

The Performance of Interreligious Dialogue in the Realm of International Relations: A Critical Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Interreligious Dialogue (IRD) is neither a simple concept, nor a simple practice. Even before we consider the issues of such things as the ethics, hermeneutics, and praxis of understanding across diverse worlds of meaning, it is something that is enacted and performed according to social, cultural, and political discourses. The agendas of participants, sponsors, and any supposed audience all have consequences for the performativity of IRD. This paper will specifically focus on the concept of performance in relation to IRD in the political sphere, most particularly the way that IRD has become part of international relations. Attention will be given to typologies and framings of IRD, including what does, or does not, get classed as being IRD, or “true” dialogue, but herein no definition is prescribed, taking a broad approach. We will look at some specific examples of IRD in relation to track 1.5 diplomacy, noting how it relates to a securitised framing of dialogue and to what Oddbjørn Leirvik has termed “necessary dialogue”. The whole paper will be framed within the concept of performance, or performativity, which will be the main analytical approach, but taking a wider critical religious studies approach to considering how IRD is performed, or operates, within international relations.

KEYWORDS

Interreligious Dialogue, International Relations, Performance, Performativity, track 1.5 diplomacy, critical religion, International Conference on Cohesive Societies, KAICIID, G20 Interfaith Summit, Abraham Accords

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Introduction

This paper takes a critical religious studies approach to interreligious dialogue (IRD) in international relations.¹ Drawing from critical theories, it takes a particular performance studies approach engaging John Austin, Stanley Tambiah, and Judith Butler amongst others. The paper is more analytical than descriptive, and so will not delve in depth into particular case studies, rather – engaging the relevant international relations literature – we will look at ad hoc examples of what has been identified as IRD as what is termed track 1.5 diplomacy (described in the next section, but, roughly, the level between direct state-to-state diplomacy and civic interaction). The paper opens by discussing this, firstly noting how IRD is seen to operate in international relations, including how track 1.5 diplomacy is defined and its relation to such concepts as citizen diplomacy, before going on to look at widely used and relevant descriptions and typologies of IRD. This will give a frame of what is defined as track 1.5 diplomacy where IRD is involved. The next section will provide an account of performance studies, especially the notion of performativity, looking also at the location or staging of IRD. This will then lead into some examples of how we can understand the performance of IRD and international relations. A short critical religious studies section will pick up some themes from the paper relating especially to how religion operates within this conversation, including who gets included or excluded based upon how certain traditions are valorised, and noting how some discourses on religion are reinforced in relation to power dynamics. A brief conclusion ends the paper focusing on areas for future research.

Interreligious Dialogue in/as International Relations

In recent years, there has been a growing literature on the role of interreligious dialogue (IRD) within the political sphere, including in international relations (e.g. Barbato, 2017; Fahy and Haynes, 2018; Grung, 2017; Gusha, 2022; Guzansky and Marshall, 2020; Hedges, 2023; Steiner, 2018; Steiner and Christie, 2021).² From a situation where IRD was marginal even within most religious institutions (Hedges 2018a), it moved, post 9/11, to become central to policy conversations (Brodeur 2005). IRD's position as part of the conversation has meant that it, within what has been termed a post-secular context (Habermas 2017; see also Barbato, 2020a; Mavelli and Petito, 2012), has played a role in diplomacy, and in relation to social cohesion,

¹ Despite “religion” being increasingly a focus of international relations (see note 2), there has been little interaction between the disciplines. Timothy Fitzgerald has addressed this directly (Fitzgerald, 2011), however, his work has received little positive reception in international relations (see, e.g. Hasan, 2013). Critique has focused on Fitzgerald's analytic weakness, arguably related to similar criticisms of Fitzgerald's other work (see, e.g. Hedges, 2013; Miller, 2014). Nevertheless, Fitzgerald's descriptive argument, which accords with what is assumed here, that such terms as “secular” and “religious” have a particular history, is generally sound. It may be noted that Fitzgerald and others have responded to some critique, but as Daniel Miller has noted, in relation to the analytic issues, Fitzgerald's “response amounts to quite a muddle” (Miller, 2020, 429).

² This can be seen in relation to a wider literature of religion having “returned from exile” in international relations, e.g. Fox and Sandler, 2004; Haynes, 2013; Johnston and Sampson, 1996; Sheikh 2012, with the “returned from exile” motif coming from Petito and Hatzopoulos, 2003.

economics, and governance, amongst other areas.³ This is not to say that there is a singular, or clear, definition of what IRD is, nor that it is uncontroversial, or easily assimilated into the (supposed) secular/political sphere (see Hedges, 2018b; Jurgensmeyer, 2005), nor that it is not a part of complex powerplays and realpolitik. Moreover, there are certainly times when IRD is considered irrelevant, or is not at the table. Nevertheless, its growing presence in the political and international relations sphere means that it is ripe for analysis from a critical religious studies perspective.

As IRD manifests in international relations, it is often seen as a form of track 1.5 diplomacy.⁴ This is often defined as a middle ground between formal state to state diplomacy (track 1) and civilian interaction across state borders (track 2). It typically involves some formal state level interaction and has been seen to be typified in the work of the King Abdullah International Centre for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue (KAICIID; see Grung, 2017; Hedges, 2023). As an organisation, KAICIID's so-called Council of Parties includes, as founding members, the Kingdoms of Saudi Arabia and Spain, alongside the Republic of Austria, with the Holy See as an observer; Portugal joined in 2023. As such, at the highest levels, KAICIID is track 1 diplomacy, but its main work involves civil society actors, whether religious leaders or community activists, making it sit as track 1.5 diplomacy. Marc Gopin's work (2009) has helped define track 1.5 diplomacy, and he includes citizen diplomacy as it relates to peacebuilding and interreligious dialogue (see also Wilson 2015: 8, 56). Such track 1.5 diplomacy also relates to discussions on global civil society (Keane 2001; see also, Juergensmeyer 2005). Track 1.5 diplomacy, therefore, can be defined as a form of international relations in which state and/ or non-state (civil society) actors engage in cross border interactions in relation to areas which might often be associated with state-level interaction (e.g. war and peace), or in civil society activity wherein state, including inter-state, sponsorship is involved (e.g. social cohesion work, or IRD).

Other examples of IRD in/as international relations includes the work of the Holy See, especially the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID, see e.g. Barbato, 2017; Barbato, 2020b; Barbato, Joustra, and Hoover, 2019), which because of the status of the Vatican as both a city state and the centre of the magisterium of the Catholic Church means that it straddles what are often seen as secular-religious boundaries in ways which do not fit typical theory in political science, making it what is termed a "hybrid actor" (McLarren and Stahl, 2020).⁵ Again, Singapore's International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS), which has run so far in 2019 and 2022, is under the auspices of the President of the Republic and managed by a Ministry alongside an academic school,⁶ engages religious leaders, grassroots activists, including a dedicated youth platform, and enacts state to state interaction, with King Abdullah of Jordan and the Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Parolin speaking at, respectively, the 2019 and 2022 events (Hedges, 2023). It should be

³ It has been convincingly argued that within modern, secular, liberal, democratic, and multicultural states, IRD has become the almost default position for public displays of religiosity, see Hedges, 2019.

⁴ It also relates to what may be seen as a wider discussion around religious diplomacy, see Barbato, 2018; Chia, J. M-T., 2022; Hedges, 2023.

⁵ Another lens that could be brought in is Naomi Goldenberg's (2013) conception of religions as vestigial states, however, such analysis would take us down a different route, but it provides a useful perspective.

⁶ The event is run by the Ministry of Community, Culture, and Youth (MCCY) with co-operation on the academic side, and some event management, by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Other ministries are also involved in co-ordination given the potential diplomatic delicacies and protocols. See Hedges, 2023.

noted that ICCS is not simply an IRD event nor focused only on religion, with race and non-religious concerns being central to its wider focus on social cohesion. The Abraham Accords provides another example, where the peace deal within the Middle East involving developing relations between Israel and Arab states such as the UAE and latterly Saudi Arabia has been framed in relation to Abrahamic dialogue (Guzansky and Marshall, 2020; Magid, 2022).⁷ Finally, the activity of the G8/ G20 Shadow Interfaith Summit could also be viewed through this lens (Steiner 2018). This list is far from comprehensive, but notes some examples which will be referenced in this paper.

It will be useful to explore definitions of IRD and note how it operates in the international relations sphere. Before that, but related, it is necessary to address the dual “in/as” phrase used here. This refers to the fact that international relations is its own discrete activity, with IRD typically being seen as another discrete activity, or tool. As such, IRD could be perceived as something which may be used “in” international relations. Yet, at the same time, any act of IRD within a certain context could itself also be a political act, so IRD may be enacted “as” international relations. While it is common for us, today, to typically define “religion” and “politics” as discrete and distinct realms, they may also be envisaged otherwise (e.g. Goldenberg, 2013); this point raises many conceptual and analytical questions as to whether “religion” is itself a meaningful term which, for the purposes of this paper, need not be dwelt on at length,⁸ though these issues arise within the analysis, because here we are analysing the performative nature of IRD within international relations wherein nation states (typically framed as secular) and religions (typically framed as reified domains of “religion”) operate in particular ways and are defined and spoken of in ways which essentialise both.⁹ Deconstructing every term would divert analytical attention from the actual performances. With this noted, we will employ a number of different ways to conceptualise IRD.

Firstly, the most common descriptor is a typology first developed by British historian of religion Eric Sharpe but most widely known with insider terminology given by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID). This fourfold typology speaks of the dialogue of theological exchange, the dialogue of religious experience, the dialogue of life, and the dialogue of action (see Hedges, 2021a: 334; Moyaert, 2013). The typological terms are largely self-descriptive, but may be quickly glossed as follows: the dialogue of theological exchange is dialogue, normally amongst religious leaders or academics, on the meaning of particular concepts; the dialogue of religious experience is the usage of techniques such as meditation or prayer as dialogical encounters, which may be amongst elite level figures in, i.e. the intermonastic

⁷ The notion of “Abrahamic” and Abraham as a common bond is problematic (see, e.g. Levenson, 2012), while it also side-lines traditions such as the Yazidis and Samaritans who also appeal to Abraham. However, critics have arguably essentialised the differences (Dalton, 2014; Abdelnour, 2022).

⁸ Herein, “religion” is primarily used descriptively according to the way it appears within international relations literature, which is not unproblematic (see Fitzgerald 2011, and note 1). However, while taking on board critiques of the term “religion”, especially the so-called “world religions paradigm” (WRP) (e.g. Cotter and Robertson, 2016, Hedges 2021, 20-8; W. C. Smith (1978 [1962]), J. Z. (1998), Taira, 2017), this paper aligns with approaches that suggest we do not abandon the concept (see e.g. Hedges 2017c, 52-3; Hedges, 2021a, 28-34, Schilbrack, 2017).

⁹ In Benedict Anderson’s (1983) felicitous phrasing, nation-states (like large-scale religious communities) are “imagined communities”, an issue taken up in the religious studies literature (see Hedges 2021a, 428-9, see more widely 428-31).

movement (Blée, 2014), or in grassroots dialogue meetings where shared silence may be a practice; the dialogue of life is used to refer to the day-to-day quotidian encounters amongst people from religiously diverse backgrounds; and, the dialogue of action is activities undertaken for social improvement such as in ecology, disaster relief, etc. where people from different religious (and non-religious¹⁰) backgrounds work together. While often seen as distinct, the typological terms are best understood as emphases within events or situations which may overlap, or where several may be combined (Hedges, 2021a, 334-35). For instance, a group of people from different backgrounds engaged in climate action (so ostensibly the dialogue of action) may, during the work, explain the theological rationale within their tradition for such work (the dialogue of theological exchange), and may eat and drink or relax in downtime together (the dialogue of life), while some form of joint prayers, or praying “alongside” or “with” others,¹¹ may be offered (so also the dialogue of religious experience). This fourfold typology includes a potentially vast plethora of activity which may, or may not, be formally termed IRD. Some things that fall within its remit may be said to not be IRD under other definitions, with some limiting dialogue to more formal events, especially within the dialogue of theological exchange or religious experience (see e.g. Weisse and Meir, 2022). There may also be some who speak of “true” or “real” dialogue as a meaningful exchange at “theological” or “spiritual” levels (e.g. Cornille, 2012). This latter may mean, notably, that potentially some events within, for instance, the dialogue of theological exchange are determined not to be “dialogue”; for instance, in some dialogue events, leaders or representatives may be invited to share on a particular topic or theme from their tradition, and each may speak but with little interaction with what others have said, and no sense of “dialogue” if this is understood as a potentially deep and unsettling exchange where one can “see into each other’s souls” (Race, 2008, 155, citing Akbar Ahmed). In this paper, it is held that such distinctions are largely theological, or insider, in nature, and so IRD is taken, broadly, to include a wider range of intentional¹² meetings across what are perceived to be different religious (including non-religious) borders without delimiting certain things as not being dialogue.

Some other definitions of dialogue useful to this paper include the classification of parliamentary, or representative, dialogue which, most especially in the dialogue of

¹⁰ There is dispute within IRD circles about including the non-religious, but they are increasingly included (e.g. Admirand, 2020; Hedges, 2017b; Mohamed Taib, 2016; Welle, 2013), and some argue for renaming IRD as interworldview dialogue (e.g. Brodeur 2021; Hedges 2017a).

¹¹ When engaging more “conservative” traditions, the wording, and performance, of any prayer activity is important. For instance, many conservative religious figures may oppose language of “joint” prayers or praying “together”, but may be happy to pray “alongside” others, with the latter signifying that each is doing their own thing within the integrity of their tradition, as opposed to what may be framed as “syncretic”. The exact wording that is acceptable will vary from event to event, location to location, and over time. On the discursive framing of syncretism, see Hedges, 2021a, 73-9.

¹² Intentional here refers to a conscious and deliberate engagement because within, for instance, the dialogue of life we may see people variously identifying (e.g. as Sikhs, Jains, Bahais, Muslims, atheists, etc.) mixing in various locations (in the office, at the supermarket, at the school gates, in a lecture theatre, etc.) but without the difference being a factor of this experience it would not be counted as the dialogue of life. Again, if people of differing religious backgrounds engage in climate change activism but “religion” is not foregrounded as a motivating or organising factor (indeed, each may not be aware of how others identify) then it would be hard to term it the dialogue of action. While “intention” may seem a subjective factor that is hard to analytically measure, within the performative frame of this paper it fits within the illocutionary act which speaks about how an event is understood or planned by those involved – which may differ, of course, from the perlocutionary outcomes.

theological exchange, refers to the way that certain figures, normally elite leaders from mainstream traditions, are chosen to represent the tradition (Moyaert, 2013). So, for instance, if a panel discusses a particular issue or topic, typically a single representative from one religion will be asked to speak for, or represent, the stance of their tradition on that issue/ topic. This has the effect of reinforcing a sense of religion as an essentialised and monolithic sets of teachings (Hedges, 2021a: 335-36), and given the way representation works it is often an elite, educated, male who gets to present this vision, further side-lining positions from minority voices in the tradition, including the voices of women which have been spoken of as a “missing dimension” (King, 1998: 43). Such representative dialogue is often contrasted with a storytelling model in which speakers do not “represent” a tradition as a whole but stress their own particular position and narrative as one person within that religion who may not speak for all viewpoints. Such storytelling dialogue has been argued as more typical of women’s IRD (Egnell, 2006; see also Hedges, 2010: 197-227). Another important definition is that advanced by the Norwegian scholar Oddbjørn Leirvik between “spiritual” and “necessary” dialogues (2014: 17-18, more broadly 17-25), the former referring to those undertaken for some existential or theological purpose, such as understanding the other or seeking to deepen a “spiritual” understanding, the latter done for ends such as social cohesion or peacebuilding. Although a seemingly simple dichotomy, it marks a vast chasm in some dialogue events and organisations that leads to much confusion and misunderstanding between participants as to what is aimed at. Again, though, the distinction is not absolute, and some may combine both goals in some ways, it has been noted that necessary dialogues are particularly prevalent within the track 1.5 diplomacy context and can typically be viewed also as the dialogue of action (Hedges, 2023).

Finally, the question of power must be addressed. While IRD is often framed in insider narratives as being about an almost unlimited inclusion, there is also negotiation about power in terms of how any dialogue operates (Hedges, 2010: 94-102). Furthermore, as has been argued elsewhere, every IRD is an act of exclusion because, to take two often employed metaphors, there is never room for all at the table or within the tent (see Hedges, 2021a: 337).¹³ In particular, the dominance of Christian and Western-centric frames in such ways as conceptions of what dialogue is, what should be discussed and how, the financing and hosting of events, and the conception of representation may all skew events (see, variously, Mohamed, 2015; Hedges, 2010; Hedges, 2021a; but see also Hassan 2014). As such, while IRD can be presented as an open event beyond power, the fact that there is never a meeting of equals is key in thinking through such issues as ethics and participation (see e.g. Leirvik, 2014: 17-31).

The Performance of IRD in International Relations

For the purposes of this paper, the concept of performance or performativity will be crucial as a lens to approach how IRD operates within the international relations sphere. Often associated with Judith Butler (Butler, 1990), whose work on performativity has been linked to international relations (Masters, 2009), it is used and

¹³ Although describing them as metaphors, it is also literal: many events occur around tables, while the St Ethelburga Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in London has an actual tent for dialogue (Ipgrave, 2019).

theorised more widely also drawing from John Austin's speech act theory (Austin, 1962; see Hedges, 2021a: 241, 290-94). The performative refers to the effects of what is done which may be distinct from actual words or actions. Stanley Tambiah argues that a performative act has "a 'duplex structure,' meaning that it enacts a certain myth (a worldview or cosmological schema), but also gives a sense of legitimacy to certain social hierarchies" (Tambiah, 1979). Within this context, it may be argued that there is a sense in which IRD operates as a "show" or "ritualised" behaviour which also shapes the discourse around what dialogue is (though, in some contexts, ritual may be seen as problematic in relation to IRD, see Moyaert, 2014). Two particular issues around performance theory can be drawn out further for the purposes of this paper. One is from Austin's work who develops the notion of the speech act as having three components (see Hedges, 2021a, 291-92, 293) which are firstly what he terms Illocutionary acts which refers to the meaning intended by the actor, and furthermore the semantic construction in which it is embedded, or we may say what enacts it. It should be noted that, within wider performance theory, Austin's speech acts do not just refer to the spoken word but also actions, rituals, and wider embodied performances; an issue important in relation to the material turn in the study of religion (see Hedges, 2021a, 209-31). Secondly, there are locutionary acts, which refers to the activity or the utterance as a discrete thing which occurs. Finally, Austin refers to perlocutionary acts which means the actual effect of the locutionary act, which is an effect regardless of any intention. This points to a number of layers which include the intentionality behind what is done and the way this will be performed (which may be an internal personal intention, or a group plan),¹⁴ an actual event in the world as speech and/ or action, and then the results from this in how others perceive or receive what is enacted. With regards to IRD, we may speak of the planning of events, the actual performance of an event (which may, of course, not be a singular speech act or event, but may occur over an extended period), and the public or community reception and response to this.

The other part to draw out further is Butler's specific notion of performativity which has at least a twofold implication (Young, 2016). One of these is that any act occurs within a context, and just as we perform gender (Butler 1990), we also perform IRD which can mean engaging in and reinforcing a particular discursive matrix. Yet, Butler also sees the performative as, potentially at least, a site of resistance (Butler 2018). In Butler's words, each performance is part of a "citational chain" (Butler 2015: 176) which links each iteration to how whatsoever is performed has been performed before, but also potentially reinforces or disrupts the re-enactment of such performance in the future. Certainly, IRD can reinforce certain norms around how religion is perceived in the public space through its processes of representation (see Hedges, 2021a, 335-37), but differently performed IRD may change, or subvert, the status quo in such areas. Here Tambiah's notion of how performance may reinforce certain myths and the power structures associated with them becomes significant within Butler's "citational chain," but we bear in mind Butler's argument that this may be subversive or disruptive to the status quo (which may, or may not, be seen as positive or progressive), and also Austin's insights that despite how we may plan a performance as an illocutionary act, the perlocutionary act may differ.

¹⁴ How "intention(ality) relates here is discussed in note 12.

Performance can be linked to dialogue in various ways, one example being the first Assisi Day for World Prayer held by Pope John Paul II in 1986 (Chia, E. F-K., 2018). It could be argued that while, since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), IRD has been theologically allowed within Catholicism, it was seeing the involvement of a significant and respected leader that allowed many to recognise that such dialogue was permissible, that Christians could stand alongside members of other faith traditions, which is not to say that it was without controversy (Chia, E. F-K., 2018; Welle, 2013). But the dialogue itself was a performative event in terms of what it represented, and with Tambiah we could see it exhibiting a particular mythos, a sign about how Catholicism stood in relation both to other Christian traditions and non-Christian traditions. We may also note an additional insight added to Butler's notions that not simply actions but also places are aspects of performativity (Gregson and Rose, 2000). Thinking about car-boot sales and community art workers and the concept of the "stage" where the performance takes place, Nicky Gregson and Gillian Rose, deriving from Butler and others. open up the question of location. But to lead into this it is useful to quote them to stress the issues of power and construction that are inherent in thinking about performativity:

Performativity then, involves the saturation of performances and performers with power, with particular subject positions. For a critical human geography concerned with the constructedness but also with the provisionality of social identities, social differences and social power relations, it is vital that we conceptualise performers as in some sense produced by power, and not - as in most current geographical accounts - virtuoso, theatrical, anterior agents at one remove from power's social script. (Gregson and Rose, 2000: 441).

While their concern, as this quote suggests, is to connect performance theory to human geography, the question of space must also play a role in IRD; this relates to our note above concerning the material turn with the significance of materiality and embodiment, and also relates to how notions of location and place relate to connections of religion and geography (see Hedges, 2021a: ch. 17). As noted, power plays a role in critical accounts of IRD, with "performers... produced by power" but also formal dialogues, especially within parliamentary dialogues, typically occurring as staged events. This relates to what Gregson and Rose term "the interrelational nature of space" where a sharp distinction of actors and acted-on subjects is hard to maintain, but where the goings on "articulate their own spatialities, as opposed to being just located in space" (Gregson and Rose, 2000: 446, 446-47). In relation to the Assisi Day of Prayer, the location in Assisi associated with St Francis is symbolic of the conception of peace, while the events were also framed within and around a specifically Catholic basilica. It is not the place of this paper to offer a detailed account of this event, rather the focus here is that location matters as an aspect of performance, and no event just happens somewhere; rather, the specificity of actual located spatiality is part of the whole performative event in both its illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects.

Power, performance, and place would also be key in assessing how IRD relates to the Abraham Accords, which in some ways involve track 1 diplomacy, but are also related to the possibility of wider citizen relations including IRD, and a recent IRD event with Jewish participants in Saudi Arabia itself exemplifies this and seems to be track 1.5 diplomacy in action (MWL 2022). While a broad diplomatic arrangement and so not

tioned to any specific location, it is nevertheless performatively spatialised in relation to Israel-Palestine and within a wider Middle Eastern (and North African, MENA) context. It points to the way that IRD and international relations become enmeshed – in some locations the religious and political are not clearly demarcated as we deal with hybrid actors – but also this example highlights the difficulties of keeping diverse narratives around this together (e.g. how the international and interreligious relations of states such as Saudi Arabia and Israel correlate, Jeong 2021), a matter which could be further explored with regards to the performative.

We also see performance in events held by KAICIID and at ICCS. While both do a range of work, with ICCS having a Young Leaders Platform (YLP) which encourages grassroots and activist networks across borders, and counts as track 1.5 diplomacy given its setting within the wider event, and KAICIID runs what is termed its Fellows programme which trains community leaders and activists on the ground in peacebuilding and reconciliation skills alongside dialogue facilitation, there is much that can be classed as parliamentary dialogue. As has been argued elsewhere (Hedges 2023), the parliamentary style platforms at both events tend to differ from what may be termed the standard dialogue of theological exchange (about theological concepts) in what may be called the dialogue of theological exchange about the dialogue of action (i.e. religio-theological rationales for social cohesion and peacebuilding). This reflects the staging of these events within a securitised frame of dialogue which has occurred post 9/11 (see Brodeur 2005; Hedges and Mohamed Taib, 2019; Malik, 2014), where social cohesion and peacebuilding are prioritised by government actors. So, for instance, with ICCS which is centred around three key plenaries (which centre, broadly, around “faith”, “identity”, and “cohesion” respectively) the first one on faith sees people who may broadly be termed religious leaders, in representative dialogue style, saying what their tradition has to say about social cohesion (see ICCS, 2022; Hedges, 2023). It should not be supposed though that, despite the way government involvement alters the dynamics of IRD (see Hedges, 2018b; Hedges, 2019), this represents something out of kilter with the wider IRD scene. In her history of what she terms the multifaith movement, Australian sociologist Anna Halafoff has identified four aims of the movement through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. While not divided chronologically, as they overlap and all concerns appear at different times, they also represent something of a trajectory with IRD organisations and concerns moving, broadly, from more theological concerns about a supposed “spiritual” unity of all religions towards multi-actor peacebuilding networks as we move into the twenty-first century (Halafoff 2014: 35-70).¹⁵

The G8/20 IFS also represents the tendency of religious groups to be involved in the dialogue of action. Explored in depth by Sherrie Steiner as both a participant and an academic (Steiner 2018; Steiner 2019; Steiner and Christie 2021), it started in 2005 from the Make Poverty History campaign which was directed by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, now Emeritus Cambridge Professor, Rowan Williams and the long-time interreligious advocate Jim Wallis of *Sojourner’s Magazine* (Steiner 2018: 101). Partly

¹⁵ It should be stressed that this is a general tendency, but what are probably the world’s two oldest still existent IRD organisations, the World Congress of Faiths (1938, WCF) and the Interreligious Organisation of Singapore (1949, IRO), have had interests which span a wide range of activities. For instance, the IRO was founded post-WWII with an explicit peace agenda, and has been involved with workers’ rights, theological exchange, and social cohesion over its history. See, on the WCF, Race and Hawkins, 2022; and, on the IRO, Hedges and Mohamed Taib, 2019.

through this global and concerted activist movement, the G8 meeting in 2005 announced 15-20 billion US dollars in poverty relief. Seeing this success, a sustained effort to have this as a shadow summit alongside the regular G8/20 meetings occurred. It sits alongside various other shadow summits, some of which have become official parts of the G8/20 orbit of activity, e.g. shadow summits on gender, and ecology/environmentalism, but this remains unofficial (Steiner, 2019; Adams, 2021: 202-204). As such, while the other two examples here are more directly governmental, this could be linked to theorising on global civil society movements (Keane, 2001); though how far religious actors operate as cooperative parties is open to discussion (Jurgensmeyer 2005; see also Hedges, 2018b). How far the G8/20 IFS is an IRD organisation may be open to debate, but within the framing here as an explicitly religiously-focused movement that brings together different religions to bring a shared voice from “religion” into the realm of international relations it is clearly operating within the broad remit of the dialogue of action, and as within this paper we do not delimit what “true” dialogue is, it seems to meet the criteria. Again, it can be seen as operating as track 1.5 diplomacy (Hedges, 2023). It also has a somewhat different staging in its performance from KAICIID and ICCS as not government sponsored. Its spatiality is also different in that it occurs, under a different hosting organisation, each year within a different country, which will in turn affect priorities and dynamics (Steiner, 2019).¹⁶

More could obviously be said on how performance relates to IRD as international relations, but given this paper’s aim to open this as an area for debate and investigation, we move now to the last part of this paper which offers something of a critical analysis.

A Critical Reflection on the Performance of IRD as International Relations

As noted above, the involvement of certain parties within dialogue means that others must be excluded. For instance, when mainstream Christian denominations are included, the result is that Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons will not generally be brought in – most Christians do not regard them as Christians; but such groups may, sometimes, be dialogued with (e.g. Millet, 2013). Again, Quakers are also often not regarded as Christians by other Christians. Likewise, Sunni Muslim representatives may refuse Ahmadiyya Muslims entry to dialogue, regarding them as “heretics”, and historically Shia Muslims are and remain a tricky question (e.g. Özervarlı, 2017). Again, for many Muslims, Bahais are seen as a schismatic movement, though at ICCS they are included as one of the “religions” of Singapore, raising the framing of a tradition as a “religion”.¹⁷ The dynamic of dialogue’s inclusion of certain Others, as noted above, goes alongside an exclusion of other Others.¹⁸ Within international relations, at least

¹⁶ While not relevant to this paper, it is notable that the G8/20 Summit was side-lined at the 2022 G20 event in Indonesia, as the local dynamic meant that what was showcased was Indonesia’s indigenous model of a moderate Islam, and it seems that this Indonesian Islam lead is being followed up in the 2023 event in India with the two countries acting in tandem to promote Indonesia’s “R20” (Religion 20) instead, see R20 n.d.

¹⁷ See note 8, also Hedges, 2021a, especially chs 1, 2, 3, 7, 10, 18. On Singapore’s religions, see note 19.

¹⁸ While not a focus here, this may, importantly, be read through the lens of identity theory, see Hedges, 2021a, 140-54, 311-15. The capitalisation of “Others” here follows the conception of the Lithuanian-French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, see Hedges, 2021a, 308, Box 3.5.

two questions arise: the question is often the acceptability of certain traditions to political powers, which may be associated with discourse on such things as “good” and “bad” Muslims, itself an Islamophobic trope (see Hedges, 2021b); and the other is the prestige (often, but not always, size) of traditions, that they are seen as partners a government may wish to engage, especially on a prime inter/national stage. With ICCS, this is in part determined by Singapore having what is generally seen as ten official religions, each with a representative apex body or leadership who are then partners with government,¹⁹ while KAICIID has an advisory board of religious leaders which maps on to what are seen as major traditions (KAICIID, N.D.), and the G8/20 IFS has often worked in coordination with the Vatican and Al-Azhar University alongside what are seen as leading partner institutions in host countries (see Steiner, 2018).

The above issue can, within a wider critical religious studies lens, be linked to the way that IRD can solidify and reify the world religions paradigm (WRP) and particular narratives of elite religious leaders and institutions (Hedges, 2021a: 537). It should be noted that both KAICIID (in its fellows programme) and ICCS (in its YLP and in invitees) do go beyond such representative or mainstream traditions, and indigenous religions and non-religion are represented (the latter also reflecting ICCS’ interests beyond religion), as well as members of minority groups within the mainstream traditions.²⁰ This returns to our earlier note that while sometimes dialogue can be valorised as a somewhat idealised form of communication (both in IRD and in secular dialogue theory), negotiations of power determine which traditions are allowed to speak and who is even at the table (Hedges, 2021a: 335-37; Moyaert, 2013; Hedges, 2010: 94-102). However, it is possible to be overly cynical or critical, and for organisers and facilitators of dialogue this may partly be a pragmatic necessity: space at the table, or room in the tent, is always limited, and not every voice may be heard. Certainly, it is not the issue of government involvement *per se* that leads to exclusion of some groups, for this is built into IRD already, but these can become entwined.²¹ Moreover, in as far as government backing gives credence to an event, it may seem odd that marginal or minority traditions would be given space when they do not represent a sizable demographic, and as with any democratic system a certain size and visibility is important in getting a voice in the public square; excluding voices is not the same as silencing those voices on other platforms.

A final critical note, related to what has been said above and returning to an issue which we put to one side at the beginning of this paper, is the entire framing of “religion”.²² Both within policy and government spheres, but also sometimes amongst scholars, the voices can sometimes betray uncritical attitudes in relation to the ideals of dialogue or religion. For instance, Steiner suggested that: “faith organizations are well positioned to help combat corruption, encourage integrity and promote public ethics in public policy because of their interest in, and support of, value-based

¹⁹ On the background, see Hedges and Mohamed Taib, 2019, while the ten “religions” are: Bahai Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism.

²⁰ This information comes from informal conversations with people working with KAICIID, and the authors own role as the key academic and research consultant to ICCS.

²¹ For a discussion of how the Pagan Federation in the UK negotiated exclusion and eventual membership of the Interfaith Network (IFN) for England and Wales, which involved claims both about particular traditions and the semi-official/ governmental structure of the IFN, see Jones, 2022.

²² See notes 1, 8, 10, 17, 19.

behaviors” (Steiner, 2018: 3), which ignores the political nature of religious organisations, and what is often their complicity in corruption and other illegal behaviour; indeed, perceptions of whether what gets defined as religion is trusted or not varies greatly regionally (see Tamir, Connaughton and Salazar, 2020). Meanwhile, the signifier “religion” is far from simple nor a natural category (Hedges, 2021a, 19-43), but something with a heritage in the way Western modernity (with theological and colonial input) has classified the world, with much grey area existing between what gets classified as “religion”, “philosophy”, “worldview”, “superstition” or other nomenclature. While this is not a specific interest of this paper, it should be noted that not just the WRP paradigm but also the very notion of “religion” as a *sui generis* category which is distinct from the secular sphere (see Hedges, 2021a: 373-97), may also be part of the performance of these events. In the staging, we may see people framed as “religious leaders” having particular statuses granted, and even being given deference for their role as such, which may contrast with a critical approach that argues that whatsoever “religion” may, or may not, be, it is far from a clearly distinct and natural territory within human social networks and cultural systems. This argument, though, goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

That IRD is now strongly established within international relations as a tool of politics, especially relating to discourses of social cohesion and peacebuilding, is clear. It operates within Leirvik’s framing of necessary type dialogues. This paper has offered, through the lens of performance and performativity, an analysis from the angle of critical religious studies. There are, nevertheless, certain things this paper has not done, but which exist in other literature, or remain areas for further research, in what is still a young area of exploration. To mention some of these, the question of how religion is framed has been touched on here, but could be further explored. Much of the literature on religion, dialogue, and social cohesion remains within a very Western-centric discourse, and a decolonial discussion needs further exploration and research, though it is a growing area (see: on religion, Hedges, 2021a; on social cohesion, Hedges, 2020a; on dialogue, Hedges, 2022d, Mandal and Partni, 2022; on interreligious studies, Hedges, 2020b; Hedges and Liu, 2022). Except for the G8/20 IFS (e.g. Adams, 2021; Steiner, 2018; Steiner, 2019) and the work of the Vatican (e.g. Barbato, 2020; Barbato, Joustra, and Hoover, 2019), there are relatively few studies of IRD in international relations, and few of these are from religious studies standpoints, so much field and archival work may be done. A growing area for study, but with, as yet, no particular agreed methods, is how to evaluate or quantify the success of such work (on the expanding field, see Abu-Nimer and Nelson, 2021; Merdjanova and Brodeur, 2009; Owen and King, 2019; Woolf Centre, N.D.). The political narratives or agenda of such events and organisations also needs more analysis. One example of such work has been analysing whether – in relation to KAICIID and ICCS – if IRD in international relations may represent “dialogue-washing”, meaning that such events are simply a “show” without any concrete results; though it is argued that this allegation does not hold water with regard to these two cases (see Hedges, 2023), but exploration of other cases may well be worth undertaking. In relation to many track 1.5 diplomacy events, the illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects, alongside the locutionary, could be further analysed via, for instance, a discourse analysis approach as one way to explore this. For scholars engaged in IRD, there is also the opportunity for a reflexive study on how they operate as scholars and/or activists/ practitioners in

such spaces. Following Bruce Lincoln's theses which directly divides the scholar and activist (Lincoln, 2005, thesis 13), it is often assumed that one cannot both do IRD and critically study it, but this dichotomy seems problematic. It seems to assume the scholar as a detached, secular, rational subject apart from society, and thereby also reinforces a white-masculinist sense of the scholar as autonomous actor (see Driscoll and Miller, 2019; Hedges, 2021a, 132, 176-77). In reality, our identities are more complex and autobiography plays a part within our intellectual positions (Hedges, 2018c). This conclusion is not the place to debate this shape of the field, but this paper is hopefully a contribution showing that those engaged in IRD within this sphere may also be critical scholars reflecting on it at the same time.²³ While further areas for research could be noted, this paper has mainly focused on showing how, via the lens of performance and performativity, a critical religious studies voice may be employed to analyse IRD in/as international relations. It sees itself as simply an exploration mapping some paths in a territory which deserves further investigation.

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²³ See also Hedges 2021a, ch 14: Hedges 2023, and wider debates, such as: whether interreligious studies is an academic or practitioner space (McCarthy, 2018); the concept of the scholar activist (Moyaert, 2020); and where scholarship as a critical and outsider discipline and an insider and confessional enterprise begin and end (e.g. Hedges, 2022a; McEntee, 2022; Hedges, 2022b).

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