



UNESCO'S THIRD ACADEMIC FORUM ON INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

1 MAY 2019 - BAKU CONGRESS CENTER
(9.00 AM – 4.00 PM, ROOM A5)

5TH WORLD FORUM ON INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE, BAKU,
AZERBAIJAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

UNESCO's Academic Fora on Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue, provide a platform to share state-of-the-art research on interreligious and intercultural dialogue. The Fora, organized since 2015 and hosted on the margins of the World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue in Baku, Azerbaijan, also seek to provide operational guidance to support the activities undertaken by UN entities within the context of the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013-2022) and its Plan of Action.

This year, the Academic Forum focused on "Inter-religious Dialogue and the Governance of Religious Diversity". The participants included UNESCO Chairs of the UNITWIN Network on Interreligious Dialogue for Intercultural Understanding, experts in Interreligious and Inter-Faith Dialogue, and representatives and specialists of UN Agencies' using interreligious and inter-faith dialogue in their respective domains of work.

Religious diversity is emerging as one of the

more complex and difficult challenges facing many contemporary societies, in particular those with rising levels of ethnic, cultural and religious mixing. Whilst many societies, in particular those often characterized as being part of the Western sphere of influence, have, at times, embarked on secularization projects, a new phenomenon has been detected where individual identities are increasingly being articulated in terms of national, cultural and religious framings. This has been especially the case as competing structures of influence have been shaken by new/social media that has opened up the possibilities for individuals and communities to access, examine and deploy different repertoires of faith-based practices that help nourish spiritual needs as well as socio-political claims regarding identity, empowerment, rights and inclusion. The phenomenon of violent extremism has also highlighted the importance of addressing religious exclusion and the role of religious leaders, and concerned groups of civil society to countering radicalization.

FOCUS OF THE 2019 ACADEMIC FORUM

It is against this background that the third Academic Forum of the IDIU UniTwin network focused on the inter-related questions of inter-religious dialogue and the governance of religious diversity. In particular, the Forum brought together different perspectives from, across the global north and global south to examine the vexing question of how religious diversity is being approached and governed at a time of salient hyper security and growing levels of interconnectedness. These questions are most pertinent at the level of individual as well as national identity debates and how these debates are couched in the context of secularism, democracy and human rights.

The Forum provided a platform for presenting and discussing current inter-religious and inter-faith practice with critical analysis of the optimal conditions for the pursuit of such community-based initiatives. The deliberations of the presenters and the various stakeholders in this forum focused on the required elements of successful inter-religious dialogue and its role in mitigating against both radicalization to violent extremism as well as rising levels of right

wing populist ideologies. In addition, whilst inter-faith/inter-religious dialogue has a role to play, it is also crucial to adopt a critical stance towards some practices that lacked genuine organic, transformative and inclusive dimensions hence resulting in entrenched notions of disempowerment and marginalization.

In short, this third Academic Forum sought to examine two critical questions relating to interreligious dialogue and the governance of religious diversity in the public sphere. It helped map current practice with a view of understanding how such interventions can be conducive to producing positive, transformative change for individuals, communities and societies. In adopting this particular thematic focus, the forum acknowledged that religion is for many a strong marker of personal, and indeed group, identity. It was also consequently the opportunity to discuss on the conditions within which religious identity and inter-religious engagement can engender either discrimination and exclusion or empowerment and inclusion.

The overall conceptual framing of the forum engaged with a number of key relevant concepts and ideologies such as citizenship, multiculturalism, cultural pluralism and human rights. It is these and other related concepts that allowed a more nuanced discussion of what a well-informed approach to religious diversity governance can engender even as we are overwhelmed with highly securitized agendas that focus almost exclusively on political violence and extremist ideologies.

Specific questions that the Forum addressed:

a. Governance of religious diversity:

1. What are the specific dimensions of religious diversity governance within different traditions (multiculturalism; republicanism, democratic regimes etc...)?
2. Are there specific challenges facing current approaches to the governance of religious diversity in particular societies/regions?

3. It is even possible to talk of a “governance” of religious diversity societies where matters of faith are often talked about as being part of the private sphere?

b. Inter-religious/inter-faith dialogue:

1. Is there a role for inter-religious/inter-faith dialogue in governing religious diversity?
2. What are the conditions for successful inter-religious/inter-faith practice?
3. Can a critical approach to inter-religious/inter-faith dialogue be justified in the context of entrenched marginalization and disempowerment of religious groups/communities?
4. How critical is the role of religious leadership in mitigating against potential social harm amongst youth within culturally and religiously plural societies?

OBJECTIVES OF THE FORUM

The discussions were conducted with the view to achieve the following objectives:

1. Understanding the landscape: exchange of state-of-the-art research and good practice from UN entities – identification of gaps, potential synergies and possibilities for joint action?
2. Make recommendations for joint-actions that can be undertaken within the context of the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013-2022)
3. Examine the possibility of organizing a major research initiative on

concepts and good practice, as well as mobilization of the UNESCO-UNITWIN Network to support the work of the Interagency Task Force, and more specifically its Plan of Action.

4. Strengthen coordination of shared priorities and mechanisms of communication between academia and UN practitioners in the field of interreligious and inter-faith dialogue.

OUTCOMES

Whilst the discussion at the Forum was very detailed and highly contextualized and dealt with different conceptual and contextual aspects of the important issue of religious diversity and inter-religious dialogue, the following summary focuses on some of the key outcomes that will form the basis for follow up collaborative action. In the spirit of collegiality, we acknowledge that many of the specific points reported here were often discussed and expanded on by multiple participants thus ensuring the Forum was characterized by collective input and team work ethics. The specific thematic questions guiding this Third Academic Forum was instrumental in providing overall coherence and focus through the deliberations. Below is a summary of some of the more pertinent issues that will form the basis of our collective follow up action plan:

1. The Third Academic Forum was moderated by Ann-Belinda Preis, Chief, Section of Intercultural Dialogue, Social and Human Sciences Sector, UNESCO and by Fethi Mansouri, Director of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation and Convenor of the UNESCO UniTwin Network on Inter-religious Dialogue and Intercultural Understanding (IDIU), Melbourne. Fifteen UNESCO Chairs in the UNITWIN network, external experts working in the domain of IRD and UN colleagues working with religious leaders/structures took part in this pioneering composition of the Forum (see enclosed list in the Annexes).

2. A number of points that found particular agreement might serve as the basis of onward reflection about how UNESCO can promote interreligious dialogue:
 - a. UN agencies have always been working with faith-based organizations (FBOs) across the world, although their work only forms a small part of the overall effort. FBOs come in many different forms, but have – in general - tended to emphasise the **engagement of religious leaders** to the exclusion of other important actors. It was, therefore, suggested that it is critically important to engage different types of religious actors and not only the so-called leadership which in many cases tended to be a contested concept that has implications for representation and inclusion. More critically, it was also pointed out that when religious actors are engaged, it is critically important that this happens without instrumentalizing them – and without having them instrumentalize UNESCO/other actors. It is paramount to create more inclusive processes that can engage communities and individuals whilst ensuring that they are able to express what religion means for them and their identities. In this context, gender inclusivity was identified by many participants as a key element in this regard, though there needs to be a careful consideration for how gender issues in certain religious communities are often conflated with other social, cultural and political complications that must be unpacked in a nuanced and highly contextualized manner.
 - b. The need to **use language and narratives around religious and faith-based work** that are genuinely and authentically inclusive, avoiding words and expressions that risk creating or reinforcing a sense of otherness or marginality with an 'us' and 'them'

rhetoric that reflects and reinforces the , minority/ majority paradigm. Discussions highlighted the need to instead move towards a more inclusive, empowering language that foster a sense of shared responsibility and community. Additionally best practice initiatives promoting the value of diversity and coping with difference should be disseminated and scaled up if/whenever possible. Furthermore, the importance of reinforcing trust between religious and secular institutions, which has been challenged in recent years, was underscored, and the use of inclusive and respectful language should be encouraged to this end. As an example to illustrate how language shaped political discourse, Paul Morris used the phrase 'demonstrating the vulnerability of all' to explain the success of the political and community response to the recent horrific attacks in New Zealand. Several participants highlighted the role of Memory and historical education to promote inclusive discourse, as the need to create positive narratives about religious diversity in educational structures;

- c. Participants shared the view that religion should not be dismissed as something that belongs solely to the private sphere; religion plays an undeniably significant (and growing) role in social relations in our contemporary world, and it can no longer be ignored or considered only in isolation. Participants noted that **religious identities have become important elements of political expressions**. The assumed secular 'consensus' is not as pervasive or widespread globally as is popularly assumed, and some participants suggested that we are now living in a post-secular moment. In this regard, participants stressed that interfaith/interreligious engagement must link up with other social issues/concerns/challenges. Furthermore, they noted that it would also be important to consider the "unspoken agendas" relating to power - such as the nexus between freedom of religion and broader human rights claims, going beyond an essentialist/reductionist approach to look at how some of these competing claims can be reconciled through dialogue and mutual engagement.
- d. As new generations live religion differently and in many ways more creatively, the **role of young people** in interreligious dialogue was also brought to the fore. In this regard, participants agreed on the importance of **intergenerational religious dialogue** as a mechanism to encourage inclusive debate around difficult issues with the aim of achieving mutual understanding and hopefully shared visions and actions. At the same

time, the **role of social media** and the effect it can have on young people as a vehicle that can be used to spread negative narratives, reinforce stereotypes and drive discrimination, was noted with concern by participants. In this regard, they stressed the need for further emphasis to be placed on encouraging positive narratives from all actors, as well as fostering meaningful dialogue amongst young people of different religious/faith backgrounds in order to promote cross-cultural understanding and social cohesion. They also noted that this would require further reflection since the legitimacy of historical narratives are often questioned.

- e. The role of religion in tackling some of the broader aspirations of the **sustainable development agenda** was also discussed, with several participants questioning how religion and religious leaders could influence agendas positively in the protection of the environment and in climate change. To illustrate one example of how religious leadership can be in addressing environmental issues, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative to protect the rainforest in Latin America was presented, illustrating the importance of both inter- and intra- religious dialogue.
3. The Coordinator of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development, Azza Karam (UNFPA) emphasized that UNESCO can add significant value to the joint work of the United Nations system through its academic expertise and knowledge, not least through the UNITWIN Network. Participants also stressed the importance of engaging religious communities in UNESCO's work to promote the sustainable development goal 16 (building inclusive and peaceful societies).
4. Azza Karam also mentioned the importance for UN Agencies to understand the **humanitarian and development role of religious entities**, emphasizing that more must be done to take this into consideration when developing and implementing projects.
5. In the context of discussing possible focuses for future research to be undertaken by the UNESCO Chairs key topics included the **development of a typology of definitions and approaches to interfaith dialogue**, elaborating approaches to measuring the impact of interreligious dialogue, and exploratory work to understand the impact of trauma on

interreligious dialogue. Other proposed research areas included exploring the interplay between religion and culture in understanding identities claims especially among minority groups. Participants also, discussed how to reintroduce religion as a serious consideration within public discourse and policy relating to diversity and social cohesion.

6. As a concrete proposal involving efforts from the collective expertise of the participants, Priyankar Upadhyaya proposed to **collect good practices and innovative narratives, highlighting the constructive role of religious diversity in our societies**. The proposed compendium/anthology will bring together salient stories/practices drawing on interreligious/interfaith dialogues from around the world, highlighting practices/narratives/aphorisms of interreligious understanding and interfaith dialogue, which challenge the much-hyped sway of religious conflicts. It will seek to underline the innumerable positive instances where religious and faith-based actors have engaged in mediation and trauma healing and provided valuable humanitarian assistance in conflict-torn areas. This volume will highlight the continuum of 'good 'practices in interreligious peacebuilding and interfaith dialogue, recognising that if religion is construed as a critical vector in conflict, it may also, be seen as a vital part of its resolution.

7. Nada Al-Nashif, Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences at UNESCO closed the Academic Forum by **thanking the Ministry of Culture of Azerbaijan for their generous hosting of the Forum**, as well as the experts for their participation in the 2019 edition that launched a dialogue between academia and UN agencies on emerging issues of concern, of which the role of religion and faith and the governance of religious diversity in the context of SDG 16. She summarized a number of the most salient conclusions from the day, acknowledging that it provided UNESCO with a strong basis from which to consider where it might add value to work on interreligious and interfaith dialogue. She committed to carry forward this reflection with all of the participants.

“Respect for cultural diversity based on human rights is at the heart of our action, and it means we must approach interreligious dialogue without falling into political debates and staying on track in our domains of competencies and within our mandate”, Nada Al-Nashif,

1 May 2019, Baku, Azerbaijan.



ANNEXES

AGENDA

Wednesday 1 May 2019 - Baku Congress Centre

9.30 am Welcoming words by Sevda Mammadaliyeva, Deputy Minister of Culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Deputy Chair of the National Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan for UNESCO

9.40 am Understanding the landscape from UNESCO's point of view, from the academic eyes and from the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development:

Introductory remarks on the objectives of UNESCO's Third Academic Forum on Intercultural Dialogue by Ann-Belinda Preis, UNESCO, Chief, Section of Intercultural Dialogue, Social and Human Sciences Sector

The need for conceptual clarity on the governance of religious diversity by Fethi Mansouri, Coordinator of the UNITWIN Network on Interreligious Dialogue for Intercultural Understanding

Experiences in Engaging Faith-Based and Community Groups in Development and Humanitarian Assistance Efforts since 2007 by Azza Karam, Senior Adviser, UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and Coordinator, UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development

Moderation by Ann-Belinda Preis and Fethi Mansouri

10.00 am **Session 1 - The State of the art in interreligious dialogue: most recent research developments by UNESCO Chairs**

- **Paul Morris**, Chairholder, UNESCO Chair in Inter-Religious Understanding and Relations in New Zealand and the Pacific, Victoria University of Wellington
- **Priyankar Upadhyaya**, UNESCO Chair for Peace, Banaras Hindu University and Global Fellow, International Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
- **Hassan Nadhem**, UNESCO Chair on the Development of Inter-Religious Dialogue Studies in the Islamic World (1091), the University of Kufa, Iraq
- **Jorge Enrique Gonzalez**, Chairholder UNESCO Chair on intercultural dialogue, Universidad Nacional de Colombia
- **Roger Koussetogue Koude**, UNESCO Chair "Memory, Cultures and Interculturality", Vice-Dean, Faculty of Law, Catholic University of Lyon

- **Despina Anagnostopoulou**, Associate Professor, Director of the UNESCO Chair on Intercultural Policy for an Active Citizenship and Solidarity
- **Alon Goshen-Gottstein**, UNESCO Chair in Interfaith Studies, Elijah School For the Study of the Wisdom in World Religions, Jerusalem
- **Alberto Melloni**, Full Professor of History of Christianity University of Modena-Reggio E., Secretary of the Foundation for Religious Studies, Bologna, UNESCO Chair Holder University of Bologna, Italy.

11.20 am **Discussion**

11.40 am **Session 2 - External expert views: academic research on IRD**

- **Mikhail A. Stepanov**, Academic secretary of UNESCO Chair in Comparative Studies of Spiritual Traditions, their Specific Cultures and Interreligious Dialogue, St Petersburg, Russia
- **Romeo Gbaguidi**, Philologist and Intercultural Mediator, Perspective of African Traditional Religions and monolithic religions, University of Madrid
- **Lori G. Beaman**, Canada Research Chair in Religious Diversity and Social Change, Department of Classics and Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, Canada
- **Elias Szczytnicki**, Secretary-General and Regional Director, Religions for Peace Latin America and the Caribbean, Lima
- **Ricard Zapata-Barrero**, Professor in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain
- **Abe Radkin**, Aladdin Project, Executive Director, Paris, France

12.30 pm Discussion

1.00 pm Lunch

2.00 pm **Session 3 – The priorities and key issues on the “UN” ground on IRD**

- **Azza Karam**, Senior Adviser, UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and Coordinator, UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development
- **Fredrik Albert Von Bothmer**, Office of the Special Advisers on the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect

2.15 pm Discussion

2.35 pm **Session 4 – Understanding the key-players “in the IRD market” and selecting priorities in UNESCO’s fields of competencies**

All participants

3.15 pm **Session 5 - Recommendations to UNESCO on a potential IRD niche/strategy:** Selection of priorities and proposals for partnerships, research and collaboration: Commitment from the Chairs and the UN Task force on UNESCO's work towards IRD

All participants

4.00 pm **Closing words by Nada Al-Nashif,** UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

UNESCO CHAIRS IN THE UNITWIN NETWORK FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

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