

RELIGION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE G20 INTERFAITH SUMMIT

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We are pleased to inform you about a very interesting and promising collaborative project known as the G20 Interfaith Summit²¹. This initiative is led by a group of universities, humanitarian organizations, NGO's, and independent scholars of which we form a part. The basic idea of the G20 Interfaith Summit is to hold a high-level interfaith forum in the shadow of the official G20 meetings.

Since 2014, the project has produced four successful conferences in conjunction with G20 Summits in Australia, Turkey, China, and Germany. Our plan is to do the same in Argentina in 2018. These conferences bring together a broad group of international experts on economy, law, and policy, as well as global leaders from various religious organizations and professional and humanitarian backgrounds. The general purpose of the conferences is to highlight the key role that religion plays in sustainable development and other issues important to the wider G20 process. The meetings have also served a role in

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facilitating networking and collaboration among people of influence from differing religious and philosophical traditions.

This presentation has three parts:

1. A brief description of the history and experience of this project.
2. An outline of the project's current evolution, describing in more detail its organization, the need for the project, and its purpose and objectives.
3. A discussion about the path forward, identifying obstacles and recommending solutions.

5.1 History and Experience of the G20 Interfaith Summit

Every initiative begins with a discussion. The G20 Interfaith Summit began with a discussion between Prof. Brian Adams at Griffith University in Australia and Prof. Cole Durham of Brigham Young University in the United States. Brian Adams heads the Centre for Interfaith and Cultural Dialogue at Griffith University. Mindful of the fact that Australia would be the host of the G20 Summit in 2014, Prof. Adams contacted Prof. Durham to seek advice and support. Prof. Durham is a leading expert on international religious freedom and church-state law. He founded the International Center for Law and Religion Studies, which has become a global leader in the field. Prof. Durham's center has successfully collaborated with dozens of institutions worldwide to organize hundreds of international conferences, training seminars, and other activities on the subject of law and religion. The center has numerous publications to its credit and has consulted on draft legislation in over 55 countries.

Brian Adams and Cole Durham joined forces to plan a "G20 Interfaith Summit" in Australia in 2014. Together they envisioned that an annual summit of this nature would draw leaders from all over the

world. They recognized that religious voices are too often missing in policy discussions and that the magnetism of the overall G20 process would attract substantial interest.

The G20 Interfaith Summits have all been successful, each in its own way. The 2014 conference near Brisbane, Australia was a remarkable first effort. It drew nearly 200 experts and interested participants from all parts of the world. The theme of the conference was “Economic Development and Religious Freedom.”

The 2015 Interfaith Summit in Istanbul, Turkey raised the level of participation and dialogue to a new height. The summit theme was “Religion, Harmony, and Sustainable Development.” This theme set the tone for subsequent G20 Interfaith Summits, which have focused specifically on the role of religion in seeking to achieve the UN’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Istanbul conference enjoyed the support of a broad array of organizations and included representatives from the Turkish government, the U.S. government, the Chinese government, the Holy See, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and numerous other governmental and religious organizations and NGOs. Approximately 300 registered participants attended the summit, including nearly 140 speakers and moderators. These represented all inhabited continents of the world and more than 40 individual countries.

The 2016 conference in Beijing, China was by necessity a smaller event because of political sensitivity in that country with respect to religion and religious freedom. However, the G20 Interfaith meeting took place under the auspices of the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS), which is a major think tank of the Chinese state. Approximately 20 international scholars, in addition to several Chinese scholars, discussed the theme of “Dialogue among Civilizations and Community of Common Destiny for All Mankind.” Religion per se was not the topic of discussion. Our associate Kathrine Marshall of Georgetown University noted, “The overall line of argument was that

common values trump real divides linked to culture or religion” (Marshall, 2016).

In June of 2017, the fourth G20 Interfaith Summit took place in Potsdam, Germany, with the theme of “Religion, Sustainable Development, and the Refugee Crisis.” Special attention was paid to issues surrounding the refugee crisis, addressing concerns such as religious extremism. Other subthemes included the environment. A large contingent of Argentinians attended the conference, including representatives from the Secretaría de Culto de la Nación, legal scholars, and economists. In a session dedicated to Latin America and the G20, the Argentinian delegation raised the subject of dignified employment, education, and inclusive development. They indicated convincingly that Latin American religious voices and voices from the Global South have much to contribute on these topics. Their thoughts resonated positively with an audience made up of experts and leaders from around the world.

As part of the discussion during the G20 events in Germany, members of the organizing committee debated whether to seek official status as another G20 engagement group, similar to the T20 or C20 (for think tanks and civil society respectively). For a variety of reasons, that idea is on hold, and the organizing committee for the G20 Interfaith Summit is not pursuing it at present. It should be noted that none of the seven official G20 engagement groups, and much less the actual world leaders who gather for the G20 Leaders Summit, have demonstrated a propensity to attach significance to religion as being relevant to their purposes. However, some of our G20 Interfaith associates, including Kathrine Marshall from Georgetown University and leaders from PaRD, which is an important religious NGO headquartered in Germany, were able to put forward a few policy proposals concerning religion as part of the T20 meetings in 2017.

5.2 Current Status and Evolution of the G20 Interfaith Summit

a. Organization

The G20 Interfaith Summit began as an informal organization, largely taking shape and structure through the mutual interests and energies of its founders, Cole Durham and Brian Adams. Cole and Brian have put together an organizing committee consisting of 15 noted experts from across the world. The conferences themselves have enjoyed the official sponsorship of more than 30 institutions, among them academic, humanitarian, professional, and religious organizations. Significant funding has come from both institutional and individual donors, mainly from Europe, the Middle East, and North America.

The experience with the G20 Interfaith Summit in Germany in 2017 taught an important lesson: There are numerous groups interested in this space, but there are no clear stewards of it to cultivate and take care of it. The G20 Interfaith Summit can fill this role well. It already has a track record of significant success. However, the G20 Interfaith Summit organization needs to become more substantial, with a formal organization, objectives, and operational activities. It needs to include an even broader coalition of religious civil society, including additional major NGOs concerned with the alleviation of poverty and hunger and other societal needs. With a more formal and stronger organization we see this project rising to its potential. We are in the process of formalizing the G20 Interfaith organization at this time.

b. Need for international religious dialogue

Some may question the need or even the propriety of an international forum for religious voices to discuss public policy and social and economic challenges. Religion is left out of most such discussion. However, it should not be.

Religion is central to human life. This is an anthropological, geopolitical, and sociological fact. Religion is not merely an incidental feature of human existence. Archeology reveals that religion existed before civilization (Lewis-Williams 2008, 23). Psychologists and social scientists have observed that religious belief is as ordinary or natural an acquisition for human beings as is language or singing (Shah, et al. 2012, 13-14; Barrett 2012, 16-20). Indeed, some speculate that religious belief is perhaps even instinctive and that on the other hand atheism is a learned behavior requiring conscious effort to sustain. (Shah, et al. 2012, 14). Massive global studies by the Pew Research Center estimate that nearly 84% of the world's population claims religious affiliation of some sort, and many of those who are religiously unaffiliated nonetheless have some degree of spiritual belief and practice. Relatively few claim no spiritual sensibility. (Pew 2012, 1.)

Unfortunately, as we know, there is negative side to religion. We witness the actions of religious extremists in connection with some of the world's most difficult conflicts. Such examples make it easy for the uninformed to dismiss religion as a source of prejudice and bigotry and an impediment to social harmony. Such condemnation is myopic. The reality is that religion comes in many forms. In its best form religion has always exercised, and continues today to exercise, an enormously positive influence on the world. Consider, for example, that the world community's shared commitment to human rights and equality before the law are the product not of legislation or politics but of beliefs in human dignity and transcendent notions of right and wrong that are of fundamentally religious origin (Shestack 1998, 205-06).

Many of the most important advances in western civilization have been motivated by religion. These include the abolition of slavery and the civil rights movement. In their best form, religions teach ethical values of integrity, love of neighbor, and individual accountability for actions. These values motivate charitable works. They are part of the

intellectual infrastructure that supports and establishes the rule of law and maintains the stability and unity of society. Without widespread individual commitment to transcendent ethical values taught largely by religion, society would devolve into chaos, lawlessness, and violence. No amount of government supervision or law enforcement would be able to make up the difference.

In the first *Diálogo de alto nivel sobre ética y economía* held last year (Calvo et al., 2017), many contributors observed that economic theory is insufficient to the demands of our current development challenges. Among the observations was that long-held premises concerning man's universal desire to maximize self-interest are inadequate in explaining both the problems and the solutions respecting sustainable development. Classical economic theory, it was suggested, is a closed system of thought that does not accurately translate to the real world.

Religion offers a missing element in this theory, which is of course the whole point of this *Diálogo*, namely, that economics must be considered in the light of ethics. Altruism—the opposite of maximizing self-interest—enters the hearts of people of good will more readily through religious teaching than through any other influence.

In short, religion permeates our perception of humanity and our commitment to one another, to society, to the economy, to law and order, and to the common good. Its relevance to policy dialogue should be self-evident.

But where is there a forum that concentrates responsible religious voices into one group to share insights and coordinate efforts? The G20 Interfaith Summit provides an answer to that question. Major NGOs, including some associated with major religious denominations, have an interest in the type of dialogue and networking that the G20 Interfaith Summit facilitates. Realistically, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 depend on shared effort across different sectors of

society. The State cannot possibly hope to achieve any of them alone. Many of the SDGs are squarely within the subject-matter interest and competency of religion. To a large degree the SDGs will be unattainable without a sustained collaborative effort that includes religion. The G20 Interfaith Summit helps fill this significant void in public dialogue.

c. Purpose and objectives

The G20 Interfaith Summit has the purpose of providing a significant platform for leaders, scholars, and organizations to participate in discussion about matters of mutual interest, including the key role that religion plays in sustainable development and other issues relevant to society and the wider G20 process.

The objectives of the G20 Interfaith Summit include, but are not limited to the following:

1. Seek broad and meaningful participation from religious, academic, governmental, and civil society actors.
2. Increase understanding and harmony among people of differing religious and philosophical viewpoints.
3. Identify and highlight issues of common concern to people of differing religious and philosophical viewpoints.
4. Facilitate networking and collaboration among people of influence from differing religious and philosophical traditions.
5. Position participants to respond more effectively, within their own individual sphere or in collaboration with the efforts of others, to alleviate societal ills and augment the availability of social goods to which all human beings should be entitled as a matter of human dignity.
6. Provide a forum for religious voices to contribute positively to public dialogue.

The organizers of the G20 Interfaith Summit acknowledge certain limits. The organization is a self-sustaining, self-governing coalition of interested academic, religious, and civil society organizations and individuals whose common interest is motivated by religious and ethical values that uphold human dignity and the rights pertaining to it. This project and its governing organization are independent of other interfaith forums, as well as independent of any government and of the G20 organization itself, including the G20 engagement groups. However, the G20 Interfaith Summit offers its availability and convening power as an influence in the G20 process to the extent considered appropriate. The G20 Interfaith Summit seeks collaboration with significant local institutions when holding its meetings in G20 Summit host countries. The G20 Interfaith Summit seeks to conduct its meetings in a way that maintains an atmosphere of harmony and respect for the G20 priorities of the host country. The G20 Interfaith Summit holds an expansive view of the usefulness of interfaith dialogue and collaboration as an agent for the improvement of society. Therefore, it does not mean to circumvent or co-opt other valuable efforts of this nature; rather, it invites participation and collaboration.

3. The Path Forward

The G20 Interfaith Summit is on a successful path toward increased influence and success. What began in 2014 as an idea for an interesting side meeting to the G20 Summit in Australia has now blossomed into an annual event that attracts important participants from around the world. The purpose and scope of the G20 Interfaith Summit is an evolving theme. But the focus seems relatively well settled on being a platform for useful, constructive discussion of religion's role in sustainable development in particular, as well as other subthemes of mutual interest.

We believe that at least in the near future, the continued success of the G20 Interfaith Summit is relatively assured.

That does not mean that this project is free of challenges and obstacles. On the contrary, there are several, of which we mention just four:

1. We already mentioned the need to formalize the organizational structure as this program grows in prominence and size.
2. Another immediate need is to recruit additional representatives of major NGOs and other organizations to participate. We have thus far been relatively more successful in recruiting scholars, and a question arises how will the academic aspects of the Interfaith Summit interact with more policy-oriented discussions in which NGOs would typically engage.
3. Funding is always a concern for any organization. Recruiting additional partner organizations will help fund this effort in the long term. We have benefitted from a few very generous donors in the short term who we hope will maintain their commitment and interest. As we diversify our funding sources, we add value to our brand. Having a positive brand is important as we continue to work with representatives of G20 host governments to assure high levels of moral support and participation when we organize conferences with local institutions.
4. Finally, it is worth mentioning as a potential obstacle that not all countries that are members of the G20 are friendly toward religious discussion. We mentioned earlier the case of China, where the discussion needed to be adjusted to take in a broader academic view of common human values rather than discuss religion *per se*. The result was, nonetheless, positive, given the unique circumstances of the host country. The organizers of the G20 Interfaith Summit intend to make such adjustments as are

appropriate to local circumstances in the interest of advancing positive discussion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we sound a note of optimism. Interfaith dialogue is, in economic terms, a product for which we sense growing demand. An older view of interfaith dialogue would have entailed sharing differences in religious beliefs and practices in an effort to foster reconciliation, harmony, and greater understanding. That is an intrinsically valuable exercise to which we subscribe. But we also see a new and more expansive path ahead, one where interfaith dialogue is less about comparing beliefs and practices and much more about believers from diverse religious traditions working together in positive ways to address the real problems of our society. Respectful interaction in this sort of forum is a catalyst that will yield positive results that are difficult to fully predict. At this point as our project is still in its infant stages, we feel the best measure of our success is the growing interest in our activities now arising from many corners. We trust that we will have much more to contribute as we move forward.

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