



by Nizar Ghanem

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Spirituality and flying!

I was once discussing with a friend of mine, who is a trainer himself, about using spirituality in training courses. He looked at me smiling then said “Well, you don’t want the training course to end up like an ashram, you the preacher, and participants flying in the air!” While I am not a preacher and am not planning to become one, I found it rather interesting to think of a training course where participants fly through the air!

Spirituality is looked upon as something different from religion, something that has a more individualistic aspect to it that can perhaps challenge religion as a social structure or an organisation that has been historically involved in political polarisation or mobilisation. Spirituality might be a good way to break the exclusivity of the religious experience creating a more humanist perception of it. Spirituality is seen as a path of individual seeking and as a deeper form of contemplation. It’s more of an individualistic path that seems to stress the direct experience of individuals rather than customs, social norms or tradition. In this way many see spirituality as a liberating force that can create a humanist space between the different religions on matters of ethics and values. The question of using spirituality definitely depends on the particular context in which it is to be used.

While working on a project with Iraqi NGOs on peace-building, I had a participant who ticked the names on the participants’ list, categorizing them as either Sunni or Shiite! Religious tensions between the different Iraqi groups, for example, make it practically impossible to initiate a religious dialogue between the participants without going into politics. Since religion is used and immersed in politics, I found out that talking more about individual beliefs, spiritual values, and paths is a more powerful tool that can bridge gaps between the two different sects. Thus spirituality can be helpful in peace-building initiatives where religious identities can be problematic and still in tension.

In Lebanon with its civil war that has lasted for 15 years, there are NGOs that use spirituality as a form of peace-building tool that can be helpful in bridging gaps between different communities and initiating communal reconciliation. For example, the Moral Re-armament Group, which is a group of Lebanese ex-militia men from different Christian and Muslim sects, uses spirituality as a forum to meet and renounce violence.

Each coming from different religion and history, they don’t renounce their religion, but they meet on the same spiritual path and utilise meditation, and tell their stories of confession while asking forgiveness. During the course, I was able to utilise that group to start a wave of confessions and apologies between the Iraqi participants.

BUILDING PEACE—A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

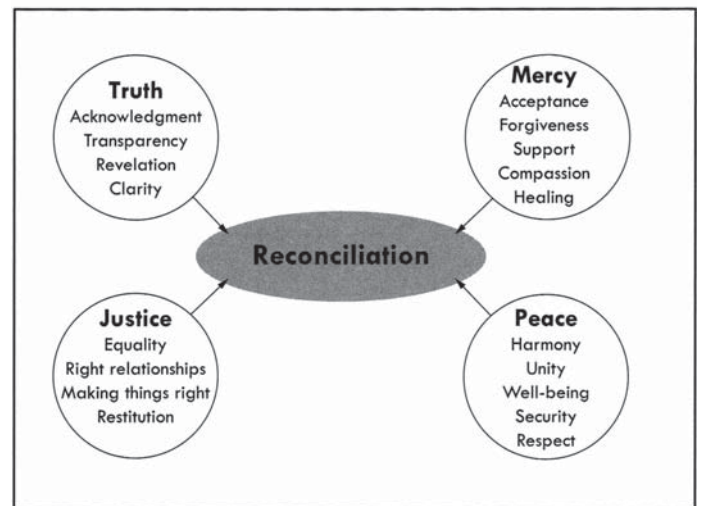


Figure 1. The Place Called Reconciliation.

Here is an illustration from John Paul Lederach’s book called *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Reconciliation has four elements as shown above. Utilising spirituality fits in “encouraging values of mercy, compassion and (mostly) healing”. In many cases trying to intervene in conflict situations, we tend to focus on problem-solving, interests, finding alternative solutions and case studies; but we might miss that essential part that triggers a *change of attitude*. Spirituality fits there, in establishing a link



between the mind and the heart, thus launching a change of attitude that can build later into a transformation of conflict. In other words, you might explain to participants for days the importance of values like mercy, acceptance and forgiveness, but you can never explain to them the meaning of healing. If participants cannot feel and experience compassion and forgiveness they will never be able to become peace agents in their respective societies. Solving the underlying causes of conflict like disputes about resources, interests or political issues could stop the violence, but it doesn't resolve the attitudes of mistrust, hatred and xenophobia. Spirituality, by focusing on the individual and on direct experience can be a great tool for healing, which will lead to forgiveness. Thus, spirituality as a method has to be utilised in conjunction with other tools and systems of intervention.

Spiritual moments can be moments of deep reflection and letting go of one's fears and inhibitions, it can also be fun at times; where participants express their inner desires and dreams away from the pressure of the social structure and the battling identities. Although spirituality can be used in peace-building and conflict transformation, its use is still uncertain in promoting the needed transformation. Not every participant might be inclined to share, or to live these moments. Also spirituality, if not used in the proper context, can be actually "boring" and may be too sentimental for some.

If spirituality is an individual effort and "path" that involves self-inspection and reflection, it also fits with modern views of tolerance, individuality and self-awareness. Sometimes seen as a rebellion against religion, many people find it modern or suits modern values. Nevertheless, spiritual practices have appeared in different cultures and times. The EuroMed region has many spiritual traditions like the Celts and the Sufis. Using these spiritual traditions to boost a dialogue between the cultures of the EuroMed region can be interesting and powerful. It was always amazing for me reading Celtic poetry and find its similarity to Arab poetry. In EuroMed youth work, spirituality can be used as a theme of cultural exchange, discovering the different practices in EuroMed. On the other hand, spiritual practices can help inter-religious dialogue since spirituality can be much more inclusive and broader than religious practices.

I have a German friend from Hamburg who is a Muslim Sufi, but at the same time a member of a clowning group. Jumping with him in the streets of Beirut, hugging people and laughing

our asses off, was a great experience. In his belief, Islam is all about laughter and to him he spreads the message of his faith through clowning. His inclusive view that sees everything as connected made me think of how to use such methods to fight Islamophobia and racism. While spirituality is always seen as something rather "serious", "deep", "reflective" and "profound", spirituality can be in creative jubilee using dancing, music, art and poetry to state the essential idea which is – in my opinion- "we are all one!"

Finally, I haven't been able to make participants fly yet, but maybe when space journeys become more frequent, we can all experience spiritual moments without gravity! Until then, I leave with the poetry of the Thirteenth century Mystic Jalaludine Al rumi who was born in what is today Afghanistan:

*I hold no religion or creed,
Am neither Eastern nor Western
Muslim or infidel
Zoroastrian, Christian, Jew or Gentile.
I come from neither land nor sea,
Am not related to those above or below,
Was not born nearby or far away,
Do not live either in Paradise or on this Earth
Claim descent nor from Adam and Eve
or the Angels above,
I transcend body and soul.
My home is beyond place and name.
It is with the beloved, in space beyond space.
I embrace all and am part of all.*

Notes and references :

- Kinzer, S., *All the Shah's Men*, New Jersey 2003, page 26
- Lederach, J., *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington D.C., page 30.

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