New Directions of Dialogue: The G20 Interfaith Experience

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By Prof. W. Cole Durham, Jr.
President, G20 Interfaith Forum Association and
Founding Director, International Center for Law and Religion Studies at BYU
J. Reuben Clark Law School
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah 84602 USA
Phone: (801) 422-6842
Cell/WhatsApp: +1 (801) 376-6395

Email: durhamwc@durhamiclrs.org

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By Prof. W. Cole Durham, Jr.*

I. Introduction

For the past twelve years, I have been involved in a creative and impactful form of interfaith dialogue going on in the context of the G20 Process. Specifically, I have been involved in the leadership of the G20 Interfaith Forum, which has drawn together significant religious leaders and actors, government officials, engaged academics, and numerous interested individuals and organizations from the civil society sector. Relligion left out. To give you a picture of how this relates to our theme—"Intereligious Dialogue and Intercultural Understanding"--let me first say some brief words about the nature of the G20 Interfaith enterprise in general, and then share our sense of areas in which action-oriented dialogue, better referred to as diapraxis, can help suggest improved approaches for achieving attitudinal change among and cooperative outcomes among international actors.

Problem orientation

II. The G20 Forum

The G20 itself is significant because its formal members represent roughly 80% of the earth's gross economic output, and nearly 80% of its population. It includes not only the 19 nations with the largest gross national products, but also the European Union and the African Union, and thereby indirectly roughly an additional 70 countries. The G20 came into its own during the economic crisis of 2008-2009, and as a result, it has always had a heavy focus on global economic issues. However, during most of its recent history, it has had a consistent focus on social issues largely corresponding the UN's sustainable development goals, and as a result, it

* Susa Young Gates University Professor of Law emeritus, J. Reuben Clark Law School, Brigham Young University and Founding Director, International Center for Law and Religion Studies at BYU. A.B., Harvard College, 1972; J.D. Harvard Law School, 1975.

has emphasized a number of issues that have long been central to the concerns of religious communities. What the G20 Interfaith Forum adds is a mission "to provide thought leadership on global public policy questions where religious communities' unique insights demonstrate how faith can be put into action for the common good. By mobilizing an international network of faith leaders around the G20 process, the IF20 highlights practical solutions to care for the vulnerable."[1] By bringing religious actors, political leaders, academics, and policy specialists together in areas focused on areas in recognized need for action, that hoped for aims of interfaith dialogue are jump-started by bringing groups together to work on common problems. Interfaith dialogue is a byproduct, not an engine of change itself. Religious actors share their religiously based ideas and experience in a context already focused on shared problems.

I will often refer to the G20 Interfaith Forum in my remarks as "IF20," short for "Interfaith 20." This name is analogous to that of various formal G20 engagement groups that have grown up as a system of stakeholders that bring specialized experience in guiding global processes. This includes groups such as the "B20" for business, the "L20" for labor, the "U20" for urban affairs, the "W20" for women, and the "Y20," for youth, and numerous others.[2] The IF20 is not a formal engagement group, but because of the strength of its connection to religious groups, it is often treated as a comparable G20 stakeholder. For the past twelve years, our organization has held forum events to contribute to recommendations coming from each year's G20 Summit.

III. Examples of G20 Initiatives

For this part of my presentation, I will simply describe X ongoing initiatives that identify ways in which religious, governmental, academic, and policy actors have joined together in G20 contexts to attempt to make local, regional, or global impacts. Rather than starting with

[1] For more on our mission statement, go to the IF20 website, click on the "About Submenue" and a brief version of our mission statement appears there. For the full version, see www.g20interfaith.or/mission..

[2] For an overview of engagement groups, see "Sherpa Track, Finance Track, and Engagement Groups: What are the G20 'workstreams,*"* The Indian Express, Friday, Nov. 17, 2023 (News/Explained/Explained Global). The list of formal engagement groups has been expanding over time. By the time of the South African G20 in 2025, the list exceeded 20 groups. Several G20 countries have recommended that IF20 be granted formal engagement group status, but while we have often been treated as the functional equivalent of a formal engagement group, political opposition from some G20 countries to religion-related organizations has limited our access to formal status. This has not been a problem in practice, since most G20 countries have been anxious to work with us.

interfaith dialogue and attempting to find measurable impacts in practical policy domains, we identify high level areas of consensus needs, and learn more about dialogue as an outcome of diapraxis. In effect, rather than trying to evaluate the impact of high-level comparative theology and traditional forms of dialogue, we simply jump forward and attempt to harvest results by bringing together people of good will from different religious traditions and see what can be learned from their diverse range of experience with bringing their theological premises to bear on solving practical problems. Let me describe a few such initiatives from our recently completed G20 Interfaith Forum completed in the United States two weeks ago.

A. Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy. This is a program that has been pioneered in Indonesia and has now been running for several years. It has now involved training of 10,000 to 11,000 teachers, and results have been empirically tested. The program involves providing introduction to Christian, Jewish, and Muslim ideas taught by experts from within the various traditions. The teachers then involve students from different faith traditions in processes where they get to know each other. Results have been impressive enough that major school systems in Indonesia are implementing CCRL methods, and surrounding countries in the ASEAN are exploring using this method not only in primary and secondary education, but also in training government officials to deal with religious difference in mitigating religious conflict situations.

B. Artificial Intelligence. One of the major focuses of this years G20 Interfaith Forum was on religious responses to artificial intelligence (AI). We brought together experts from several regions and several religious traditions who shared concerns about AI drawing on their varied religious backgrounds and shared concerns. While concerns varied across geographic regions and religious denominations, there were a variety of shared concerns, and much that could be added from differing experiential backgrounds. This is an area where concern levels are high

enough that efforts are already emerging to address biased algorithms, worries about biased descriptions of religions in social media, replacement of human ethical judgment with AI agents that lack moral accountability, and so forth. Examples range from very sophisticated analysis, such as that found in the Pope's recent encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* to less extensive efforts such as that enunciated at our Forum by an apostle of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A conference is being organized on Christian Orthodox attitudes toward AI by the leader of our regional institution, IF20-Europe.

C. Trafficking and Modern Forms of Slavery. For the past several years, we have had a focus at each successive Forum on the challenge of trafficking and modern forms of slavery. This year one of our speakers was Jamieson Greer, the U.S. Trade Representative. As a member of Trump's cabinet, this is only one area of focus, but he was able to meet with long-time recognized experts on combatting trafficking and to share concerns of one of his specialty departments that seeks to combat trafficking in the context of international trade. Again, the situation is one in which there is a common problem, widely recognized by religious groups that are working together to find concrete starting points for wrestling with this huge global problem.

D. Sacred Sites. We have long had viewed a range of issues concerning sacred sites as an urgent area for joint religious action. The issues can be quite different depending on the religious tradition involved. A current issue of major concern is escalating levels of anti-semitism and Islamophobia. This has led to major projects on helping different religious groups to be prepared for violent attacks. The U.S. State Department has recognized that problems involving sacred sites can be an entry point for dialogue and increased understanding of different religious groups. Management of sacred sites creates opportunities for people from different religious traditions to learn more about their neighbors of different faiths. This generally has

positive influence. Problems can arise in quite different circumstances, ranging from land use and zoning problems faced by contemporary unpopular religious groups to longer term issues involving landmarking of religious sites (and thereby limiting some of their usefulness as a flexible worship center), and support for maintenance of ancient buildings that have become historical landmarks.

E. Health issues. Much of the health care on earth is provided by religious groups. This is very visible with pandemics such as Ebola, AIDS, or COVID, but also very visible through religiously-affiliated hospitals and clinics, which are often sustained by religious communities.

F. Inter-religious Councils. We have cooperated in the past in many ways with Religions for Peace, probably the largest interfaith body on earth. One notable area is helping with capacity building for interfaith councils in Africa. Over 35 countries there have interfaith councils with varying degrees of effectiveness. In many cases, these include not only national institutions, but organizational structures extending down to the local level. These bodies are interfaith in their very nature, but training to make them more aware of religious differences can be helpful. For example, I recently met with individuals engaged in creating an interfaith council in Rwanda. In line unfortunately with what is happening in several African countries, Rwanda has passed relatively stiff regulations that require among other things that a religious community must have a university-trained clergyman in order to be granted legal-entity status. This has clearly adverse consequences for religious communities who do not consider university training to be a normal qualification for religious service. This and other regulations caused the closure of roughly 10,000 church units in Rwanda.

IV. Empirical Understanding of Role of Religious Diversity.

The reality is that we have more empirical evidence today than ever before about the relationship of diversity, the religious freedom necessary to sustain it, and countless other social goods.[3] Significantly, of the many goods that freedom of religion and conscience reinforce, peacebuilding stands out. It is fundamental to the structure of peacebuilding. Without it, no society can be fully just, and processes aimed at achieving stable and lasting peace are necessarily incomplete.[4]

The reverse is also true. It is not merely discrimination against minorities that is problematic.[5] We are learning that there is a "paradox of privilege."[6] When governments grant privileges to dominant religions, thinking that will stabilize society, they allow majorities to become more aggressive and less civil. "Privileged religious majorities tend to engage in intimidation or even violence against religious minorities, often with impunity."[7] It is thus no surprise that the "vast majority of religious violence in the world today is generated not by repressed religious minorities but by religious majorities emboldened and radicalized by the privileges they enjoy from governments."[8]

The fundamental idea is that freedom of conscience protects pluralism, and pluralism tends to stabilize rather than destabilize society. This idea was advanced as early as the writings of John Locke but has been vindicated by over three hundred years of intervening history.

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[3] Allen Hertzke, Why Religious Freedom Matters: Human Rights and Human Flourishing (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2026), 16-20; Brian J. Grim & Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied:Religious Persecution and Conflict in the twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[4] W. Cole Durham, Jr. and Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Place of Religious Freedom in the Structure of Peacebuilding," in Italia Omer, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 281-306.

[5] Jonathan Fox, *Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me: Why Governments Discriminate Against Religious Minorities.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[6] Hertzke, 150.

[7] Id., 151.

[8] Id., 149. See also William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

The significance of freedom of conscience to peacebuilding can be seen at every stage in the cessation of conflicts. For example, at the constitutional moments when constitutions are distilled out of conflict, religious and ideological liberty plays an important role in assuring those about to enter into a new society that their respective positions will be protected and afforded deep respect. International legal frameworks and commitment to freedom of *conscience* also play a significant role in shaping the contexts within which peace can crystallize.

Further, religious freedom can play a significant filtering role, helping to support the social goods flowing from religion, while setting limits to and blocking adverse social developments emanating from the darker side of religion.

Freedom of conscience also It helps protect the role of religious leaders as trusted individuals who can assume peacekeeping roles themselves and who can lead their followers to do likewise.

At still another level, by contributing to the generation of social capital, religious freedom can help lay the material foundations for social stability. It can also avoid the need for religious organizations to spend a substantial portion of their resources in self-defense maneuvers necessitated by persecution or discrimination.

V. Gaps in Empirical Understanding of Turning Diversity into Cooperation

Based on the foregoing, and in particular on our experience in the G20 context, there are a few points that need to be made. First, it is in fact remarkably difficult to find empirically testable notions that show how knowledge based on comparative religion and theology can lead to verifiable social science validation of the notion that dialogue can help turn diversity into cooperation. Second, having said that, what we have found is that is comparatively easy to identify priorities areas of broad policy consensus where religious groups are willing to work together. One can see subtle and not-so-subtle shades of difference among them, but this is more a consequence of common work initially engaged in on the basis

of recognized consensus issues. Third, the past two decades in particular have made remarkable progress in tracking the significance of diversity, pluralism, and the underlying right to religious freedom as an area that is vital to peacebuilding and the creations of countless other goods. One promising avenue would be to identify types of social capital that are generated by religious communities, and see how basic social teachings contribute to progress or stasis in this area. A practical point is that effort needs to be focused more on diapraxis than dialogue per se.