

Tuesday 15 March | Understanding the Other: Religion as Dialogue?

In this times of turmoil, religious beliefs are often held accountable for disagreement, tension and conflict. However, religion, despite being portrayed as the source of divisions, can also serve as a tool for creating connections. This debate explored the ways and conditions under which religious beliefs foster mutual understanding. Willem Jansen (Initiatives of Change), Mahardhika Sadjad (ISS) and Ilyas Sherally (MashriQ) shared their personal experiences to trigger discussion and open up avenues for new insights on religion as dialogue.



Diapraxi: action!

"85% of the world population is religious, if 85% of the world would be violent it is better to buy a one-way ticket to the Moon"

Jansen kicked off the discussion by emphasizing that religion is a human construct, and religious beliefs appear in a wide spectrum of shades and features. Jansen referred to his personal experiences with diapraxi, dialogue through action, in Pakistan and Kenya. Poetry and music bridged religious divides in Pakistan. In Kenya, a 'mapping project' created mutual understanding: interreligious pairs map a particular area and got to understand the personal story of the other. Lastly, Jansen mentioned the movie "The Imam and the Pastor" Initiatives of Change made. The movie tells the story of an Imam and a Pastor who cooperated to resolve the ethnic religious crisis in Nigeria.

The Notion of the Other

"There can be no I, without a relation to and a concept of an other"

Sherally shared a personal story of his journey to Hebron where he found himself engaged in a dialogue with Jewish youngsters after he missed his morning prayers as a consequence of the high degree of checkpoints. The inter-religious projects that were initiated from this meeting were an opportunity for Sherally to connect with "the other". Sherally also reflected the value of the concept of the other, since we are all "others" to each other. Besides, the construct of the other can never be completely grasped, since the concept is continuously subjected to change. However, the other is also a tool to define oneself.

The personal narrative

"Ever since I was a child I never could draw straight lines, now as an adult I refuse to sit comfortably on one"

Religion as a dialogue for Sadjad is the dialogue within oneself, the dialogue between oneself and God, and the dialogue between oneself and the social environment. Religion is often debated through singular narratives about its followers that position them in opposition to notions of modernity, human rights, and democracy. By engaging people in personal narratives, we look at religion as an ongoing journey where discussions can be more nuanced and engagement happens through a desire to understand rather than a need to prove one is right. The individual experience is what creates mutual understanding, as she has noticed on several occasions.

The struggle with the "outside"

The discussion evolved around the 2 faces of religion: the inside, the internal journey oneself makes, and the outside, the external acknowledgement of beliefs in the public discourse. The cultural and social framework in which religion is practiced is crucial in this perspective. The personal narrative of the majority can become overshadowed by extremists. Should the Human Rights Declaration which entails freedom of worship be rethought in order to prevent violent oppression based on religious interpretation of the holy books? Not so in the opinion of the speakers. Context and the personal story should be on the forefront and the extremists radical-groups who preach hatred should not be allowed to determine the perception of the "silent majority". Perceived threats to the external recognition of one's belief system should not determine the dialogue.

Written by Marijn Clevers.

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