Religions for Peace: Agenda for Public Affairs
Enhancing Legitimacy and Impact

By Wolfgang Schurer

In spite of their dogmatic differences, the world’s leading religions share a common ethical core: caring for our common future. This was most effectively addressed in the closing resolutions of the World Assembly in Lindau 2019. The term “care”, which is a leitmotif of interreligious dialogue, expresses two orientations: care for fellow human beings and care for creation. These two notions of “care” are the pillars of any culture of peace, and should be central for all Religions for Peace’s initiatives.

This ethical core provides legitimacy to Religions for Peace and its stakeholders. Preserving and fostering this legitimacy is the conditio sine qua non for securing the unique position of the organisation, and for igniting further development. Caring for our common future represents an agenda based on realizing this ethos and creating sustainable impact.

The ethos of “care” is about how we live, not necessarily about what we believe in. Religions for Peace recognizes and respects dogmatic differences in an effort to enhance joint action, which includes diverse stakeholders from within the organisation, and beyond. In order to succeed in this mission, especially during these globally challenging times, various challenges have to be met in a strategic and coherent way.

Defining Purpose and Identifying Initiatives

This notion of “care” is being realized by religious communities and their individual members every day. For Religions for Peace as an institution, there are five sets of core strengths which inform its activities:

- Peacebuilding: Religious leaders and communities interact in order to mitigate and/or minimize conflict and establish peaceful relations. They aspire to act as role models and provide inspiration to other societal actors.

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1 For the philosophical argument, see John Gray at: https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-14944470
Facilitation (e.g. Track II): Religions for Peace offers venues for dialogue to representatives of warring factions in order to foster mutual understanding, respect and recognition. This could lead to more tangible negotiations for peace.

Fostering a culture for peace: Religions for Peace identifies causes for conflict which have to be solved in order to foster a culture for peace. Per its 2020-2025 Strategic Plan, these issues include discrimination against women, climate change, challenges around interreligious education, and freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Religions for Peace develops tangible projects to solve these issues and lays the foundation for peaceful coexistence.

Mobilizing institutions, communities and networks: Religious institutions and communities are the primary stakeholders of RfP. Serving them and mobilizing them for a joint purpose are two sides of one coin.

Advocacy: Based on its legitimacy and impact, Religions for Peace persuades other actors from governmental, intergovernmental, and civil society sectors, to join and realize this agenda. This is among the strategic priorities adopted by the movement in December of 2019.

Credibility: walk the talk

In order to foster its legitimacy, Religions for Peace has to address its core constituents as it leads by example. The challenge is that religious communities are often instrumentalized for the sake of other goals, be they political, ideological, or financial. For instance, the role of women in religious communities is still often discriminatory; the value of women as peace-makers within and beyond communities remains underappreciated. Some religious communities are often addressed with hate, not respect; and religious sites are increasingly politicised. While Religions for Peace cannot coerce all constituents to align, it can still enact an agenda of taking a principled stance, persuasion and leading by example.

Leadership in spirit, thought and practice

Religious communities work by transcending the present and giving it meaning. They give stability in a changing world: stability in practicing faith and stability in community. This feature, the need for meaning and community building, becomes even more important, but also more challenging in the times of COVID. Spiritual leadership is ever more important today.
The ethos of “care” requires thought leadership. Thinking about new and sustainable ways to enact this ethos is required. Faith provides the confidence that obstacles may be overcome, and it projects the faithful as trustees of care.

Realizing this ethos is the continuing responsibility of all stakeholders. Five decades of experience over all continents have established a set of practice leadership that can be shared within Religions for Peace on global and regional scales. This is further enhanced by cooperation with other practice leaders from various fields.

Public Dialogue

Religions for Peace has to continue to communicate with various stakeholders using tailor-made approaches while a “unity of doctrine” is maintained. While institutional legitimacy lends credibility, the focus should lie on the impact created. Communication is an effort to broaden the coalition and serve the purpose of the movement. Appearance in media should be an integral part of strategy for realizing the agenda.

The two-fold notion of “care” is largely accessible beyond the religious sphere. It should inform any public appearance, both direct and through media, and ensure a position of reciprocity and neutrality. Such an approach serves the various religious communities which face an erosion of membership, and broadens the coalitions geared towards peacebuilding.

Partnerships

“Care” for human beings and for the environment encompasses the various contemporary notions of sustainability, justice and coexistence being expressed in the various SDGs. Religions for Peace can vastly broaden its partnerships by sharing the combined spiritual, intellectual and practice leadership in other contexts, too. Religions for Peace’s unique capability of integrating top-down and bottom-up approaches come to fruition in an environment coined by the paradox of parallel processes of globalization and localization. Therefore, RfP faces ample opportunities to broaden its reach, generate wider ownership and, hence, create further impact. This requires coherence and cohesion, professionalism and perseverance, love and labor.