



**THE VALUES THAT BIND US:
TOLERANCE AND INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE**

REPORT ON BUSSOLA INSTITUTE 'MAJLIS'
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INTRODUCTION

Since it was established, The Bussola Institute, through an exploration of the 'Values that Bind Us', has been actively contributing towards the promotion of peace, tolerance, cohesion and inter-faith dialogue between followers of different religions.

As part of this journey, last June, Bussola, in collaboration with the Islamic Community of Croatia, and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in the United Arab Emirates, conducted a seminar in Zagreb, entitled 'The Values that Bind Us,' which explored the underlying values that are shared across religions and how these can be the basis of tolerance and coexistence.

As a further step along this road, and in light the recent landmark visit of Pope Francis to the United Arab Emirates at the start of February 2019, where he attended a historic International Interfaith Meeting on Human Fraternity, Bussola decided to hold a 'majlis' event at its Bussola Headquarters entitled: 'The Values that Bind Us: A Conversation on Tolerance and the Potential of Inter-Faith Dialogue' to explore further, the importance of inter-faith dialogue and particularly tolerance as key factors in building societies and reducing religious tensions and conflicts.

The Bussola gathering brought together 20 religious leaders, diplomats and civil society representatives to discuss important questions concerning shared values, the importance of inter-faith understanding and dialogue. Over the course of 90 minutes of guided conversation and discussion, followed by a less formal lunch, attendees considered what future steps might be taken to encourage peaceful co-existence, inculcate mutual respect and build more tolerant societies, particularly from a religious dimension.

Importantly, the Majlis set out from the premise of seeking to identify areas of common ground and mutual understanding, rather than focusing on points of difference and disagreement in religious doctrine and practice.

It was widely agreed that Pope Francis' visit to the UAE, the first in history to the Arabian Peninsula by any Pontiff, had revealed a genuine desire for change, and for encouraging greater tolerance amongst people of different faiths. As well as conducting a historic Mass for around 130,000 of the UAE's more than one



¹ A Majlis is a 'sitting place' where community members gather to discuss local events and issues, exchange news, receive guests, socialize and be entertained. The Majlis is where the community gathers to resolve problems, pay condolences and hold wedding receptions.

million Roman Catholics, Pope Francis, together with the Grand Imam of Al Azhar in Egypt, the most important centre of Islamic learning in the world, took part in an 'Inter-Religious Conference for Human Fraternity', together with more than 200 senior religious leaders from across the spectrum of faith. This was organised by the Muslim Council of Elders in Abu Dhabi and included not only the leaders of the Christian and Muslim worlds but also senior representatives from Judaism, the Hindu faith and Buddhism.

At the conclusion of the Abu Dhabi conference, Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb and Pope Francis signed a joint declaration for: 'Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together'. The two leaders stated: "Our aspiration is that this Declaration may constitute an invitation to reconciliation and fraternity among all believers, indeed among believers and non-believers, and among all people of goodwill; this Declaration may be an appeal to every upright conscience that rejects deplorable violence and blind extremism; an appeal to those who cherish the values of tolerance and fraternity that are promoted and encouraged by religions."

Against this backdrop of shared determination to promote tolerance and fraternity, and to break down the barriers that too frequently result in religiously-based conflict, the Bussola Majlis contributors considered what factors would be important in bringing about lasting change, while also identifying the obstacles that stand in the path of change and how these might be overcome.

MAJLIS DISCOURSE

While the Bussola Majlis was conducted in a positive, robust and purposeful manner, some contributors agreed early on that the challenges to building bridges between faiths and to overcoming decades, even centuries, of religious enmity are considerable.

It was generally agreed that one of the key problems was that this kind of co-operative dialogue was too often confined to "audiences of the willing": people already well-disposed towards notions of religious harmony and mutual respect. Accordingly, finding ways to bring people from more extreme positions towards willingness to share ideas and dialogue is likely to remain a significant hurdle.

It was also suggested that one of the key challenges, particularly in the Arab World where Jews and Muslims frequently find themselves in political opposition, remains the need to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict. Too often this is portrayed as a Jewish-Muslim collision so that religious differences are sharpened and made more antagonistic by political expediency and the conflation of religion and politics in pursuit of narrower, factional interests.

It was also pointed out that, despite the very positive and co-operative mood that had prevailed in Abu Dhabi the previous week, this was not the first time that efforts have been made by senior religious leaders to promote inter-faith harmony. Rather, it seems to be the case that religion is too often being hijacked or harnessed for political ends which, in the final analysis, have little to do with matters of confession or faith.

With these cautionary thoughts aired early on, attendees moved on to consider what changes need to be considered if genuine and lasting change is to be achieved. The first factor, on which there was universal agreement, was the importance of strong leadership. As one contributor argued powerfully, leadership is vital if there is to be any possibility of building universal "opposition to intolerance". People follow strong leaders. Accordingly, not only must religious leaders across all faiths emphasise ideas of peace and harmony that are core principles for all Abrahamic persuasions, but they must become stronger advocates for religious tolerance and be seen as genuine role models.

Another contributor argued that religious discourse must not only identify "shared values" but also "shared concerns". He suggested that a key message for all religious leaders should be the need to promote "religious literacy" so that people of faith develop a better understanding of fundamental

doctrines, not only of their own faith but of other world religions. He expressed concern that there remains “too much ignorance” that allows people to be misled and be encouraged towards adopting more extreme views.

The conversation moved on to consider the need for, what one discussant described as “secular spaces for difficult conversations”. It was again broadly agreed that there are insufficient opportunities for groups from different religions to come together to share ideas, and to understand and acknowledge areas of common understanding and mutual concern.

Having agreed the vital role of good and positive leadership, the Majlis contributors moved on to consider the equal importance of sound and solid education, not only in faith but through broader and more rounded religious education. It was widely agreed that educating children in religious tolerance from the earliest years of their schooling should be seen as an important investment in people’s futures and the stability of wider societies. It was also agreed that religious education should celebrate and embrace the essential ideas that are implicit to both tolerance and diversity.

A third area of discussion developed around ideas associated with volunteering within society – again to be encouraged from the earliest years of education. It was widely agreed that enabling and encouraging young people to volunteer should be understood as an important contribution to their own societies. Moreover, it should come to be seen as a normal function in any society and not limited to those with a higher sense of social conscience. Volunteering should come to be accepted as a routine activity by all societies, and not limited to “those that care” or simply where it is a “matter of duty”. At the same time, there was concern that the demands of many national curricula, that prioritise qualifications and economic betterment, may be actively discouraging young people from volunteering because of the pressure on people’s time.

Another route towards building shared understanding and encouraging inter-faith tolerance would be through the better utilisation of sport. Several contributors agreed that participation in sport enabled young people to see each other as equals, thus helping to break down perceptions of difference and to build shared understanding.

It was also agreed that a broader range of role models was required if religious tolerance is to be better promoted, especially those who appeal to younger generations. A number of contributors agreed that it was especially important to counter negative stereo-typing and ill-informed prejudice against Muslims. Islam, in particular, needs to emphasise even more strongly than it has over recent years that it is a religion of peace and understanding that stands firmly against extremism and terrorist violence. It was even argued that Muslims in Europe should identify themselves more strongly as European citizens first, while faith and religion should remain matters for individuals’ private conscience.

Finally, the Majlis considered the key enabling role that might be played by the media – both mainstream and social media. It was agreed that a narrative of tolerance needs to be communicated more powerfully through the media. But this remains challenging as many media outlets tend to be drawn to highlighting and even promoting extreme positions which are often antithetical to the mostly moderate stances pursued by people of faith, regardless of their religion. Changing these perceptions remains a significant hurdle, not just for Muslims but for people of all faiths in an increasingly secular world.

Regarding media messaging, past conflict in Northern Ireland, and how perceptions of sharply opposed Christian communities have been addressed, were discussed. As one contributor explained, core messages including: “Not in my Name”, “Not my Values” and “Not my Faith” achieved powerful resonance across divided communities. However, they also struggled – and still struggle – to resonate with a media that remains determined to tell a story of violence, division and irreconcilable differences. It was emphasised that this is not a problem solely for religion but that the badge of religion is too frequently pinned on wider societal difficulties.

CONCLUSIONS

At the end of the Majlis, it was agreed that this inter-faith Majlis, that had emphasised the ties that bind us rather than the differences that divide us, had made a further important contribution to considering how tolerance and understanding can work to heal societal discord and pave the way to a more consensual and understanding approach to difficulties that face societies across both Europe and the Arab World.

Specifically, the Majlis had identified a number of themes that are worthy of further consideration and development. These include:

- The need for improved leadership so that the message of tolerance is communicated more powerfully and more effectively across all communities and faiths.
- The need to improve the quality of religious education and the need to inculcate ideas of tolerance and mutual respect from the earliest ages, so that children grow up understanding the many ideas shared across all religions while also appreciating that religious differences need to be acknowledged, tolerated and even embraced.
- The importance of volunteering, particularly amongst young people, so that this becomes a core responsibility for every society. Volunteering is a supreme means of promoting understanding and bridging age, class and differences of view.
- The promotion of interfaith tolerance still requires stronger role models who will be naturally followed and supported by global communities. This is now especially important in increasingly secular societies where a lack of religious understanding and frequent prejudice have become more pronounced.
- As ever, the media, both social and mainstream, have a vital part to play in changing religious narratives, embracing messages that encourage tolerance and shaping international attitudes and perceptions. Getting the media messaging right will be a key challenge if the world is to become more tolerant and less divided.

The Bussola Institute is grateful to all the Majlis contributors, some of whom had travelled long distances, for taking the time and effort to make such thoughtful and positive contributions to this most important subject of religious tolerance and embracing the ties that bind humankind.

It is hoped that this important Majlis will lead to a larger conference later this year to consider the ideas and issues highlighted in this gathering so that the Bussola Institute can continue, not only to contribute to the inter-faith dialogue that was initiated by Pope Francis's historic visit to the Arabian Peninsula, but also recommend actions and potential remedies for the hurdles that still hinder interfaith appreciation, tolerance and understanding.



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