

Ahmed KYEYUNE\*

**COMPARATIVE INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE  
(UGANDA AND USA)**

**Abstract:** This paper aims at conceiving an explanation of globalization and religious pluralism in Uganda. By this comparison, I want to emphasize that the forces of micro disintegration have manifested in religion, ethnicity, regionalism and all other kinds of pluralism. Although patterns of interaction between people of different faiths have not always been cooperative, violence in the name of God is very shocking.

**Keywords:** *Interaction, Pluralism, Islamic, development, Secular State, Uganda.*

\*\*\*

**INTRODUCTION**

The end of the Cold War, in 1990, brought hope that world peace is around the corner—even some scholars like Fukuyama concluded that it was the end of history. The development of technology and trade contributed to globalization far faster than anticipated. Communication and information technology in particular have changed so much in a short time, not only the quick flow of information but also what can be done with information. No area of the world has been left untouched by globalization, either as loser or beneficiary. With different factors contributing to the macro-integration, the process of globalization appears unstoppable. However, as the forces of the global macro-integration are pushing the world into a single entity, forces of micro-disintegration are pulling communities apart. Is globalization carrying its own anti-thesis? Forces of micro-disintegration have manifested in religion, ethnicity, regionalism and all other kinds of pluralism. In the process of micro-disintegration, countries like former Yugoslavia were reduced to pieces. Violence in Congo has left five million dead, Somalia fell in unending chaos etc. In the post-Cold War violence, Africa's Great Lakes region is having the biggest share of human loss. Peace remains elusive as new variables came up to remind both the international actors and academicians

---

\* Political Science Department, Islamic University in Uganda (ahmedchuni14@gmail.com).  
*Danubius*, XXXIII, Supliment, Galați, 2015, pp. 39-54.

that a lot needs to be done. Pluralism in all its kind has assumed a center stage in the post-cold war conflict. In the cob web of pluralism, religious pluralism has particularly become a major variable in the contemporary international conflict. What is more worrying is the rise of religious extremism even in the areas least expected. Earlier, the secular assumptions that religion will disappear with increasing science development have been proved wrong. Instead, religion has continued to play a big role in human relations. Although patterns of interaction between people of different faiths have not always been cooperative, violence in the name of God is very shocking.

This fear often turns to anger when we discover the other characteristic that frequently attend these acts of public violence: their justification by religion. Most people feel that religion should provide tranquility and peace, and not terror. Yet, in many of these cases, religion has supplied not only the ideology but also the motivation and the organizational structure for the perpetrators<sup>1</sup>.

In the post-Cold War era, three major paradigms have come up: Huntington's clash of civilizations, Fukuyama's end of history and inter-religious dialogue. Each of these provides an answer but leaves many questions unanswered. Huntington's clash of civilization overstates the role of cultural pluralism in the post-Cold War conflict, Fukuyama was arrogant and inter-religious dialogue too optimistic. What is clear is that religious pluralism is a fact and will continue to grow in all our societies. Encouraging it should be the task and not halting it. How do we get the best out of religious pluralism?

Both Uganda and USA have long traditions of religious pluralism, though USA is more pluralistic. Migrations, missionary activity, attempts to fit to local conditions, attempts to internationalization, dissatisfaction with the status-quo and many other factors have all combined to create religious pluralism and to keep it moving. In the process of pluralizing, identities have been threatened, interests affected, power relations challenged, perceptions and misperceptions formed and changed and the patterns of interaction have ranged from confrontation to cooperation<sup>2</sup>.

The 9/11 tragedy shook the world while, at the same time, proved the greatest test to American systems and values in recent times. How has the US fought terror amidst religious pluralism in her backyard? What are the institutions and values that have helped US to deal with its religious pluralism, especially in the post 9/11 period? How and when does inter-religions cooperation exist, especially in the post 9/11 era? What can Uganda learn from US experience?

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* (University of California Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>2</sup> For details on the definition of the relations, as used here, see Harold Saunders, "Two Challenges for the New Century: Transforming Relationships in Whole Bodies Politic," *Political Psychology* vol. 23, no. 1 (March 2002): 151-164.

In dealing with these questions, this paper looks at the following: the definition of religious pluralism, brief backgrounds of Uganda and USA, religious pluralism both in USA and Uganda, salient issues in inter-religious relations of the two countries, comparison of the efforts at inter-religious dialogue and, finally, it points out areas where Uganda and other countries can benefit from the US example. The paper is based on the assumption that religious pluralism is not bad as long as the right values and institutions are in place to ensure cooperation between the adherents of different faiths. Inter-religious dialogue, though optimistic, appears to be the only alternative in ensuring harmony in this pluralistic world.

### 1. WHAT IS RELIGIOUS PLURALISM?

The concept of religious pluralism is not new but, like many other concepts in social sciences, is contested across national, political and disciplinary contexts<sup>3</sup>.

The commonly used meaning of the term is diversity or manyness, as stated by Albanese. She defines religious pluralism as manyness (the free existence of many faiths)<sup>4</sup>.

In defining religious pluralism, Beckford shows that the term “religious diversity” is both complex and subtle, as there are different indicators used for political and scholarly purposes. Beckford questions the application of the terms “diversity” and “acceptability” in the definition of religious pluralism<sup>5</sup>.

Dowd proposes three dimensions of religious diversity; a) qualitative and pertaining to the differences in creed, b) The second dimension is quantitative and concerns the number of distinctive religious groups, and c) the third dimension of religious diversity is proportionality<sup>6</sup>.

However, there is a question on whether pluralism is only diversity or manyness. According to Moore K.<sup>7</sup>, the understanding of pluralism goes beyond using the word pluralism as a mere descriptor of social conditions—the existence of people of diverse backgrounds, living in proximity to each other—to using it prescriptively, to promote a desired outcome<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Banchoff, ed., *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2013), 11.

<sup>5</sup> James A. Beckford, *Social theory and religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 76.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Dowd, “Religious Diversity and Violent Conflict: Lessons from Nigeria,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* vol.38, no.1 (Winter 2014): 153-68, accessed July 15, 2014, [www.fletcherforum.org/.../38-1\\_D](http://www.fletcherforum.org/.../38-1_D).

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Moore, *The Unfamiliar Abode* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Eck<sup>9</sup> draws a distinction between religious pluralism and diversity. According to Eck, all of America's diversity, old and new, does not add up to pluralism. "Pluralism" and "diversity" are sometimes used as if they were synonymous, but diversity - splendid, colorful and perhaps threatening - is not pluralism. Pluralism is the engagement that creates a common society from all that diversity. She gives four areas of definition; first, pluralism is not diversity alone, but *the energetic engagement with diversity*. Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but *the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*. Third, pluralism is not relativism, but *the encounter of commitments*. Fourth, pluralism is *based on dialogue*. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism<sup>10</sup>.

According to T. Banchoff<sup>11</sup>, in theology, the term often suggests harmony, convergence or compatibility across the religious traditions - in opposition to religious exclusivism, while in sociology, pluralism can refer to the diversity of different religious traditions within the same social or cultural space. Banchoff states that: "Religious pluralism refers to patterns of peaceful interaction among diverse religious actors—individuals and groups who identify with and act out of particular religious traditions. Religious pluralism, in this definition, does not posit different religions on diverse paths to the same truth, as it does in some theological contexts. And the term implies more than the social and religious diversity explored in much sociological analysis. Religious pluralism is the interaction of religious actors with one another and with the society and the state around concrete cultural, social, economic, and political agendas. It denotes a politics that joins diverse communities with overlapping but distinctive ethics and interests."<sup>12</sup>

From the above definitions, we can consider religious pluralism to include: diversity of religions and religious groups, public acceptance of this diversity and interaction between religious groups/individuals.

## 2. BRIEF BACKGROUND OF UGANDA AND USA

Uganda is a small country in East Africa, with a population of around 30 million people. Peopling of Uganda has happened through a series of migrations which continue up to today. There are over 62 tribes, with different but at times overlapping native religious practices. It should be noted that native religions did have a jealous god and there was a tendency to add on deities, instead of replacing.

---

<sup>9</sup> Diana Eck, *A New Religious America* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> "The Pluralism Project," accessed July 15, 2014, [www.pluralism.org](http://www.pluralism.org).

<sup>11</sup> Banchoff, *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

In the end, the individual had several gods to attend to. The Baganda, for example, had more than 100 deities.

The contact with the world started in 1844, when an Arab trader, Ahmed bin Ibrahim, from the East African coast, reached Uganda. With him, he carried the Islam, which became the first foreign religion in Uganda, later to be followed by Christianity. With the construction of the Uganda railway in 1888, the British employed Indian labor. As a result, Indian religions also came to the country. The increasing migrations led either to new religions or increasing members of the existing faiths. Today, the number of religions in Uganda is difficult to ascertain as there are many sects which are not recorded. The table below gives a list of religions, according to the main report of 2002 population and housing census<sup>13</sup>.

#### Religious Affiliation

Affiliation	2002 census
Christians	85.2%
Catholic	41.9%
Church of Uganda (Anglican)	35.9%
Pentecostal	4.6%
Seventh-day Adventist	1.5%
Orthodox Christian	0.1%
Other Christian	1.6%
Muslim	12.1%
Traditional	1.0%
Baha'i	0.1%
None	0.9%
Other non-Christian	0.7%

On the other hand, USA is a big country, at a different level of development and of socio-religious liberalism. Religious pluralism in USA is as old as the country itself. The different native tribes had their own beliefs, which were not totally lost with the coming of the Europeans.

Historians tell us that America has always been a land of many religions, and this is true. A vast, textured pluralism was already present in the life of the native peoples—even before the Europeans came to these shores. The wide diversity of native religious practices continues today, from the Piscataway of Maryland to the Blackfeet of Montana<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> "Uganda Bureau of Statistics," accessed July 15, 2014, [www.ubos.org](http://www.ubos.org).

<sup>14</sup> Eck, *A new religious America*, 3.

European migrations were largely caused by the religious persecutions from Europe and by the search for economic opportunities. Although all could be categorized as Judeo-Christian, there are many sects that came and continued to come with each set of migrants.

The people who came across the Atlantic from Europe also had diverse religious traditions - Spanish and French Catholics, British Anglicans and Quakers, Sephardic Jews and Dutch Reform Christians .... this diversity broadened over the last three hundred years. The settlement of many Africans brought here by the slave trade meant the coming of the Muslims. The Chinese and Japanese who came to seek their fortune in the mines and fields of the west brought with them a mixture of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian traditions. Eastern European Jews and Irish and Italian Catholics also arrived in force in the nineteenth century. Both Christian and Muslim immigrants came from the Middle East. Punjabis from northwest India came in the first decade of the twentieth century. Most of them were Sikh, who settled in the central and imperial valleys of California, built America's first *gurdwaras* and intermarried with Mexican women, creating a rich Sikh-Spanish subculture<sup>15</sup>.

### 3. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN UGANDA AND USA

We have already seen that pluralism means not only diversity of faiths but also relations between them. This diversity and its content keep on changing as Eck points out: "Religion is never a finished product, packaged, delivered, and passed from generation to generation but dynamic, and ever changing."<sup>16</sup>

What Eck does not mention is that even the relations between these changing faiths change. As noted before, this changing nature of religions, at its turn, affects the identity, interests, power relations, perceptions and misperceptions and patterns of interaction, causing fear or hope among faithful. What are/have been the salient issues in these relations? Before looking at the salient issues, let's briefly consider the major perspectives on pluralism.

Diversity and pluralism generally are contested values. Proponents of religious diversity were /are optimistic that diversity leads to a wider choice and prevents the domination by one group. James Madison, one of America's leading champions of religious freedom, supported this view, that religious diversity would guarantee religious freedom by itself: for where there is such a variety of sects, there cannot be a majority to oppress and persecute the rest<sup>17</sup>. Did Madison mean all religions? Did he have Islam, Hindu, and others on his mind? It seems Madison

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>17</sup> Noah Feldman, *Divided by God* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 19.

was only thinking in the terms of the Christian religions and did not predict what new migrations the future will bring.

The opponents of diversity supported the pessimistic view that diversity will lead to war and to the loss of both national and moral identity. Fears included domination by new groups, diluting American values and turning the Protestants into a minority<sup>18</sup>. This view was important in the enactment of the exclusive immigration laws of 1920, which limited the inflow of the non Anglo-Saxon.

However, in 1965, the new immigration laws negated the exclusivist restrictions stated in the 1920 law and new migrants started flowing in. As in the earlier migrations, new faiths came in, more adherents were added to the existing ones, new interpretations and sects emerged. Could all these blend or melt in the American way of life? The melting pot of culture meant that, once people of diverse cultural background reached America, their cultures and values inevitable gets blended in the American culture and the result will be an American type of culture. Whereas it was true of the earlier migrations, the improved communication technology and the easy migration keeps the new migrants in touch with their home culture and values. Eck was right to doubt the reality of the melting pot: "Our oneness will not mean the blending of religions into a religious melting pot, all speaking a king of religious Esperanto. Of course, there will be conversions, intermarriages—probably plenty of them—and forms of public and private syncretism, but there will never be widespread melting of religions or unanimity on matters of religious truth."<sup>19</sup>

Religious pluralism is seen from those three perspectives and, just like in case of its definition, there is a contest on what people expect from it, how they handle it and how it impacts on them. It is in this contested zone that the USA and Uganda find themselves.

#### **4. SALIENT ISSUES. US/UGANDA RELIGIOUS PLURALISM**

Throughout the history of both USA and Uganda, religious relations have not always been rosy. In Uganda, wars have been fought and are being fought with religion as the excuse. The period between 1884 and 1900 was a period of religious wars between the followers of three main denomination, that is Muslims, Roman Catholics and Anglican Protestants which came to an end with the establishment of the colonial rule. The post-colonial period witnessed the massacres against the Muslims in 1979, the Kanungu inferno and an on-going war against the Allied Democratic Forces and Lord's Resistance Army. There is also a history of the Ugandan martyrs, in all the three main religions, something rare in Africa. In 2010,

---

<sup>18</sup> Eck, *A New Religious America*, 27.

Uganda was attacked by the al-Shabab terrorists from Somalia and more threats are still expected from the same group. USA has not had wars but hate attacks against religious minorities have been common before and after 9/11. Hate attacks and discrimination against Jews and Catholic were common in the US history. The al-Qaeda attacks against the US targets in different parts of the world (US included) and the 9/11 tragedy are some of the religious related conflicts that these countries have to deal with. The cause of this religious violent outburst cannot be fully comprehended.

Looking at the American society, the religious concerns have been over the national identity, moral identity/uniformity, security, state-church relations and increasingly over its foreign policy. It is against these that a comparison with Uganda will be made.

As already seen above, the religious identity of the US was of concern to the conservative members of the American society. Even though the first amendment aimed at the freedom of religions, non-protestant religions and Asian religions (new religious movements) were not in the mind of the framers. These new religious movements also carry with them new races, as opposed to the dominant white race. As Roof and Caron point out, the old image of the WASP - the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant - is gradually vanishing, which adds to the worries of many conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, national identity, especially religious identity, has never been an issue in Uganda, except for the brief period of Amin's rule. Even with its Christian majority, Uganda is a member state of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The country does not have strict migration laws and even those already extant are not enforced due to corruption and weak law enforcement institutions. Uganda does not have a state religion, though the religion of the sovereign is considered the first among equals. As shown on the table above, Christians form the overwhelming majority but they are highly divided between Roman Catholics and Anglican Protestants to the extent that they always need a Muslim as the arbiter.

Increasing liberalism and secularism have made it hard to sustain moral uniformity. For example, reproduction and sexual liberalism, previously seen as deviant behaviors or values, are increasingly becoming common and acceptable to

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>20</sup> Wade Clark Roof & Nathalie Caron, "Shifting Boundaries: Religion in the United States," in ed. C.W.E. Bigsby, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Companion to Modern American Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 7.



the dismay of the conservatives<sup>21</sup>. Uganda also has its own conservatives, opposed to the above stated social changes and to many other aspects of the human rights, which are considered as immoral, especially sexual liberalism. This conservatism is based on both religion and traditional cultural values. Just recently, the president of Uganda signed a law criminalizing homosexuality and there was a talk about a law on decent dressing in public<sup>22</sup>.

The state-church relations have been debatable since medieval Europe. Even though US constitutionally managed to separate the church from the state, it did not manage to divorce politics from religion. According to Feldman, “the deep divide in America life, then is not primarily over religious belief of affiliation - it is over the role that belief should play in the business of politics and government...the essential question of how religion and government should interact becomes most salient when we confront the controversial constitutional problems that arise under the heading of church and state.”<sup>23</sup>

The rise of the evangelical Christians had been on for some time in the US even before Bush’s presidency. This Christian lobby had even managed to secure the Religious Freedom Act, in late 1998, which empowered the American President to deal with countries that did not allow freedom of worship to Christians<sup>24</sup>. These developments worried the liberals who considered that the state was being hijacked by one religion. On the other side, as already mentioned, state-church relations have been an area of contest since the colonial rule. The colonial state itself was built on religious divisionism and, throughout the colonial period, politics of exclusion of certain groups and of dominance by the Anglicans, as the religion of the sovereign, was the rule. Different post-colonial governments have followed the same line. In a society where the state still plays a big role in people’s lives, who controls the state matters a lot. It is for this reason that politics becomes the battle ground for religions, just as worship centers become the battle ground for politicians in Uganda.

The 9/11 tragedy also brought in the question of security. For many people, American or not, Islam and terrorism are not yet demarcated. The increasing number of Muslims represents an increasing risk of terror. Television images of relentless fights in the Muslim countries and the poor human rights record add to

---

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion on this see Roof&Caron, “Shifting Boundaries: Religion in the United States,” 17-18; Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 19-36, deals with the militant Christian groups and the violence they committed over the issue of morality.

<sup>22</sup> Uganda recently passed an anti-gay law but even before that homosexuality was illegal (though the law was not enforced).

<sup>23</sup> Feldman, *Divided by God*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> “Georgetown Journal of International Affairs,” accessed July 13, 2014, <http://journal.georgetown.edu/>.

the fear. Poorly interpreted by Jihadists and poorly understood by many non-Muslims, Islam has been totally associated with violence. But not only Islam is seen as such, even those other religions from the Asian regions are added on this list, probably out of ignorance. The fears of Americans are vindicated by the religious violence and underdevelopment of the areas these religions come from<sup>25</sup>. Uganda has a similar problem, initially drawn from the excesses of Amin's regime, then by media and later on, by the terrorist attacks from ADF (Allied Democratic Forces) and al-Shabab terrorists. In both countries, Muslims have a lot to explain. Apart from Muslims, Uganda has had a problem with Christian insurgents/terrorists and cults<sup>26</sup>. The major group is the Holy Spirit Movement, started by Lakwena, but now under Joseph Kony (a former catechist), under a new name of Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The group is now terrorizing many countries including South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic.

Foreign policy, though not currently a big issue, is likely to become important, as new religions gain ground. The US has been and is still a great supporter of Israel, in the Middle East conflict. According to Ali Mazrui, the American support to Israel includes: arming Israel with sophisticated weapons, economic aid and weakening of the anti-Israel Arab forces<sup>27</sup>. In the several wars fought, Israel has emerged victorious, while Arabs and their Muslim sympathizers/supporters have been humiliated. This American support is a result of the efforts of the Jewish lobby group<sup>28</sup>. Will the followers of other religions also ask for favorable policies too? Muslims in the USA, for example, are reportedly mobilizing to boycott the Ramadhan Iftar dinner at the White House because of the American support to Israel in the on-going war<sup>29</sup>.

## 5. WHAT IS INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE?

Despite the prevalence of hate violence and terror threats, it is amazing how Americans quickly overcome the difficult times. Comforting and supporting

---

<sup>25</sup> M.P. Daggett, in an article on the heathen invasion ("The Heathen Invasion," *Missionary Review* vol. XXXV: 538-540) wonders how a religion that has not developed the condition of women in its area of origin can develop the condition of American women.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the way the government treated the cults, see the 2012 Report on International Religious Freedom - Uganda.

<sup>27</sup> Arye Oden, *Islam & Politics in Kenya* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 130.

<sup>28</sup> "Georgetown Journal of International Affairs," accessed July 13, 2014, <http://journal.georgetown.edu/>.

<sup>29</sup> Julien Eilperin, "Arab American group urges boycott of White House Iftar dinner," accessed July 13, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2014/07/14/arab-american-group-urges-boycott-of-white-house-iftar-dinner>.

victims of hate crimes is done smoothly by all people, despite their religious diversity and opinion<sup>30</sup>. The American Muslims condemned the 9/11 attacks, Christians have come to the aid of the Muslims in cases of attacks and many others. The list of examples is endless. What drives the American spirit? What institutions are responsible for this spirit? This brings us to the interfaith dialogue in America.

Inter-religious dialogue has many definitions which cannot be exhausted in this essay, though we can look at some of them<sup>31</sup>. In its special report of 23 July 2004, United States Institute of Peace defined inter-religious dialogue as follows: "At its most basic level, interfaith dialogue involves people of different religious faiths coming together to have a conversation. "Conversation" in this sense has an expansive definition, and is not limited to verbal exchange alone...It is aimed at mutual understanding, not competing; at mutual problem solving, not proselytizing."<sup>32</sup>

Inter-religious dialogue has been defined by Merdjanova and Brodeur as "all forms of inter-religious dialogue activities that foster an ethos of tolerance, nonviolence, and trust"<sup>33</sup>. The two also consider Eck's definition as the most commonly used. According to Eck, inter-religious is defined as: "The first is parliamentary style dialogue. Secondly, there is institutional dialogue, such as the regular meetings between representatives of the Vatican and the International Jewish Committee for Inter-religious Consultation. Thirdly, there is theological dialogue, which takes seriously the questions and challenges posed by people of other faiths. Fourthly, dialogue in a community or the dialogue of life is the search for good relationships in ordinary life. Fifthly, spiritual dialogue is the attempt to learn from other traditions of prayers and meditation. Lastly, there is inner dialogue, which is 'that conversation that goes on within ourselves in any other form of dialogue.'<sup>34</sup>

Eck's definition is comprehensive and gives us several means of dialogue, from institutional to individual levels. The inner dialogue is very important and we shall see later that meaningful dialogue is only possible when actors can realize in their hearts the importance of living in harmony with others. From above, we see that inter-religious dialogue includes many activities and, at different levels, the aim of understanding others faith and working together for peace. This calls for commitment, a lot of tolerance and sincerity.

---

<sup>30</sup> Eck, *A New Religious America*, 240-248.

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed discussion on the definitions, see Ina Merdjanova & Patrice Brodeur, *Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding in Balkans: Religion as a Conversation Starter* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), 10-39.

<sup>32</sup> "United States Institute of Peace," accessed July 13, 2014, [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org).

<sup>33</sup> Merdjanova&Brodeur, *Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding in Balkans*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

## 6. INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE US

Whichever way one may define inter-religious dialogue, it is a reality that it can no longer be ignored, if the society is to balance the fears and expectations arising out of pluralism. Inter-religious dialogue is the necessary outcome of pluralism. In this pluralistic world, we know that, within each religious community, there is a spectrum of opinions regarding “the other”, ranging from hostility to tolerance and cooperation<sup>35</sup>.

The visible inter-religious dialogue in the US can be traced back to the World's Parliament of Religions of 1893, held in Chicago. After that, there have been many conferences and efforts aiming at a dialogue, both local and international. Within the US, there are many organizations aiming at interfaith dialogue. For our discussion, we can mention that there are efforts at federal, state and community levels<sup>36</sup>. Activities include discussions, teaching others about one's faith, training in interfaith cooperation, worship centers, limiting hate sermons, assisting in building of worship centers and many others.

Dialogue cannot be done in vacuum, but in societies where there is appreciation of love, the love for humans simply because they are humans. Hearts full of hate cannot appreciate dialogue and can turn everything into a harming or killing tool. The American values of love, equality, freedom and liberty provide the basis of successful dialogue<sup>37</sup>. This is not to say that there is no violence in US or that there are no evil people, what I mean here is that it is easier to heal an injured soul full of love than to heal an injured soul full of hate. It is in such a situation that people can forgive, can be patient, can cooperate and can accept to be part of others who are not like them.

Closely related to the above, is the spirit of volunteerism in the US. Interfaith dialogue needs a lot of sacrifice and, in fact, many people engaged in dialogue activities. As Ellis S. and Campbell K. note: “In the United States, just about everyone, at one time or another, has been a volunteer. On any given day, millions of Americans give of their time and talents to benefit their communities through volunteer service. Volunteering is so pervasive in the United States that it can be observed daily in almost every aspect of life.....The roots of U.S.

---

<sup>35</sup> V. Havel, “Inter-Religious Dialogue in India. Special Reference to Hindu-Christian Dialogue in Indian Context,” accessed July 13, 2014, [www.poust.cz/Data/files/Interreligious%20dialog%20in%20India.pdf](http://www.poust.cz/Data/files/Interreligious%20dialog%20in%20India.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> For details on federal activities, see the “Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnership” (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/ofbnp>), while for the state efforts, see “Inter-religious Studies. Dialogue in the United States,” accessed July 13, 2014, [irdialogue.org/resources/dialogue-in-us/](http://irdialogue.org/resources/dialogue-in-us/).

<sup>37</sup> These values are embedded in the US constitution and they are taught in all US schools under the subject of civics.

volunteerism are far reaching and deep. Americans have been banding together to help one another since colonial times.”<sup>38</sup>

Mass media has also been exploited. Most of our views about others are largely shaped not by facts but by the media, with all its strength and weaknesses. As noted in our introduction, improved communication technology has enabled a quick flow of information. American dialogue practitioners reach a high percentage of their population through television, internet and many other forms of modern communication. At the worship centers, there are fliers, brochures and other kind of tools used to convey information<sup>39</sup>.

## 7. LEARNING FROM THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

There is a problem in comparing these two countries, given their differences in almost all aspects. However, it is my belief that the lessons can be adjusted to the local conditions.

Religious cooperation is not new in Uganda and it can be traced back to the 1888 coup against Kabaka Mwanga, when the followers of all religions united against the king. There has been also an informal dialogue among Ugandans for a long time, because the social nature of the Ugandan societies. Clans and extended family settings make it difficult to have all relatives belonging to the same faith. Family and clan functions usually require organizers to know what is allowed and what is not allowed for the clan members who are of different faiths. This is more valid for the Muslims, whose religion is more restrictive. However, these are isolated incidences and do not greatly impact on interfaith relations. A wider dialogue needs more effort and knowledge. From the American experience, Uganda has to learn the following:

Uganda has to build a new culture of tolerance based on love, freedom, equality and liberty. The formation of these values should involve all people and should not be simply dictated from above. The role of these values cannot be underestimated. In a region where brutality reaches unimaginable levels, where reconciliation efforts are defied and where violent conflicts usually re-occur, new values appear to be part of the solution. These values need to be fit in our cultures and should extend beyond religious tolerance, to include all aspects of human life. This can be done by religious leaders, community leaders, political leaders, constitutional amendments, education curriculum and families. Religious leaders

---

<sup>38</sup> “Volunteering: An American Tradition,” accessed July 12, 2014, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/publication/2011/11/20111114165203nasus0.1764032.html#axzz3uE7qA89a>.

are very important, because they meet their congregations at least once a week and they reach deep in the rural areas, where most civil organizations rarely go.

The state should also control the church. Lack of control in the name of the freedom of worship has allowed hate preachers to take the podium, many without any qualification other than the ability to speak in public. Preachers trained in foreign countries have also tended to carry the conflict from their places of training to the places of preaching (imported conflict). The state should guide the curriculum development in *madrassa*-s and other institutions of religious training, while those trained outside should pursue an orientation course.

The government should be committed itself to inter-religious dialogue through its own agencies, activities and funding. Leaving interfaith dialogue to external donors creates a lot of delays and diverts the objectives/methods of the agencies to those of the donors which, at times, may not be compatible with or a priority in the local situations. For example, at the moment, the biggest fund giver of the inter-religious councils has been the US, but it is threatening to withdraw the funding because of the new anti-homosexual law of Uganda.

As already noted, there is no state religion in Uganda but the religion of the sovereign usually has undue advantage over the others. This has been the major cause of the religious tensions and wars in Uganda. For example, when Muslims were massacred after the overthrow of Iddi Amin in 1979, no justice was ever been done and it is only recently (after 30 years) that the president promised to compensate victims. This kind of scenario has to be avoided and, instead, the state should show more transparency and equality for all.

Volunteerism is not new in Uganda but the years of wars, corruption and hate have created suspicion and zero-sum thinking. Since the 1966 crisis, political turmoil became a common aspect of Uganda, up to 1986. The turmoil had both ethnic and religious bearing and people lost their interest in the common good. From 1986, the political turmoil was replaced with a level of corruption unprecedented in Uganda's history. However, even in this situation, the spirit has to be built again, with the leaders from all levels and religious leaders in particular getting fully involved. Religious dialogue and cooperation cannot be totally dependent on funding, as people will doubt the intentions of the effort. Moreover the funding is scarce and unreliable.

In the above discussion, I have tried to show that pluralism cannot be halted, as exclusivists may wish, just as it is not a bed of roses. In any case, with increasing technology and migrations, pluralism is likely to grow. While there could be many fears about pluralism, sameness alone has never been a guarantor of

---

<sup>39</sup> The American Muslims, for example, reach out to media houses and film producers to give correct information that help to promote good relations.

peace. Finding proper values and institutions is the only way of ensuring harmonious co-existence in this constantly changing world. Inter-religious dialogue involves changing people's opinions and, as such, it takes a lot of time, efforts and faces a lot of challenges but the results are far better and long lasting than the use of violence. America provides a good example, not only to Uganda but also to other societies that have interest in peaceful co-existence.

### REFERENCES

- Albanese, Catherine. *America: Religions and Religion*. Cengage Learning: Wadsworth, 2013.
- Banchoff, Thomas, ed., *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2008
- Beckford, James A. *Social theory and religion*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Daggett, M.P., "The Heathen Invasion." *Missionary Review* vol. XXXV: 538-540.
- Dowd, Robert, "Religious Diversity and Violent Conflict: Lessons from Nigeria." *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* vol.38, no.1 (Winter 2014): 153-68. Accessed July 15, 2014. [www.fletcherforum.org/.../38-1\\_D](http://www.fletcherforum.org/.../38-1_D).
- Eck, Diana. *A new religious America*. HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2001.
- Eilperin, Julien, "Arab American group urges boycott of White House Iftar dinner." Accessed July 13, 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2014/07/14/arab-american-group-urges-boycott-of-white-house-iftar-dinner>.
- Feldman, Noah. *Divided by God*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2005.
- "Georgetown Journal of International Affairs." Accessed July 13, 2014. <http://journal.georgetown.edu/>.
- Havel, V., "Inter-Religious Dialogue in India. Special Reference to Hindu-Christian Dialogue in Indian Context." Accessed July 13, 2014. [www.poust.cz/Data/files/Interreligious%20dialog%20in%20India.pdf](http://www.poust.cz/Data/files/Interreligious%20dialog%20in%20India.pdf).
- "Inter-religious Studies. Dialogue in the United States." Accessed July 13, 2014. [irdialogue.org/resources/dialogue-in-us/](http://irdialogue.org/resources/dialogue-in-us/).
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Terror in the name of God*. University of California Press, 2003.
- Merdjanova, Ina & Patrice Brodeur, *Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding in Balkans: Religion as a Conversation Starter*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009.

Moore, Katherine. *The Unfamiliar Abode*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

“Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnership.” Accessed July 13, 2015. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/ofbnp>.

Oden, Arye, *Islam & Politics in Kenya*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000.

Saunders, Harold. “Political Psychology.” *International Society of Political Psychology*, vol. 23, issue 1 (March 2002): 151-164.

Roof, Wade Clark & Nathalie Caron. “Shifting Boundaries: Religion in the United States.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*, edited by C.W.E. Bigsby, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

“Uganda Bureau of Statistics.” Accessed July 15, 2014. [www.ubos.org](http://www.ubos.org).

“United States Institute of Peace.” Accessed July 13, 2014. [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org).

“Volunteering: An American Tradition.” Accessed July 12, 2014. <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/publication/2011/11/20111114165203nasus0.1764032.html#axzz3uE7qA89a>.