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Examining the Role of Interfaith Dialogue Initiatives Towards Peacebuilding: A Case Study of the Community of Sant'Egidio

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Abstract

Interfaith dialogue is the meeting of persons of different faiths to have a conversation, so at its most basic it essentially is talking. However, it is the nature of this talking that is crucial, as it involves all parties sympathizing with one another to understand their position (Smock, 2002, p. 6). Paul F. Knitter describes it as “the interaction of mutual presence speaking and listening and witnessing the commitments, the values, and the rituals of others” (Knitter, 1996, p. 14).

Using qualitative methodologies and undertaking fieldwork in both Italy (where the Community of Sant’Egidio is based) and Israel, I analysed the challenges and possibilities surrounding the place of Faith Based Actors (FBAs) within peacebuilding and development, asking whether there is an appropriate space for the collaboration of different faiths within the peace process, and if so what this may look like. In doing so I have explored the use of current interfaith dialogue initiatives as a tool for what Galtung terms ‘positive’ peace, analysing the connections between peacebuilding and development and religions place within these paradigms, and how they parallel positive and negative peace theories.

This research has shown that religion has a large role to play in peacebuilding, as FBAs are considered more trustworthy, they understand the perspective of religious communities, and can use the peace ethic inherent in their faith as a contribution to peace and development efforts. Interfaith dialogues were especially important in conflict as they were a form of community participation in peace activism, and showed solidarity and a commitment to learning about ‘other’ religions. People, organizations and FBAs are aware and realistic that interfaith dialogue alone does not have the power to end immediate conflict, but it does hold power to change the atmosphere in which many of the prejudices that cause conflict arise. I argue therefore, that interfaith dialogues can be seen as a ‘positive’ peace initiative, as it is a tool that can be used towards fixing rooted problems of conflict and contribute to sustainable peacebuilding through the changing of societal attitudes.

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: AN INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION	2
1.1.1 <i>PERSONAL RATIONALE</i>	2
1.1.2 <i>ACADEMIC RATIONALE</i>	2
1.2 RESEARCH AIM, OBJECTIVES, QUESTIONS AND METHODS	3
1.3 SELECTION OF FIELD SITES	4
1.3.1 <i>ROME</i>	4
1.3.2 <i>ISRAEL</i>	5
1.4 OUTLINE OF THESIS	5
CHAPTER 2: RELIGION, DEVELOPMENT AND CONFLICT: A LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
2.1 INTRODUCTION	7
2.2 RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT	7
2.3 RELIGION AND CONFLICT	10
2.4 FAITH-BASED ACTORS IN THE CONFLICT CONTEXT	17
2.5 INTERFAITH DIALOGUES	21
2.6 <i>SANT'EGIDIO</i>	26
2.7 SUMMARY	28
CHAPTER 3: POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE APPROACHES TO PEACE: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	31
3.1 INTRODUCTION	31
3.2 PEACEBUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT	31
3.3 UNDERSTANDING POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE PEACE	34
3.4 APPLYING THESE APPROACHES TO THE RESEARCH CONTEXT	38
3.5 SUMMARY	41
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY.....	43
4.1 INTRODUCTION	43
4.2 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH	43
4.3 RESEARCH METHODS	44
4.3.1 <i>SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS</i>	44
4.3.2 <i>DOCUMENT ANALYSIS</i>	45
4.3.3 <i>PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND JOURNALING</i>	45
4.3.4 <i>REFLECTION JOURNAL</i>	46
4.3.5 <i>TRIANGULATION</i>	47
4.3.6 <i>SNOWBALL SAMPLING</i>	47
4.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	47
4.5 POSITIONALITY	49
4.5.1 <i>POWER IN RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS</i>	50
4.6 FIELDWORK EXPERIENCE	51
4.7 LIMITATIONS/ OBSTACLES FACED IN THE FIELD	52
4.8 RETURNING FROM THE FIELD	53
4.9 DESIGN OF DATA ANALYSIS	54
4.10 SUMMARY	55
CHAPTER 5: PLACES, PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS	57

5.1 INTRODUCTION	57
5.2 PLACES	57
5.2.1 <i>THEOLOGY OF ST FRANCIS</i>	57
5.2.2 <i>SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL</i>	59
5.2.3 <i>CONFLICT SETTING IN ISRAEL/PALESTINE</i>	60
5.3 PEOPLE	61
5.4 ORGANIZATIONS AND INITIATIVES	63
5.4.1 <i>SANT'EGIDIO</i>	63
5.4.2 <i>GLOBAL FREEDOM NETWORK</i>	69
5.4.3 <i>RELIGIONS FOR PEACE ITALY</i>	71
5.4.4 <i>ANGLICAN CENTRE</i>	72
5.4.5 <i>LAY CENTRE</i>	74
5.4.6 <i>ISTITUTO TEVERE</i>	75
5.4.7 <i>VATICAN</i>	76
5.4.8 <i>IEA</i>	77
5.4.9 <i>ICCI</i>	78
CHAPTER 6: EXAMINING INTERFAITH DIALOGUES	81
6.1 PROCESSES OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE	81
6.1.1 <i>COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION MODEL</i>	83
6.1.2 <i>ELITE MODELS</i>	86
6.1.3 <i>CEREMONIAL MODEL</i>	88
6.1.4 <i>OVERVIEW OF PROCESSES</i>	94
6.2 IMPORTANCE OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE	91
6.3 PEACE DEFINITIONS	93
6.4 SUMMARY	95
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION OF THE RESEARCH	97
7.1 INTRODUCTION	97
7.2 IS THERE AN APPROPRIATE SPACE FOR RELIGION IN PEACEBUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT?	97
7.2.1 <i>LINKING PEACEBUILDING, DEVELOPMENT AND RELIGION</i>	97
7.2.2 <i>RELIGIONS AND CONFLICT</i>	98
7.2.3 <i>FBAS IN PEACE SETTINGS</i>	100
7.2.4 <i>SUMMARY</i>	101
7.3 WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CURRENT INTERFAITH DIALOGUE INITIATIVES?	101
7.3.1 <i>CATEGORIES OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE INITIATIVES</i>	101
7.3.2 <i>COMMUNITY EFFECTIVENESS</i>	104
7.3.3 <i>COMPARISON OF LOCATIONS</i>	106
7.3.4 <i>SUMMARY</i>	108
7.4 HOW ARE INTERFAITH DIALOGUES CONTRIBUTING TO 'POSITIVE PEACE'?	108
7.5 LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS	111
7.6 RESEARCH SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING STATEMENTS	112
APPENDICES	115
APPENDIX 1: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS, ORIGINAL LAYOUT	115
APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION STRUCTURE	115
APPENDIX 3: CONSENT FORM	116
APPENDIX 4: INFORMATION SHEET	117
REFERENCES	119

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: CATEGORIES OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUES IN LITERATURE, ANNA BALDWIN	24
TABLE 2: DATA ANALYSIS STAGES (STEWART-WITHERS ET AL., 2014, P. 76)	54
TABLE 3: PARTICIPANTS AND DOCUMENTS, ANNA BALDWIN	61
TABLE 4: VARIATION OF OBSERVATIONS OF THE PROCESSES, ANNA BALDWIN	82
TABLE 5: PARTICIPANTS VIEW ON INTERFAITH DIALOGUES, ANNA BALDWIN	91
TABLE 6: NEGATIVE PEACE ATTRIBUTES FROM PEACE DEFINITIONS, ANNA BALDWIN	94
TABLE 7: POSITIVE PEACE ATTRIBUTES FROM PEACE DEFINITIONS, ANNA BALDWIN	94
TABLE 8: COMPARISON OF CATEGORIES OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUES IN LITERATURE AND THIS RESEARCH, ANNA BALDWIN	103

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: THE EXTENDED CONCEPTS OF VIOLENCE AND PEACE (GALTUNG, 1969, P. 183)	37
FIGURE 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, ANNA BALDWIN (2014)	40
FIGURE 3 MAXWELL'S INTERACTIVE MODEL OF RESEARCH DESIGN (MAXWELL, 2013, P. 5)	55

LIST OF PICTURES

PICTURE 1: SIGNING OF THE MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT	70
PICTURE 2: RELIGIONS FOR PEACE CALENDAR, 2014	72
PICTURE 3: THE ANGLICAN CENTRE LIBRARY	74
PICTURE 4: COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION MODEL AT ISTITUTO TEVERE	84
PICTURE 5: CLOSING CEREMONY OF THE INTERNATIONAL MEETING FOR PRAYER AND PEACE, 2014	87
PICTURE 6: CANDLES THAT HAD BEEN LIT DURING THE CEREMONY	89

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FBA	FAITH BASED ACTOR
NGO	NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION
UN	UNITED NATIONS
MDGs	MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS
WB	WORLD BANK
DANIDA	DANISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCY
NORAD	NORWEGIAN AGENCY FOR DEVELOPMENT
SIDA	SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY
IMPP	INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS FOR PRAYER AND PEACE
DDVE	DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE ON VALUES AND ETHICS
DFID	DEPARTMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
IEA	INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER ASSOCIATION
ICCI	INTERRELIGIOUS COORDINATING COUNCIL OF ISRAEL
RFP	RELIGIONS FOR PEACE
GFN	GLOBAL FREEDOM NETWORK