

Interfaith dialog: Time to come down from the hill

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A prelude to this week's interfaith dialog of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was aptly called "Talks on the Hills", which brought together leaders of different faiths from different countries in the two regions. The dialog, which was held at Bali's renowned Ubud hill resort between July 17 and July 19 was part of the "Talks on the Hills" series organized by the Singapore-based Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF).

Whether it was the intention of the organizers or not, the title of the Ubud meeting captured the essence of the problem of past interfaith dialogs, and this is certainly true for the ones held in Indonesia. Such dialogs have been limited largely to the leaders of the major faiths, but they have hardly resonated among their respective flocks or communities.

Such talks in the past amounted to nothing more than feel-good gatherings that tended to avoid asking and answering the tough questions that divide communities, nations and the world along religious lines. They put on a semblance of cordiality and come out with joint statements about the need to forge peaceful and harmonious coexistence among peoples of different religions. And then they go home till their next dialog.

The reality on the ground is often far from cordial and harmonious. In some places in Indonesia, for example, there are tensions between the different religious communities, some lurking just under the surface, while others, as in Maluku and the Central Sulawesi district of Poso, have blown up into full-scale communal conflicts.

It is at the grassroots level that interfaith relations are lived and experienced, with all of their challenges and complexities. The challenge for the leaders engaged in interfaith dialogs is to come down from the hill and convince their communities to follow their lead. Interfaith dialogs should not be confined to the top leaders of the different religions; people at the grassroots level should also be encouraged to engage in similar interaction.

Recent events at the national and global levels have made interfaith dialogs more important than ever -- locally, nationally, regionally and globally. This week's ASEM forum, which will be kicked off here on Thursday by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, is one such contribution at the regional level.

The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in New York and on the Pentagon in 2001, the series of bomb attacks in Indonesia, including the most devastating one in Bali in 2002, the Spanish train bombings, and more recently the London bombings, have made relations between followers of Islam and other faiths around the world uneasy. The perpetrators of all these attacks have claimed to be acting in the name of Islam, and in the process have driven a wedge between Muslims and Christians in the West.

It is heartening to see that in response to this month's bombings in London, just about every Muslim leader and organization in the world has denounced the attacks and thus immediately distanced themselves from the radical groups that try to hijack their religion.

Still, this and past tragic events have created tensions among people of different faiths, most notably between Islam and Christianity. The terrorists seem to have got their way, at least partially. There have already been some backlashes in Europe against Muslim

minorities. Turkey's bid to join the European Union has also been jeopardized because of strong opposition, not so much from the governments as from the peoples of Europe.

Similar tensions are also being felt in Indonesia, the nation with the largest Muslim population in the world. The terror attacks at home and abroad have obviously had some impact on interfaith relations, but tensions between people of different religions have also been increasing independently of the global trend. The conflicts in Maluku and Poso had nothing to do with the spate of terrorist attacks that began on Sept. 11.

For a nation as diverse as Indonesia, in which all the major world religions are represented, interfaith dialog is a must. Religious tensions have played a part in this nation's life, but somehow Indonesia has managed to ease most of them. Without dialog, however, many of the tensions could easily come to the surface again and then explode into conflict.

But while Indonesia can pride itself for having a long tradition of dialog among its religious leaders, the conflicts in Maluku and Poso, as well as the tensions affecting interfaith relations in some other parts of the country, suggest that religious leaders still have their work cut out for them.

Indonesia needs to have more interfaith dialogs at both the local and national levels, and now with the growing tension between Islam and the West, also at the regional and international levels. But we need to have more intensive as well as extensive dialogs, expanding the range of participants down to the grassroots level. And most of all, we need to have dialogs that are effective in addressing the questions that divide us along religious lines.

High profile dialogs, including the one held in Bali, are bound to be loaded with technical, theological language, which, while relevant, often has no bearing on the lives of ordinary people. What these leaders have to do once they return home is to recreate at the community level the spirit and the atmosphere of cordial and mutual respect that characterize these dialogs, for it is at the community level that true interfaith relations are lived and experienced.

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