rumi Forum, the broad research objective is to explore the relation between peace and faith.

Founded in 1999 in Washington D.C., Rumi Forum aims to foster interfaith and intercultural dialogue, stimulate thinking and exchange of opinions on supporting and fostering democracy and peace all over the world and to provide a common platform for education and information exchange. For Rumi Forum, interfaith and intercultural dialogue refers to promote love and understanding and spend efforts to find ways and more common ground among peoples of diverse faiths and cultures. Rumi Forum declares its one of the goal is to support activities pertaining to the better service to humanity such as promoting conflict resolution in and among nations. It lists committing to universal values of freedom,

justice, and the rights of all living beings as its mission too. Distinguished professors working with the American Universities, specifically Islamic studies and Religion departments constitute the advisory board of the Forum.

2. The Selection of Case

The selection of Rumi Forum was done according to three indicators of faith-based peace building actor. First criteria is the involvement in peace building activities ranging from prevention, early warning, advocacy, education, intra-faith and inter-faith dialogue, mediation, observation and transitional justice. The second criteria is the carrying out peace building activities in religious and nonreligious conflicts, and thereby targeting not only beneficiary that share their own religious convictions, but also beneficiary from different religions communities and secular one. The third criteria are the whether the activists - participants and/or organizers- take their faith into consideration by involving this kind of activities. Discussing by Appleby (2000), these activists have to be who have been formed by a religious community and who are acting with the intent to uphold, extent, or defend its values and precepts.

As an organization, Rumi Forum meets three criteria and seems a promising case study to discuss global function of interfaith in peace building. In addition to the intensity of the interfaith activities in Rumi Forum's activity list, President Dr. Ali Yurtsever states that "Rumi Forum is a faith based organization which promotes interfaith and intercultural dialogue to build bridges between the faiths and cultures to promote peace in the world." The director of the Center for Interfaith & Intercultural Dialogue notes more detailed explanation about the identification of the forum. She says: "The Rumi Forum is a non-profit organization facilitating dialogue between communities, including cultural, education, and faith communities."

Although the forum has not involved in peace processes in conflict zones, Forum announces promotion of peace in the world and contribution to a peaceful coexistence of the adherents of dif-

ferent faiths, cultures, ethnicities and races as its principal goal. It serves both beneficiaries that share their own religious convictions and beneficiaries from different religions communities and secular one. It views four issue areas such as democracy and human rights; development and environment; education and youth; interfaith and intercultural dialogue is the tools to achieve peaceful coexistence. Forum states that respect to the environment and to the idea of all creatures' right to exist, the sanctity of human rights and democracy constitute the main pillars of peaceful world. To this end, it uses promotion of education, exchange of information, opinions and expertise. The forum set the teaching of 13th. Century Sufi philosopher-poet Mawlana Jalaladdin Rumi as its mission which is to facilitate dialogue by promoting love to transform hate, understanding to prevent misinterpretation, flexibility against rigidity, and, above all, tolerance to overcome bigotry.

3. The Discussion on Global Functions and Peace Building

In terms of the global functions of interfaith dialogue, the answers of interviewees to the question addressing whether they think that the Rumi Forum positively contribute to world peace and how, elaborate my point about first function, called the changes in perceptual level. The President says:

The main aim of the forum is to contribute to the world peace. As it is well known today's major problem is that people and communities use their religion and ideologies to justify their wars and fights. Each and every one of the community's adherents of diverse faiths claim that their faiths are the best ones and they have privileges over the others and through that, they found the issues to fight over them. So the main thing to overcome this problem is the education, dialogue, tolerance, love and reconciliation. The Rumi Forum's mission begins just at this point.

The director explains it more briefly:

“I believe that this (peace) is the mission of the Rumi Forum –we are promoting peace through dialogue between people of all backgrounds/adherences for a better and more peaceful world.”

It is critical to acknowledge that similar to other faith based organizations, the activists - participants and/or organizers- take their faith into consideration by involving this kind of activities. To explore this kind of consideration in the case of Rumi Forum, the question addressing motivational bases were asked. Answer of the president, quoted below exemplifies faith and peace activism relation: “Since we are faith based organization we believe that the world is temporary and God created the human being and the creatures in peace and His holy desire from the human beings is to maintain this peace. To this end, He sent prophets, books and gave advices to all humanity and showed them how to keep peace through applying your religion. Mainly, all religions from God give almost the same directions to the adherents. So, as Muslims our aim is to please God through taking his advises and behave accordingly. For His sake and the sake of humanity, we consume money, energy and time so as to overcome the problems that the humanity faces in this modern age.

Diverse range of activities, organized by Rumi Forum gives us idea about how and to what extend it engages in peace building. It is open to work with organizations and individuals interested in furthering peaceful relations. According to the activities reported during 1999-2007, activities can be categorized into the six activity groups. These are visits and meetings; help programs; academic gatherings; interfaith dialogue, intercultural events; and intercultural trips

For the sake of this paper, I will examine only one activity group labeled as visits and meetings. Rumi Forum visits several community leaders, government officials including ministers, embassies, congressmen of different countries, institutions such as universities, House of Representatives, think-tanks, in order to initiate a dialogue and build bridges between the different communities, organizations and state institutions. Although the Rumi has been organizing activities since 1999, only reports of last three years (2005, 2006, and

2007) are available. Over the past three years, the Rumi Forum has held 33 dialogue meetings in Washington D.C. The president and the board members of the Forum made 15 visits, as well as they were visited by nine. For instance, some of the visits and meetings held in 2007 as following. The Forum visited Ambassador of Tajikistan to the US; Ambassador of Israel to the US. It was visited by from Archbishop Mesrob II, Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul; from McLean Christian Science Church; First Church of Christ, Scientist, Reston, VA. Forum held meeting with Rev. Susan L. Taylor, President of the Founding Church of Scientology in Washington, DC.; Pastor Doug Jones, HCLC, Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Herndon; Jane Tilly, Director of Quality Care and Public Policy at the Alzheimer's Association. In these meetings, parties discuss the mission of their organizations, and the possibilities of future joint interfaith and intercultural endeavors between their community, organization and the Rumi Forum. If the visitor joined in Turkey's trip, they discussed about the trip and past interfaith activities.

These visits serve to fulfill four functions of interfaith. During visits parties acknowledge that they have overlapping theologies more that they had assumed before. Recognizing similarities and differences could be result in changes in attitudes towards others. The dialogical process becomes very crucial for eroding old mistrust and fears between different religious. The second function, respect to the religious freedom of each other is manifested by visiting those who does not belong your traditional. In an organizational level, Rumi Forum gives the message that as Muslims who live in the States respect all kinds of religious traditions and show willingness to live in a pluralist society. Variety of organizations visited by the Forum, demonstrate that it intends to cooperate with other organizations to address the common needs of humanity through cooperation as stated as the third function of interfaith organizations. Although the Rumi Forum was not founded as a philanthropic organization, it has showed sensitivity regarding disasters and social problems. For instance, Rumi Forum contributed \$8,075 to the Hurricane Katrina

Relief Effort of the Red Cross. On January 24, 2005, Rumi Forum prepared food for more than 400 homeless and needy people in the shelter in D.C. In addition, it donated \$10,225 for the Pakistani earthquake victims.

The fourth function, the impact of interfaith dialogue on the institutional changes in theology, politics, and social cooperation on the ground is the most challenging function for interfaith organizations. Changes in established institutions occur in long time periods. As well as agency, structures play detrimental role in transformations. In this context, it is too early to conclude that Rumi Forum lead major institutional changes. I believe in this point, the discussion on the aims of the organization regarding its impact is worthwhile. To seek the anticipated impact of the organization I asked interviewee. While the president is very eager to answer this question, the Board Directory find satisfactory to refer the goals of the Forum written on the web page. The President noted that:

“We are trying to reach the entire peace throughout the world. We imagine a world full of love, tolerance, reconciliation between the members of the faiths beliefs and cultures. We are dreaming a world without blood, tears and suffer. Unfortunately today’s world is full of these unfortunate instances, wars, crimes and tears. Mothers cry, children cry and the families cry continuously all over the world. But thinking realistically Rumi Forum can not afford to resolve all problems throughout the world. But we’ll be happy if we contribute at least small impacts on the way of the entire peace. It is worth to say that the number of organizations like Rumi Forum increases in number all over the world. This at least gives me a hope for the future...”

According to the President the desired objects in people’s knowledge, attitudes and behaviors are as following:

“... would create a good type of attitudes and behaviors I hope; which can be defined as love and tolerance for others, respecting everyone in their own beliefs and faiths, keeping the rights of poor and needy and help them etc.”

The answer of the Board Director is the same, she says:” We are seeking to educate ourselves as well as the individuals/communities we dialogue with . . . we are hoping that the work that we do will help bring positive attitudes and actions/behaviors.”

In this section,

It is interesting that the forum is often very cautious to state that it is a non-partisan organization without no one particular agenda and no inherent ideology. In addition to respect, genuine concern for the spiritual quality is emphasized in the mission statement.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I attempted to initialize a research about the interfaith activities and peace building. The first step is to clarifying the focus of the study through making appropriate conceptualization. Focus of the study started with the faith-based peace building and moved through the interfaith dialogue organizations as faith based peace building actors. Each step reveals that the topic is under the pressure of the conceptual tension. To overcome this threat as well as to succeed coherence, the study insisted on the usage of faith instead of religious. Theory of global functions of interfaith is implied to discuss the faith and peace building relation. The goal is to test the theory with one case and explore to new dynamics which would be potential for the theory development about the interfaith dialogue, its vitality, possibility or promise for the peaceful coexistence. The overall goal is to contribute to the religion and peace literature with a systematic approach about the interfaith.

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