



How Interfaith Dialogue Upholds the Fabric of Multiculturalism in the Face of Disenchantment and Hatred

Rabbi Silvina Chemen



RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Towards ICCS 2025

How Interfaith Dialogue Upholds the Fabric of Multiculturalism in the Face of Disenchantment and Hatred

By Rabbi Silvina Chemen

SYNOPSIS

Interfaith dialogue cultivates trust, counteracts fragmentation, and nurtures shared values in diverse societies. It extends beyond mere discussion, requiring meaningful encounters with people in our daily lives. By embracing pluralism with humility, spirituality becomes a force for justice, bridges polarisation, and builds compassionate public spaces amidst rising cynicism and disenchantment.

COMMENTARY

In multi-faith societies, people from different backgrounds learn to work the land together, speak the language of the nation, and celebrate each other's religious traditions in shared public spaces.

In a climate of escalating religious distrust, interfaith dialogue can serve as a bastion against hatred, cynicism, and the growing fragmentation of our community. This process helps us to recover the moral imagination to hope, act, and walk together in the spirit of justice and peace.

Such spiritual transformations, however, do not occur in isolation; rather, they happen through encounters with the religious "others" – our neighbour, brother or sister in faith or humanity. When religious identity is nurtured in the presence of the other and lived with openness, humility, and compassion, it becomes a force capable of healing divisions, restoring dignity, and building a more just and loving society.

When Dialogue is Not Enough

We live in a time when simply talking about interreligious dialogue is no longer sufficient. I am not referring to those idealised scenes where leaders of different faiths come together as a gesture of mutual acceptance. Today, interfaith dialogue is called to become a deep and concrete response to social fragmentation, cultural polarisation, and the ethical disenchantment that permeates our societies.

The encounter between faith communities that choose to build participatory, active, and democratic spaces of coexistence is not a “decorative act”; it is a prosocial stance. It means resisting totalising discourses, exclusionary struggles, the postmodern narrative that dismisses religion as obsolete, and the logic of immediacy that reduces the value of human life to individual and material satisfaction.

Spirituality and Public Commitment

Faced with the violent images that dominate the media and public discourse, faith communities remain bastions of trust. Spirituality is a protected space within our inner sanctum, and it offers society an essential and irreplaceable value. However, it is not only about protection – it is about radiating outward.

From an authentic faith and united in purpose, religions can contribute to rebuilding a more just, compassionate, and hopeful society. A hope not born from abstract promises, but from a deep knowledge of the other: their sensitivity, spirituality, and humanity. That knowledge is only possible if we embrace the value of real encounters between people of different faiths, where no one is reduced to a religious label.

Leadership as a Generator of Shared Longing

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote:

“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to long for the vast and endless sea.”

Perhaps the time has come when cultural change no longer depends solely on charismatic figures or large public events. True transformation requires democratising leadership, expanding it, empowering many people, and generating collective enthusiasm. Social transformation can only emerge from a shared sense of purpose, one that provides direction and meaning to our actions.

This requires a new kind of mindset for religious and community leaders. Leadership should no longer focus solely on who holds the microphone or performs the ritual, but on those who can inspire longing, empathy, and consensus, so that many others assume responsibility for collective action.

Ethics of Otherness and Spiritual Pluralism

Social cohesion has little to do with the homogenisation of thought or belief. On the contrary, the point of union is that non-negotiable element that defends and protects

the dignity of one's own life and that of others on the same level. This union results from many points, all diverse and all beautiful, that enrich any human collective.

Through his ethics of otherness, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas teaches us that the relationship with the Other – with a capital “O” – destabilises any attempt to reduce individuals to fixed categories. Linking my singularity with that of the person before me opens us to a richer and deeper experience of the mystery that lives within our faith traditions.

Against Cynicism: Dialogue as Cultural Praxis

We are immersed in an era defined by “post-”: postmodernity, post-truth, post-certainties, and so on. We face a context that promotes disenchantment and strips us of the symbolic resources needed to rebuild the human fabric. Individualism has become an aspiration, physical and mental walls are growing, and immediacy has replaced the deep commitment to time.

As the Italian philosopher Pietro Barcellona wrote:

“The age of disenchantment gives way to the age of cynicism.”

In the face of this, interreligious dialogue is also a form of cultural resistance. It is a bet on creating real spaces of coexistence, reaffirming one's own identity and that of others, reclaiming the not-naïve enchantment of humanity, and disarming cynicism through compassion, study, and mutual presence.

Speaking is Not Enough: Embodying Encounter

Meaningful dialogue between religions requires a significant shift in the mindset of spiritual leaders and faith communities. Perpetuating the continuity of one's own message has nothing to do with shutting oneself off in one's own doctrine and seizing the truth. We need to enhance our capacity to reach out, share, and question the uncomfortable history and the deeply seated hatred. This difficult transformation is crucial for our faith to live more worthily and honestly, and as an unavoidable part of our private and public discourse.

Our religious traditions must make public spaces our sanctuaries. We must carry the voice of justice, truth, love, compassion, social responsibility, and hope where hate speech, war, and indifference currently seem to reign.

It is essential to stand together where fragmentation seems to be winning. We must update our message to the needs of our time and go out hand in hand to share our speeches, actions, and common prayers.

Rabbi Silvina Chemen is Vice Rector, Abarbanel University Institute, and Director, Center for Dialogue and Social Action, Marshall T. Meyer Latin American Rabbinical Seminary. This commentary is part of a series leading up to the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) 2025.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.

