Interreligious dialogue in international politics

From the margins of the religious field to the centre of civil society

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Introduction: Interreligious dialogue as an international phenomenon

Since the start of the twenty-first century, interreligious dialogue (IRD) has developed into an increasingly significant dimension of international politics. There is for one the so-called ‘IRD Movement’ (Boehle 2002; Halafoff 2013), consisting of multiple individuals, networks and organizations that emphasize interreligious dialogue as a means of religious cooperation. These actors conduct a variety of activities, from coming up with official resolutions on world peace to organizing local development networks and international expert meetings. Some of them are very active in international politics.

But the notion of IRD has also entered into international, political discourse itself. It has been integrated into official policy documents of the UN as well as the EU and other international bodies. In 2002, the United Nations’ General Assembly (UN-GA) began to issue resolutions on IRD (UN-GA 2002). In 2008, the Council of Europe published a White Paper on intercultural dialogue that puts particular emphasis on the ‘religious dimension’ of this type of dialogue (Council of Europe 2008). And finally, a few years ago, the European People’s Party (EPP-Group) organized a conference in Zagreb to celebrate 20 years of IRD in Europe (EPP-Group no date).

On the basis of these observations, the chapter presents a two-directional argument to make the point that analysis of IRD can help understand global religion and politics. It will show (a) how IRD has developed into a central dimension of international politics and (b) to what extent IRD activities are influenced by international politics.

To make this argument, the chapter approaches the phenomenon of interreligious dialogue primarily as a semantic marker for a discursive field. In this field, a variety of different concepts (with respective nuances of meaning) are used, such as interreligious, interfaith, multi-faith dialogue, encounters or relations. The chapter analyzes the interdependences between the social field constituted by references to these notions and international politics, seen here as a very specific dimension of global processes (Lehmann 2018b).
On the notion of IRD

In general, research on IRD has two main strands. First, publications by practitioners of dialogue who see dialogue primarily as hermeneutic process. Second, a relatively new strand of research focuses on the socio-cultural role of IRD in contemporary society.

IRD as a process of hermeneutics

Most authors in the first strand have a formal training in institutions of higher religious education with degrees in Christian theology or Quranic Studies. Their publications tend to focus on three major fields of analysis. They have for one produced a wide range of definitions that highlight varied dimensions of dialogue in different fields of action. In most cases, these definitions put particular emphasis on the individual dimension of dialogue, which has decisive normative underpinnings (Forward 2001; Merrigan and Friday 2017). In the edited volume Understanding Interreligious Relations, Marianna Moyaert defines IRD in the following way:

Dialogue is connected deep down with the search for truth and a striving for wisdom. It excludes fanaticism. A fanatic is a person who, convinced that he is absolutely right, locks himself up in his own position and refuses any critical testing or challenge. Dialogue presupposes precisely the engagement of people with critical minds, who question the obvious and also allow others to challenge them.

(Moyaert 2013, p. 206)

Many scholars in this first strand argue that dialogue is such a highly complex process that one has to distinguish several dimensions of dialogue so that it can be applied appropriately. The most influential of these typologies is probably that of the ‘Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue’ and the ‘Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.’ In 1991, these two bodies of the Vatican published a document entitled ‘Dialogue and Proclamation’ that identifies four types of dialogue:

a) The dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
b) The dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
c) The dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.
d) The dialogue of religious experience, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual encounters such as contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue/Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples 1991).

In addition, authors of the first strand offer valuable data on the history of IRD and present-day dialogue activities around the world (Kuschel 2011; Braybrooke 2013; Latinovic et al. 2016). Publications also tackle the development of dialogue in different national contexts (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009; Iwuchukwu 2013; Marshall 2017; Aguilar 2018). Finally books, leaflets as well as websites are dedicated to the practical implementation of dialogue (Swidler 2014; Rötting et al. 2016; Druel 2017; Garred and Abu-Nimer 2018).
IRD as a socio-cultural phenomenon

The second strand of research is dominated by sociologists, political scientists and scholars of religion who analyse IRD primarily as a socio-cultural phenomenon (Dussert-Galiant 2013; Sinn 2014). Most of their analyses do not start from concepts of what IRD is supposed to be, but from the observation that dialogue has become a semantic marker in a variety of socio-cultural contexts. Accordingly, the editors of a 2018 special issue of Social Compass on ‘Interreligious Relations and Governance of Religion in Europe’ explain their inquiry in the following way:

The articles selected for this special issue set out to systematically describe and understand the characteristics and the role of the ‘interreligious sector’ in the governance of religion ... The case studies included share an understanding of the multifaceted nature of the interreligious movement and its internal diversity and complexity. This is reflected in a variety of terms used to denote the semantic field of the phenomenon, such as interreligious, interfaith, multifaith and interconvictional.

(Griera and Nagel 2018, p. 304)

On this basis, the editors also introduce a tentative concept of what they identify as interreligious dialogue within the context of the special issue:

Generally speaking, these initiatives share three characteristics, as they (1) include the participation of persons or parties belonging to at least two different religious traditions (or life stances in the broader sense), (2) exhibit a minimum of planning, duration and coherence compared to situated incidents of interreligious encounter and (3) are driven by the will to foster interaction among religiously diverse people in order to bring forth specific consequences, such as mutual understanding or community cohesion.

(Griera and Nagel 2018, p. 305)

This relatively new approach adds a different dimension to the analysis of dialogue (Lehmann and Koch 2015). The proponents of the second strand rather approach IRD as a phenomenon that helps to better understand the role of religion within differentiated, pluralized (post- or late-) modern societies. So far, the majority of such studies focus on either (a) local (and sometimes national) IRD activities, or (b) the more general interrelations between IRD initiatives and specific sectors of society (Klinkhammer et al. 2011; Nordin 2017; Ipgrave et al. 2018). The latter highlight the complex networks that constitute dialogue activities within their socio-cultural contexts and their relationships to other social fields such as politics and economics (Griera 2012; Nagel 2016).

Three cases of international IRD organizations

This section considers three organizations that are (a) explicitly doing IRD, (b) international in outlook and (c) frequently perceived as central to international IRD activities (Lehmann forthcoming).

The first is the ‘World’s Parliament of Religions’ that took place in Chicago in 1893, which served as a point of reference for the establishment of an international IRD organization under the name ‘Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions’ in 1993. The second case is the ‘World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP),’ which also began as a singular event that took place in 1970 and afterwards slowly transformed into an
international IRD organization presently called ‘Religions for Peace/International.’ The third case is the ‘United Religions Initiative (URI),’ which was formally established in 2000. It is a new foundation in the field of IRD with an international outlook.

These three cases highlight three stages in the history of IRD activities that are still significant today.

**The ‘Parliament’: first attempts ‘from the margins’**

The 1893 ‘Parliament’ is probably the most intensely explored singular event in the history of modern IRD (Mouzzouri forthcoming). The Parliament took place in what can be described as the pre-Herbergian period of the history of US religions, which was still very much dominated by Protestant denominations at an early stage of modern globalization (Herberg 1955; Berger and Huntington 2002; Beyer 2006). It was a local event with an international agenda that had primarily been organized by members of US denominations. A side event of the 1893 World (Columbian) Fair in Chicago, it included speakers from different Christian denominations (primarily from the USA) as well as from other so-called, world religions (primarily Hindu and Buddhist). In most cases, these speakers used the Parliament as a platform to present their respective religious positions to a wider audience (Lüddeckens 2001; Seager 2009).

The main actors that initiated the 1893 Parliament would at the time have been considered on the margins of the religious field (King 1993; Molendijk 2011). Unitarians and Universalists played, for example, a highly significant role in the preparation and implementation of the Parliament, whilst official Anglican and Muslim (and later on also Catholic) representatives were critical about the meeting and did not formally participate (Seager 1989). Such marginality was typical of most early IRD activities in the twentieth century, like the ‘Religiöse Menschheitsbund (RMB)’ (Choi 2013) and the ‘World Congress of Faiths (WCF)’ (World Congress of Faiths no date). The former was organized by Professor of Systematic Theology Rudolf Otto (best known for his book *Das Heilige*), the latter by the army officer and explorer Francis Younghusband.

**WCRP: increased activism in civil society**

The ‘World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP)’ took place in Kyoto, Japan in 1970 (Pedescoll forthcoming). This case broadens the perspective of the present discussions towards Asia in general and Japan in particular (Reader 1991; Coulmas 2014). The WCRP has to be seen in relation to the social changes of the 1960s, not only within the religious field but also politics, and amidst processes of increasing decolonization, the emergence of new social movements, the Cold War and especially the resistance to the Vietnam War (Marwick 1998; McLeod 2007).

At present, our knowledge about the 1970 conference is still very much influenced by the publications of the Unitarian Universalist and long-time Secretary General of WCRP, Homer A. Jack (1993). The Asian dimension of the early history of the WCRP—with its particular actors, ideological cleavages and down-to-earth financial problems—has not been sufficiently analysed yet.

Within the present argument, the WCRP highlights a new dimension of IRD activities. Its organizers wanted to show that religions could play an active role in the consolidation of peace around the world and that dialogue among religions is the best way to reach this aim (Wettach–Zeitz 2007). This moves the focus away from conceptual and theological matters towards wider socio-cultural engagement—in this case on peace and disarmament. Later, this
new emphasis diversified to include not only questions of peace and disarmament but also sustainable development, women and youth. In this respect, the establishment of the WCRP demonstrates close links to the agenda of the ‘Temple of Understanding’ (Temple of Understanding no date) with its particular focus on the UN as well as the ‘International Association for Religious Freedom’ (International Association for Religious Freedom no date)—the latter underscoring the link between IRD and human rights. All these organizations triggered a stronger integration of IRD activities into the newly emerging strands of international civil society. The respective changes had unintended consequences for IRD including an increasing focus on formal religious representation.

**URI: support from within religious hierarchies**

Formally established in 2000, the ‘United Religions Initiative’ (URI) is a network of local groups coordinated from the so-called ‘Global Office’ in San Francisco that has been strongly encouraged and supported by William E. Swing (at the time Episcopal Bishop of California) to form and sustain a worldwide network of local dialogue activists (Singha forthcoming). In this manner, URI has grown into one of the major new international actors in the field of IRD.

The formation of URI coincided with the breakdown of the bipolar world order and the pre-9/11 discourse on religion. It was influenced by debates on the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ but not the so-called ‘War against Terror’ (with its particular focus on Islam)—even though the latter later on shaped URI’s responses around the world (Huntington 1996; Thomas 2005; Toft et al. 2011). Today URI is structured around so-called ‘Cooperation Circles’ that are organized locally and specialize in specific ‘action areas’ such as community building, education, human rights and media. Here, traditional interfaith and intercultural dialogue is only 1 out of 14 Action Areas. Interestingly, URI’s primary governing body, the ‘Global Council,’ comprises members of Cooperation Circles that define themselves by formal links to religious traditions—be it as ‘practicing Hindu,’ serving ‘on the boards of Grace Cathedral,’ working as ‘General Secretary of the National Council of Churches’ or as a ‘Wiccan Elder and High Priest of Coven Trismegiston in Berkeley, CA’ (United Religions Initiative no date). Under the leadership of W. E. Swing, this illustrates how URI is supported from within religious hierarchies. Thus URI has been established from within different traditional religious hierarchies but its main focus is to explicitly work on the grassroots level. As such, it can be compared to the ‘Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions’ (Parliament of the World’s Religions no date) and the ‘(Oxford) International Interfaith Centre’ (International Interfaith Centre no date).

**Integration of IRD within the context of the UN-GA**

The following section deals with documents that are of particular symbolic significance within international politics—the resolutions of the United Nations’ General Assembly (UN-GA). It reconstructs a shift within the constriction of religion from human rights and religious freedom to IRD and harmony.

**Context of the UN-GA**

The UN is one of the most inclusive intergovernmental organizations in existence today. Its General Assembly brings together formal representatives of 193 member states (and two observer states) that are unofficially organized in five regional groups (Gareis and Varwick 2014; Jesensky 2019). Since the 1960s and 1970s, a so-called ‘Third UN’ of non-governmental organizations
(NGOs) and other civil society actors has been gaining significance within the organization (Jolly et al. 2009; Weiss et al. 2009). Since the start of the twenty-first century, the UN has more and more developed into a global institution that serves as one of the central arenas for the formulation of international discourses—on human rights, health issues, peace and disarmament.

Religiously affiliated NGOs play a significant part in this process (Lehmann 2013). Multiple religiously affiliated organizations have successfully applied for the status of an NGO formally accredited to the UN’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and other specialized UN agencies (Fitzgerald 2011; Haynes 2014; Lehmann 2016; Baumgart-Ochse 2019). This formal status provides them with a certain degree of access to UN processes. Thus, even though the religiously affiliated NGO community at the UN is highly diversified, some of the IRD organizations are very much aware from the processes at the UN that they have to a certain degree been integrated (Lehmann 2019). Within this wider setting, the concept of IRD has gained increasing prominence.

**IRD within the documents of the UN-GA**

To understand the significance of the references to IRD within the General Assembly, one has to keep in mind that the latter began to adopt resolutions dealing with religion in the 1960s. It started doing so with the Krishnaswami Commission for a ‘Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Religious Intolerance’ (UN-GA 1962). Even though a final declaration on the elimination of all forms of religious intolerance only materialized in 1981 (UN-GA 1981), the above resolution can be seen as a starting point for the UN’s appreciation of religion with respect to the wider discourse on religious freedom. It approaches religion within a very traditional, instrument-based approach to human rights. In other words, for about four decades since it was established, the General Assembly had been framing explicit references to religion almost exclusively within the context of human rights discourses. Interestingly, this is still the main frame of reference for the UN’s approach to religion.

In contrast, the General Assembly’s references to IRD (and later on to harmony) are a rather recent development (Lehmann 2018a). The 2002 resolution on the ‘Elimination of all Forms of Religious Intolerance’ (strongly influenced by members of the Regional Groups ‘Asia-Pacific’ and ‘Africa’) is the first resolution that mentions IRD (UN-GA 2002). In doing so, the resolution linked religion to the older UN discourses on dialogue—initially introduced in the 1980s, referring to dialogue as a results-oriented tool to improve the international situation (UN-GA 1986) and expanded during the 1990s towards the so-called dialogue among civilizations (UN-GA 1998). The 2002 resolution also served as the starting point for the increasing prominence of IRD in UN discourse (UN-GA 2004). Eventually this led to the following resolution on ‘The Promotion of Interreligious Dialogue’ in 2004 in which the General Assembly:

1. affirms that mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue constitute important dimensions of the dialogue among civilizations and of the culture of peace;

...  

3. invites the Secretary-General to bring the promotion of interreligious dialogue to the attention of all Governments and relevant international organizations and to submit a report thereon, including all views received, to the General Assembly at its sixtieth session (UN-GA 2004).

The above quote has to be seen in relation to the Islamist terrorist attacks of the early 2000s in New York City, Djerba, Madrid, Istanbul and London. It illustrates how this new
discourse moves the emphasis away from individual rights towards a terminology that is more ambiguous. It can be argued that the categories of dialogue and harmony are much more open to vagueness and misuse. Nevertheless, the new string of resolutions on IRD and harmony underlines the increasing international significance of discourse on IRD.

This new trend is being institutionalized. Abdullah II of Jordan was, for example, successful in launching the ‘World Interfaith Harmony Week’ as an annual UN observance week in 2010 and positioning it as a major point of reference in many dialogue circles (UN-GA 2010). In addition, the last decades have seen the establishment of international organizations dealing with IRD like KAICIID, the Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Vienna/Austria established by four member states (Saudi Arabia, Austria, Spain and the Holy See) in 2012 (KAICIID – Dialogue Center no date).

This trend has repercussions for IRD activities. The establishment of international organizations with a particular focus on IRD has strengthened the third strand of the dialogue movement with its particular emphasis on official hierarchies. At the same time, the link to the UN and international civil society strengthens the second strand in as far as IRD-NGOs have to position themselves within the wider NGO community and the activist dimension.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at IRD and international politics. It has referred to the resolutions of the UN-GA to show how IRD has become an important dimension of the discursive construction of religion within international relations. The discussion of three IRD organizations highlights some fundamental changes, from a theological exchange ‘within the margins’ of the religious field to a shift towards activism within civil society and, finally, its recognition among representatives of religious hierarchies.

This discussion suggests three sites for future research. First, more empirical analyses of the historical development of IRD activities in their respective socio-political contexts are needed. They must then be related to the history of human rights (Bobbio 1999; Fritzsche 2009). Second, there is also a need for studies of IRD in relation to the role of religion in the public sphere. From this perspective, IRD might be seen as a strategy of public representation by religious actors; or it could be interpreted in relation to the pluralization of religious actors as well as of the relationships between religious and secular actors (Berger 1999, 2014). Third, more conceptual reflections to better understand the justifications that form the basis for IRD activities and their developments over time. The establishment of an IRD discourse within the context of the UN-GA supports a reading of dialogue as a reaction to secularization and pluralization.

Finally, it would be helpful to link IRD research to those strands of the academic study of religion that underline the contingencies of the discursive construction of religion (Kippenberg 1983; McCutcheon 1997; Stuckrad 2003). Accordingly, future research will have to put additional emphasis on the power relations within dialogue activities as well as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that are based upon these processes.

References


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