

# A Review of Inter-Civilizational Dialogue: Governmental and Private Initiatives

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## **Abstract**

Is interfaith dialogue full of challenges or opportunities? Does it lead somewhere, or is it a never ending circular road? When we dialogue, do we still harbor the notion of converting our dialogue partners? Analyzing some of the actual work done by governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as academics and individuals, may answer these questions. In this short article, I will focus on several efforts' goals, success rate, and what we can learn from their experiences.

## **The Asia-Europe Foundation**

In March 1996 the leaders of twenty-five European and Asian countries, together with the European Commission, met in Bangkok for the inaugural Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). This paved the way for establishing the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) in 1997, which promotes greater mutual understanding between Asians and Europeans through intellectual, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges. In addition to interfacing between civil society groups and governments, ASEF facilitates interactions among non-officials and transmits their recommendations to policymakers; brings civil society representatives together with bureaucrats, diplomats, and other government officials for direct and open dialogue; and elevates civil society concerns to be included as a vital component of official deliberations at ASEM.

The foundation has been tasked with organizing projects closely linked with ASEM activities in collaboration with relevant Asian institutions of the ASEM countries; implementing projects assigned by future meetings of ASEM leaders or ministers and the relevant European Commission (EC) member; acting as a clearing house, catalyst and facilitator; organizing a few flagship projects of its own; conducting public relations activities to profile

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and publicize itself, as well as meetings, seminars, and other activities; and giving grants.

As the centerpiece of many of its activities is intercultural dialogue, ASEF focuses on interfaith dialogue, cultural diversity, and solutions for multicultural societies. Some programs bring together small groups of high-level personalities; others consist of seminars and conferences, while yet others provide a public platform for regional opinion leaders. All program are designed to establish new interactions and strengthen existing communications worldwide.

Presently, its most viable inter-cultural effort at a governmental level is the bi-annual Asia-Europe Young Parliamentarians Meetings (AEYPM), which enables younger members of national legislatures to develop a greater awareness and understanding of external issues affecting their country's political and cultural development. For example, they are urged to foster close ties with their counterparts from the other regions, learn from the insights of experts in their field, gain knowledge of the different national perspectives and experiences to better understand various issues, and discuss their region's various faiths and religions and how they affects national policy.

ASEF's stated goal is to establish permanent bi-regional networks focused on areas and issues that help strengthen Asia-Europe relations. ASEF, the civil society outreach of ASEM and interface between civil society and ASEM governments, contributes to the ASEM process by generating unique recommendations for official consideration. As ASEM's only physical institution, it runs a high number of projects with the support of governments. Of these, three projects in particular emphasize inter-cultural relationships: Culture Dialogues, Culture 360, and the Asia-Europe Young Parliamentarians Meeting.

Cultural Dialogue encourages discussion and the sharing of experiences among Asian and European cultural policymakers in order to develop appropriate public policies and measures as regards cultural diversity and the growth of vibrant contemporary cultural scenes. Thus, ASEF seeks to strengthen and further its role as interface between cultural policymakers and autonomous cultural center or artists' initiatives while advocating, on the ASEM level, policies that favor creativity, artistic innovation, and cultural diversity via organizing workshops, meetings, and conferences for cultural policymakers, artists, and cultural practitioners.

Culture 360, the only multi-disciplinary arts and cultural online tool focused specifically on Asia and Europe, is designed to stimulate cultural engagement and enhance greater understanding between the two regions by

serving as a platform to inform, collaborate, interact, and exchange ideas. Fuelled by artistic communities, it is the culmination of efforts from the governmental level as well as from civil societies. The project's portal was launched at the 2008 ASEM meeting in Kuala Lumpur and has received great attention by both regions' civil society groups.

The AEYPM, as explained above, exposes the younger members of national legislatures to experts, peers, and new ideas in their fields of concern. Participants usually represent both the government and the opposition from each ASEM member country and the European Parliament.

ASEF, which is well funded through its members' contributions, runs its projects effectively and continuously. Given this dependence, however, its work is often diplomatically sensitive and members often lack the political will to recommend policies that do not agree with specific national policies or the government's position. On the government-to-government level, however, ASEF seems to work well and has engendered the fruition of diplomatic ideas, although the actual impact these ideas have in complimenting non-governmental interfaith work remains minimal.

### **The Asia-Pacific Interfaith Dialogue**

Launched in 2004 and cosponsored by New Zealand, Australia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, the Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue brings together representatives of the major faith and community groups from fifteen Southeast Asian and South Pacific countries. Its stated goal is to promote cooperation through effective communication among religious communities and to build understanding, tolerance, and respect for each other's beliefs. Its basic principle is that no religion should be used to justify intolerance, fanaticism, and terrorism. The crux of the agreements signed during its four meetings seems to be multifaith dialogue and cooperation; peace as a sacred priority; increased participation by women and youth in interfaith dialogue; sharing with our communities successful examples of multifaith dialogue and cooperation and urging others to participate; and interfaith cooperation that addresses issues of the region's critical community concerns (e.g., poverty, HIV, human rights, environmental issues, and natural disasters).

This head-of-government initiated dialogue has seen four high level forums, the objectives of which are to promote understanding and foster harmony between faith communities across the Asia Pacific region and to ensure direct and frequent communication between regional faith leaders in problem resolution and building a more harmonious and peaceful future.

The dialogues have seen strong Muslim and Christian participation, with Indonesia's Muhammadiyah and the Philippines' Christians playing a leading content and administrative role together with the official governmental support of New Zealand, Australia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

The dialogue has encouraged governments to establish a mechanism for institutional policies and all relevant enabling guidelines to promote and protect human life, dignity, social justice, and the integrity of all creation; called on role-players to acknowledge and support the goals and objectives of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals; emphasizes the development and provision of training for media managers, journalists, and journalism students on religious and cultural diversity, in partnership with interfaith experts and national and international media organizations; encourages the development and review of codes of conduct and standards for the exercise of media freedom with responsibility; and supports the establishment and strengthening of dialogue among media executives, journalism, trainers and religious and interfaith leaders. Conflict management via this dialogue, especially in regards to Philippine's decades-long religious and ethnic conflict, is also stressed. It recommends that high-standing spiritual leaders participate in peace negotiations.

Australia, which started to play a larger role after the Bali bombings of 2002, is trying a hands-on approach in understanding the Muslim communities' reservation about their political and social differences. This dialogue, however, has failed to attract other ASEAN nations and Australia's and New Zealand's true goals in these dialogues are of concern to the region's NGOs.

### **The ASEAN-Canada Dialogue on Interfaith Initiatives**

Canada became a dialogue partner with ASEAN in 1977. Canada-ASEAN relations are guided by a Joint Cooperation Work Plan that deals with counterterrorism, health security, interfaith dialogue, disaster management, cooperation in multilateral fora, and trade and investment facilitation. At the first formal ASEAN-Canada meeting in February 1977, Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs informed the Chair of the ASEAN Standing Committee of her proposal to extend a program of development assistance to ASEAN. This was formalized in 1981 by the signing of the ASEAN-Canada Economic Cooperation Agreement (ACECA), which came into force on 1 June 1982. At the end of 2008, Canadian foreign investment was worth some \$8.2 billion. Canada has strong people-to-people links with ASEAN: nearly 1 million ASEAN immigrants now call Canada home, some 450,000

Canadians travel to the region annually, and over 2,000 Southeast Asian students come to study at Canadian universities each year.

In December 2008, a jointly organized interfaith workshop held in Surabaya, Indonesia, focused on practical ways for education and the media to foster interfaith and intercultural understanding, with a view to discouraging violent discourse. As the main goal of this relationship is economic and political issues, interfaith work is actually a secondary objective. Although concrete interfaith-related steps were taken after 9/11, such undertakings often pale in comparison to improving economic ties. In fact there have been only two interfaith initiatives put forward, both of them in 2008.

The interfaith forums organized are a case in point. Billed as a case study in best practices, they include non-governmental representatives and government officials from the ten ASEAN states and Canada. But these appear to be mere formalities, for there was no follow-up work and no action plan. In fact, judging by the content that was skewered more on human rights issues in ASEAN, it appears that Canada is playing a more supervisory role. As a result, NGOs have stayed away and are unwilling to work on ideas that they feel are plain lip service. On a positive note however, there seems to be potential in this partnership. Unlike Australia, China, and India, all of which are big players on the economic stage with ASEAN, Canada seems content to play a second tier role. The fact that interfaith relations are being put forward at all indicates that they believe this angle could be their niche in the ASEAN platform.

### **The UNGA High Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace**

In its resolution 61/221 of 20 December 2006 (OP. 14), the UN General Assembly decided “to convene in 2007 a high-level dialogue on interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity, in coordination with other similar initiatives in this area.” It also determined to convene a high-level dialogue on interreligious and intercultural cooperation in 2007 to promote tolerance, understanding, and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity, in coordination with similar initiatives and to consider declaring an upcoming year as the “Year of Dialogue among Religions and Cultures.” The secretary-general was (1) asked to ensure the systematic and organizational follow-up of all interreligious, intercultural, and intercivili-

tional matters within the UN system and overall coordination and coherence in its interreligious, intercultural, and intercivilizational dialogue and cooperation efforts by designating a focal unit in the Secretariat to handle these matters and (2) to report to it at its sixty-second session on Resolution 61/221's implementation.

At the same session, the General Assembly announced that it would hold a "High Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace" on 4-5 October 2007 at the ministerial or highest possible level (Resolution 61/269). The objective here was to provide an opportunity for member states to dialogue with experts from civil society, including NGOs and the private sector, to strengthen efforts to promote interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation. In December 2007, it "declare[d] 2010 as the International Year for Rapprochement of Cultures" and recommended that "appropriate events be organized on interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace."

The chance to build on these UN actions, in conjunction with mobilizing the vast spiritual, human, and organizational resources of the world's religious communities, spiritual traditions, interfaith organizations, and values-based movements, led the General Assembly to call for a United Nations Decade of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace. The plan of action was to raise the international community's awareness of the virtues of diversity and intercultural dialogue via specific examples of how all cultures and civilizations derive from and feed into each other, and to fight for human rights and oppose new forms of racism and discrimination. UNESCO has proposed that this "decade" be launched on 21 September 2010 (the International Day of Peace) and cover the period 2011-2020. Choosing this particular date would enable the International Day of Peace to be used as an annual occasion to promote this initiative's objectives, assess the progress made, and strengthen interreligious partnership and commitment.

The real impact of these projects is questionable, especially since most are performed on a diplomatic lip-service level. It is important that NGOs are included to ensure that there will be some sort of follow-up that does not require UN support.

### **The UN Alliance of Civilizations (AoC)**

Spanish prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero called for the creation of the Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) during the UN General Assembly's

fifty-ninth session in September 2004. Its 2008-09 implementation plan called for the continued development of online clearinghouses in its main areas of implementation: youth, education, media and migration. As a global organization explicitly involved in building bridges, trust, and understanding among cultures, this prominent platform and resource is working to enable the widest possible dissemination of information and materials that resonate with its objectives. Its main goal is to help expand existing efforts. At the political level, mainly through its high representative, former Portuguese president Jorge Fernando Branco de Sampaio, the AoC works to establish platforms for dialogue among political, religious, media, and civil society personalities interested in advancing its objectives.

Two major forums have taken place, in Madrid in 2008, in Istanbul in 2009. These action-driven events provide participants with a unique international platform to develop joint initiatives and forge partnerships. In addition to high-level debates about emerging trends in relations between diverse cultures and religions, these forums announce new initiatives and project-specific working sessions and provide a convening space for government agencies, international organizations, and civil society bodies working in the area of intercultural and interreligious engagement to share lessons on best practices and develop joint work platforms. By far, this initiative has been the most active governmental-level interfaith project.

One idea currently being worked on is a multi-million dollar media fund to be run independently of the UN and set up by private philanthropists and media agencies. It will finance major film productions that promote cross-cultural understanding and combat stereotypes. Another project is the Rapid Response Media Mechanism, which seeks to reduce tensions in times of cross-cultural crises (e.g., the Danish cartoon incident [2005] and ensuing violent demonstrations, and Iran's Holocaust conference [2006]). This serves as online resource ([globalexpertfinder.org](http://globalexpertfinder.org)) of experts and analysts who can make a positive contribution to debates on sensitive cross-cultural issues.

The AoC also works with this network of experts to develop materials that help frame contentious issues in less polarizing terms and offer insightful and nuanced perspectives on complex debates. Content is provided in key languages and disseminated via international and regional media outlets. To prepare the ground for these activities, it is building a "community of interest" among journalists, editors, commentators, and opinion formers.

Given its focus on young people, the AoC Secretariat is actively trying to involve them directly in its work by collaborating with broad networks of

youth organizations. Their goal is to have a youth perspective in the media debate, on cross-cultural and interreligious issues and in all AoC projects. The AoC works with the AoC Youth Advisory Committee to implement some of these initiatives and develop key messages on AoC-related themes. The Youth Advisory Committee comprises seven full members (one per world region) nominated by AoC's key youth partners. An observer from an international NGO identified by and reporting to the International Coordination Meeting of Youth Organizations (ICMYO) is also part of this committee. Strategic partners can also be invited as guest observers for two years.

AoC critics note that it is yet another governmental-level project that peddles ineffective strategies by restricting its focus to the West-Muslim world rift, thus creating cultural divisions by defining people solely by religion. Although this is true to an extent, the AoC is a well-funded idea that has the potential to work well with entities in both Europe and Asia.

### **NGO-initiated Interfaith Initiatives**

This part lists several interfaith initiatives undertaken by Religion for Peace, the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, and Soka Gakkai International.

*Religion for Peace (RP)*. Headquartered in New York, this NGO was launched in 1970 with the stated goals of respecting religious differences while celebrating our common humanity. It is active on every continent and in some very dangerous areas of the world, trying to create multi-religious partnerships to stop war, end poverty, and protect the planet; to enable communities to unleash their enormous potential for common action; and to bring together hundreds of key religious leaders every five years to discuss the great issues of our time.

Although the World Conference of Religions for Peace convened for the first time in Kyoto on 16-21 October 1970, it began in 1961, when several senior leaders from the world's major faith traditions discussed organizing a "religious summit" to call upon believers worldwide to work for peace. Religions for Peace is now organized on several levels: the International Secretariat in New York, Regional Conferences in Europe and Asia, more than seventy-five national-level affiliates, and various local units. It enjoys consultative status with the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), UNESCO, and UNICEF.

RP's recent successes include building a new climate of reconciliation in Iraq and mediating dialogue among warring factions in Sierra Leone; setting

up a network of religious women's organizations; establishing the Hope for African Children Initiative to help the millions of children affected by the continent's Africa's AIDS pandemic; bringing together hundreds of key religious leaders every five years to discuss the great issues of our time; launching ten new Interreligious Councils (IRCs) in Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bolivia, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guyana, Panama, Puerto Rico, Surinam, and Trinidad and Tobago; and launching the subregional Latin American Council of Religious Leaders. The African Council of Religious Leaders forged action plans and played a key role in preparing for the Eighth World Assembly.

It is supported by numerous foundations, governments, NGOs, and international organizations.

*The Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (RIIFS)*. Sponsored by the Kingdom of Jordan and private parties, this research center was launched in 1964. Patronized by Prince El-Hassan Bin Talal and based in Amman, it works to provide an Arab venue for the interdisciplinary study and rational discussion of religion and religious issues, with particular reference to Christianity in Arab and Muslim societies. The institution was established in 1994 in Amman, a time when the region saw an aggressive Israeli regime and an increasing American military presence, under the prince's patronage. Its original focus was the civilizational commonalities and shared values between Islam and Christianity in West Asia.

Later on it broadened its focus to include all issues related to regional and well as global religious, cultural, and civilizational diversity. For this purpose, it maintains relations with similarly concerned academic institutions throughout the world. RIIFS' projects include research and publication, as well as organizing lectures, conferences, and workshops. So far, it has organized conferences on Christian-Muslim relations; founded and published *Al-Nashra* quarterly and the bi-annual *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies*, an academic journal refereed by internationally known scholars; and held major conferences with renowned partners (e.g., the Sudanese government, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, the Royal Scientific Society, and Temple University). It has also published a series of bibliographies on Christianity in East Africa.

The institute's public outreach remains limited because it is a research institute and high in protocol due to its royal patronage. Therefore, its topics of deliberation and research must respect the government's various positions. Nevertheless, it can be useful platform for academics and policymak-

ers to meet and deliberate interfaith from a policy perspective. That said, it has produced publications and hosted talks on comparative studies; comparing Muslim societies with others. It is also interested in building bridges with Christian communities, which can be read as an initiative to foster good relations with the West. Their interest is to study historical instances of positive contact between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, and there seems to be a tendency to use Muslim historical references.

*Soka Gakkai International (SGI)*. Also known as the Society for the Creation of Value, Soka Gakkai International was created as a study group by reformist educators. Founder Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944), an author and educator, was inspired by Nichiren Buddhism and dedicated to reforming the Japanese educational system. His theory of value-creating education, which he published as a book in 1930, is centered on a belief in the unlimited potential of every individual and regards education as the lifelong pursuit of self-awareness, wisdom, and development. In its early years, SGI emphasized independent thinking (over rote learning) and self-motivation (over blind obedience), a direct challenge to the Japanese authorities of the time, who believed that education should mold docile state subjects. As a result, the SGI has always been an independent and well-organized organization at the local, national, and international levels.

In addition to earning worldwide respect, its members independently raise funds and provide relief and humanitarian aid to victims of natural disasters by mobilizing their local chapters and allow their members and displaced people to use their community centers. From 2004-07, it was the main funder of the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, which carries out the organization's agenda for humanitarianism and non-violence. This decision by the current president, who is extremely tolerant of other religions, came at the price of losing some support from the traditional priesthood. This center brings together scholars and activists in dialogue on common values across cultures and religions to support an evolving global ethic for a peaceful twenty-first century. It functions as a meeting center and a publisher, working to foster dialogue concerning peace and other social issues. Under those auspices, it has initiated a series of conferences on such topics as abolishing war, religion and ecology, and a women's leadership forum.

Institutionally, the Boston Research Centre is largely funded by SGI but is not under its direct control. Thus, sitting outside the conventional ideas of a religious organization, it furthers the ethical goals outlined by Ikeda but is non-sectarian in its focus. In that sense it represents a humanistic outreach

as understood within a Buddhist context. SGI also owns the Soka University of America, which has two campuses in California: one in Calabasas and the other in Aliso Viejo.

### **King Abdullah's "Invitation to Dialogue"**

In his December 2007 speech to hajjis from all over the world, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah stressed his conviction that all great religions and the righteous creed of Abraham have similar moral principles and ethics that define humanity and distinguish it from other species. Values like truthfulness, honesty, tolerance, social responsibility, equality, human dignity, and the family (the basic building block of all societies).

While receiving participants of the sixth forum for the "Dialogue of Civilizations between Japan and the Islamic World" in Riyadh during March 2008, the king emphasized the necessity of agreeing on how to preserve humanity and protect it against irresponsible practices and, after alluding to family disintegration and the spread of atheism, he declared that he was resolved to hold several conferences, listen to Muslim scholars and activists from around the world and, at a later stage, to the adherents of all divine religions and to those who serve humanity and its ethical principles. In his opinion, such conferences should seek to stress the ethical principles that bind people together as well as truthfulness, gratefulness, serving humanity, and the values that stress the unity of the family. After agreement on these values and principles, he will propose them in a declaration to be presented at the United Nations.

The International Conference on Dialogue, held under King Abdullah's patronage in Makkah in early 2008, was followed in Madrid during of June by the International Conference on Dialogue, under the joint patronage of King Abdullah and King Juan Carlos of Spain.

Basic Principles: The Madrid Conference affirmed King Abdullah's "Invitation to Dialogue" principles: The unity of humankind has existed since its creation; there is equality among human beings regardless of color, ethnicity, race, religion or culture; religions strive to call forth humanity's obedience to the Creator and promote happiness, justice, security, and peace; seek to enhance understanding, coexistence, and cooperation among all people; call for spreading human moral values, wisdom, and respect and rejecting all forms of extremism and terrorism; and call for respecting all religions, their places of worship and symbols, and human dignity, as well as promoting human rights, fostering peace, honoring agreements; and respecting people's traditions and right to security, freedom and self-determination.

Religions also oppose crime, terrorism, corruption, and drug addiction and seek to preserve the institution of the family and protect society from deviant behavior. As the family is considered the basic unit and nucleus of society, it must be protected against any threat of disintegration. Dialogue, one of the essentials of life, is also one of the most important means for people to become acquainted with each other, foster cooperation and mutual benefit, and search for truth – all of which contribute to human happiness. In addition, all religions and cultures seek to protect and preserve the environment from pollution and other dangers.

Mindful of the need to implement these principles through dialogue, the conference reviewed the process of dialogue and its impediments, noted that terrorism is one of the most serious obstacles to dialogue and peaceful coexistence, and called it a global phenomenon that must be confronted in a serious, responsible, and just way through a unified international effort. This calls for international agreement on defining terrorism, addressing its root causes, and promoting justice, security and stability in the world.

Conference participants recommended rejecting all “clash of civilizations and cultures” theories, for such campaigns destabilizing peace and security; enhancing and promoting common moral values within societies, as well as address problems that hinder this; disseminating the culture of mutual respect and understanding through dialogue via conferences, symposia, and relevant cultural, educational, and media programs; agreeing on international guidelines for dialogue so that those moral values and ethical principles common to all religions are confirmed and supported; and working on a document that promote respect for all religions and their symbols.

To fulfill these objectives, participants agreed to form a working group to study the problems related to this undertaking and how they might be solved; promote cooperation among religious, cultural, educational, and media institutions to deepen and consolidate ethical values; encourage constructive social practices and confront immoral behavior, family disintegration, and other problems; organize inter-religious and inter-cultural meetings, conduct research, execute media programs, and use the Internet and other media to disseminate a culture of peace, understanding, and harmonious coexistence; promote dialogue among religions, civilizations, and cultures through educational, cultural, and media activities, taking into consideration particularly younger generations; and inform the UN General Assembly of the conference’s results.

On 12-13 November 2008 and at the initiative of King Abdullah, the UN General Assembly convened a plenary high-level meeting during its

sixty-third session under item 45: Culture of Peace. The meeting adopted the following statement:

Taking note of the initiative of the King of Saudi Arabia and the World Conference on Dialogue held in Madrid between 16 and 18 July 2008 under his patronage and graciously hosted by the King and Government of Spain, the General Assembly reiterated its call for promoting a culture of tolerance and mutual understanding through dialogue, and supporting the initiatives of religious leaders, civil society, and states seeking to entrench the culture of peace, understanding, tolerance, and respect for human rights among the proponents of various faiths, cultures, and civilizations.

Participating states expressed their commitment to strengthening and supporting existing mechanisms within the United Nations for promoting tolerance and human, preserving the institution of the family, protecting the environment, spreading education, eradicating poverty, and fighting drug abuse, crime and terrorism, noting the positive role of religions, beliefs and moral humanitarian principles in tackling these challenges.

## **Conclusion**

In this review, one must have a sense of hope that sincere and fruitful efforts have been and are being made in the pursuit of dialogue between faiths, cultures, and the adherents of different convictions. As to be expected different objectives and agendas enter such a diverse efforts in the pursuit of inter-faith civilizational and intellectual dialogue. In some cases, we see that regional politics and economic cooperation are the engines that move the dialogue, or use the dialogue as a way to influence and shape political issues. Other efforts are motivated by this fairly recent need to understand the social make-up of Muslim societies. Yet others are launched to push for certain principles, mostly related to education, women and the young. All such efforts are worthwhile ones, even those with a political agenda. If we have a dialogue, then this will help us determine more accurately what such agendas are.

At a different level, since the end of the cold war and more so after 9/11, Islam has been the subject of numerous studies, interpretations, and politics that categorize it as either a great world religion, the last hurdle before liberal democracy declares victory as the world's last and lasting order, or as religion that went astray at the hands of extremists. As such, how to conduct "within faith" dialogues in the Muslim world is vital. Another challenge is determining how the Organization of the Islamic Conference can help real-

ize this goal – how it can become a “clearing house,” a follow-up organ, and a source of information for all of the initiatives claiming interfaith understanding as their aim.

In the last analysis all people, regardless of their particular faith, bear the final responsibility of being aware of and having a vision for their society and faith, as well as of striving for openness and empowerment in their own societies.