

Dialogue for Peace: Bridging Our Differences

Joining Hands in a Common Effort, Norway and the U.S.

By Leslee Lane Hoyum, Rockford, Minnesota

“We must find a way to live together as one human family,” President Barack Obama recently said at Notre Dame’s commencement program. Those words were equally relevant at the *Dialogue for Peace: Bridging Our Differences* forum held at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs in Minneapolis on May 19.

The world is filled with conflict and it is becoming smaller, but it is growing in its diversity of thought, culture and belief. How can we coexist peacefully? According to the forum’s panelists, ongoing dialogue and respect for one another’s views, whether local, national or global, is necessary to achieve such a peace.

Sponsored by the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights U.S. Foundation and the Norway House Peace Initiative, the forum offered distinguished panelists who presented their experiences and thoughts for opening dialogue. They included: Norwegian Ambassador to Syria Rolf Willy Hansen, formerly Consul General for Norway posted in Minneapolis; Imam Senaid Kobilica, President of the Islamic Council of Norway and Head Imam for the Norwegian Islamic Community of Bosnia Herzegovina; Professor Abdi Samatar, professor of geography and global studies at the University of Minnesota; Ingrid Vik, Special Advisor to the “Dialogue for Peace” program at the Oslo Center, Oslo, Norway; and J. Brian Atwood, Dean of the Humphrey Institute, who served as moderator.

The Syrian Experience

“Damascus, Syria, is the oldest, continuously inhabited city in the World,” Ambassador Rolf Willy Hansen said. “It is split into Christian, Jewish and Muslim sectors. Only 10 percent of the country’s 20 million people are Christian; it is primarily Muslim. But religious tolerance is quite good. We must remember that the country has had more than 1400 years of experience living in a religiously diversified environment.

“It is true that mixing religion and politics can be explosive and lead to dangerous territory, such as in Lebanon, causing divisiveness. The consequences can be disastrous. Syria has avoided this. Yes, Syria has issues; human rights is one, but when it comes to religion, it is doing very well. A diverse nation is a strong nation, which better prepares it for a globalized world.

“My home country, Norway, really has not faced diversity until the last 30–40 years. Norway is not a religious country; it is more secular,” added Ambassador Hansen. “Norwegians are now faced with people who are deeply-rooted in a strong faith. It’s different for them. But what is most important to ensure understanding is respect for one another and ongoing dialogue.”

Ambassador Hansen also said that he believes the United States is a very good example of how a country lives with diversity, but he quickly added that we can all learn from one another.

Muslims in Norway

When most Americans think of Norway they think of blonde, blue-eyed, fair-skinned Lutherans who live amid the world’s most spectacular scenery. But 2009 Norway is more than that. Islam is the largest minority religion in Norway, comprising more than two percent of the population.

There are at least 75,000 Muslims in Norway, perhaps as many as 150,000. Fifty-six percent live in Oslo and Akershus counties.

Although jobs, family reunification and asylum for Balkan refugees have been the principal reasons that Muslims migrate to modern Norway, Muslims in Norway can be traced as far back as 1260. According to Imam Senaid Kobilica, “Muslims in Norway are a fragmented group, coming from many different backgrounds. The largest Muslim immigrant communities come from Pakistan, Iraq and Somalia. As different immigrant group numbers increased, the wish for separate mosques for people of different nationalities, languages and groups increased.” There are more than 90 separate Muslim congregations.

A variety of efforts to organize Muslim groups and mosques led to the founding of the Islamic Council of Norway in 1994. That gave the Muslim community a united voice within its own faith and with Norwegian communities in which Muslims lived. The unification prompted an invitation from the Inter-church Council of the Church of Norway to begin a permanent dialogue between Christian and Muslim organizations.

Not surprisingly, the Sept. 11, 2001, events brought more focus on Norwegian Muslims. Although dialogue ensued, it appeared attention was brought only to people with a special interest and became, more or less, a non-issue, according to Imam Senaid Kobilica. It was the Danish *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoon controversy that made *dialogue* the buzz word of the day.

On Sept. 30, 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* ran 12 editorial cartoons, most of which satirized the Islamic prophet Muhammad and were considered blasphemous by Danish Muslims. They objected and responded by holding public protests, which subsequently led to protests throughout the world. In Norway, dialogue seminars became welcome and the media responded.

“The cartoon controversy took very different forms in Denmark and Norway,” said Imam Kobilica. “Norway had a well-developed dialogue structure, while Denmark did not. Muslim participants in the debate programs on TV, radio and in the newspapers, focused on how the publications made them feel, and that this was a hateful act.

“It was a Christian organization, Kirkens nødhjelp, which was the first to condemn publication of the cartoon in Norway. Also, the Norwegian government invited the Islamic Council of Norway to be its partner in crisis management, unlike in Denmark.”

Mediated by the Christian Democratic Party and supported by the government, the editor of *Magazinet* and the Islamic Council reconciled publicly. On the initiative of the Islamic Council and financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Muslim-Christian delegations were sent to the Middle East and Pakistan to explain Norwegian positions on and demonstrate the Norwegian culture of dialogue to the international Muslim community.

“The moral question of how we portray the faith of the other is a responsibility that is shared between all the groups in the society,” said Imam Kobilica. “But, at the same time, as a shared responsibility I believe that the responsibility is closely tied to power. Hence, those with more power have a larger responsibility. The dialogical tendency has fostered a climate of trust between religious leaders and, more recently, between religious leaders and politicians in Norway.”

Imam Senaid ended with a quote from Qur’anic verse: *Oh mankind! You have been created out of a male and female. You have been made into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know*

one another. It is a powerful reminder that the importance of dialogue is in understanding others, not necessarily agreeing with them.

Searching for Common Ground

Professor Abdi Samatar believes we must search for common ground in order to understand and respect one another. Born in Somalia and now a naturalized U.S. citizen, he feels that at the heart of respect is justice, whether between groups of people, generations or countries.

“As Americans we have a sense of civic union, and that is fine,” said Professor Samatar.

“However, we must always make space for new members. Part of becoming a part of the community is not just blending in, but being able to challenge society about how it thinks.

“People often wonder why Somalis were attracted to Minnesota,” said Professor Samatar. “It wasn’t the weather. First of all, Minnesotans can be proud of the jobs they’ve had to offer. Public education is reasonably good, and there is ‘Minnesota Nice,’ which provides a peaceful and reasonably healthy environment. But also it is important to understand they were fleeing for peace.”

Professor Samatar pointed out that as Americans we are implicated in the unrest that exists in Somalia. It is a situation, as Ambassador Hansen pointed out, where personal identities are mixed with political ones; it’s dangerous, Samatar said. During the Cold War, the Americans wished to defeat the Soviets. During the ‘60s, the actions of both undermined Somali democracy. Through a variety of circumstances the country was destroyed.

“So, how can we understand each other?” asked Professor Samatar. He offered the following:

First, we must promote formal education, since today’s students become the next generation of contributors.

Second, we must encourage dialogue in our communities before crises occur, including involvement in the political process before election time.

Finally, we must realize that the media can poison personal identity issues, such as faith and culture, making it essential to educate people and promote our common ground.

Dialogue is a Product of Our Time

“There is no question that dialogue is a product of our time,” said Ingrid Vik. “It leads to stability. We (Norwegians) are much more involved in a dialogical culture than most. You come to express your ideas, but you are also there to listen. On the other hand, even though we have the right to say what we want, it can lead to conflict. Yet, we must talk to one another, before as well as during a crisis.”

According to Vik, Europe is built on nationalism. The countries are not emerging nations and are steeped in their own cultures. She went on to say that it is not a conflict of Europe versus Islam but rather there is a lack of understanding. The parties must learn to respect one another in order to live together peacefully. Without dialogue, that may be impossible.

“Even Norwegians have a deep skepticism of new cultures,” said Vik. “But dialogue allows us to establish common ground. We view dialogue as a valuable tool in Norwegian debate; it is a distinct method for resolution. We all have strong opinions about a variety of things, including new immigrants. Often those opinions are based on myth. Dialogue reveals reality.”

Therefore, the Oslo Center, as well as other groups, encourages ongoing dialogues throughout the Kingdom of Norway. Vik went on to say that myths are often at the heart of fear. For example, myths abound that immigrant boys threaten Norwegian women. Yet, according to Vik, there are no facts to support the contention. Dialogues become invaluable to resolve such false impressions.

“Society will not change until common ground is found. We must understand that we have our own truths, but there is most likely an alternative truth,” said Vik. “That is the one we need to hear and respect.

“I, too, feel, as does Ambassador Hansen, that we have much to learn from the U.S., but sharing experiences is vital.”

In Summary

The forum brought many possibilities to the surface. As our world becomes smaller but our differences appear to grow, we need to ask ourselves, “What can I do to make my community more tolerant?”

Panelists agreed that global understanding begins with small community dialogue. Therefore, it may be time for each neighborhood to develop a dialogue group that engages all its citizens. By doing so we may be able to free ourselves from the fear of controversy and become more welcoming to all.

For more information about the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights and its U.S. Foundation, go to www.oslocenter.no, and for Norway House, go to www.norwayhouse.org.

Note: Dialogue for Peace: Bridging Our Differences, along with additional interviews, will be broadcast on Twin Cities Public Television in August.