

Ian Cameron Cliff, OBE, has been British Ambassador to Kosovo since March 2011. His background suggests a man who has worked alongside people of many different faiths in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Sudan, the Middle East and South East Asia. Interfaith Kosovo asked him about his impressions of interfaith relationships Kosovo, its global role in interfaith affairs and possible strategies for the future.

Q. Interfaith Kosovo: What impressions stand out for you personally with regards to the levels of tolerance among different faith groups in Kosovo?

A. Ian Cliff: The way in which all the communities respect the festivals of the others – the two Bajrams, Catholic and Orthodox Christmas and Catholic and Orthodox Easter. If you are in Pristina around Christmas you would think you were living in a Christian majority country. It is striking that many Muslims see e.g. the Orthodox Monastery at Decani or the Catholic Church at Letnica as places of pilgrimage for them. The juxtaposition of Mosques, Orthodox and Catholic Churches in major towns such as Pristina, Peja/Pec, Ferizaj/Urosevac, Gjakova/Djakovica – where there is also the Bektashi Tekke – and Prizren shows that historically communities have lived together. I am pleased that the Council on the Historic Centre of Prizren is now functioning and includes not only representatives of the Islamic Community, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church, but also the head of the Jewish Community.

Q. Interfaith Kosovo: What unique contribution do you think Kosovo can bring to interfaith dialogue globally?

A. Ian Cliff: That background of mutual respect plus the experience of rebuilding relations after the war and the events of 2004. Of course the scars are still recent and some people are very bitter. Nevertheless, brave individuals have made a huge effort to rebuild relations and that is an example to promote in the wider world. We support those efforts, for example through the Hajde train project to take people from Pristina to see the mixed religious and cultural heritage in Western Kosovo. I am not naive and of course there is still much to do eg to build trust between the town and the monastery in Decani and establish the much delayed Council to protect the religious and cultural heritage of Velika Hoca. But there are undoubtedly unique perspectives Kosovo can bring to the wider world of inter-faith dialogue and the Peja/Pec principles adopted at the global interfaith conference in 2013 point the way.

Q. Interfaith Kosovo: Do you have any specific suggestions as to how to improve the effectiveness of interfaith initiatives in combating extremist ideologies both here, in your own country, and elsewhere?

A. Ian Cliff: I have experience of interfaith initiatives from my time in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Sudan and now Kosovo. It is also a big theme in the UK. A risk is that in interfaith dialogue one is preaching to the converted. In other words interfaith dialogue somehow needs to engage precisely the hardliners and extremists who don't believe in it. Of course interfaith dialogue is necessary to counter the narrative of extremists who preach exclusion, hate and violence against other communities – which is the antithesis of the true teaching of all three of the great monotheistic faiths and indeed other world religions. But we need to find practical initiatives that enable progressive and open-minded people in each community to get the message across to their less open-minded co-religionists. That is not easy in an environment where extremists can exploit social deprivation and unemployment, especially among young people, for their own ends. But we can make progress if we keep plugging away, whether we are talking about Kosovo or Great Britain. Here we have seen the firmer stance against extremists taken by the Islamic Community recently. Also in a very different context we see local representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church taking a pragmatic and constructive approach on many issues in the IMC (Implementation Monitoring Council).