When I was growing up in England in the 1970s, the troubles in Northern Ireland were at their height. In 1974 two of the pubs in Guildford where I went to school were bombed by the IRA. I walked past one of these pubs everyday. 5 people were killed and 65 people were injured. If you asked me or any of my school friends about terrorism we would automatically have thought about Ireland not the Middle East. For us sectarian violence was not concerned with different sects of Islam but different sects of Christianity: Protestant versus Catholic.

Most violence in the world today is not caused by one country invading another. Russia’s presence in eastern Ukraine is an exception. Conflicts are typically now sectarian – one indigenous population battling another over how the state ought to be governed or even what the state should be: Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine. That means resolving disputes involving competing communities and groups is essential to world peace. And true leaders will be those who have a vision for reconciliation.

Sectarian conflicts arise from different groups holding different narratives. Usually, there is disagreement not just about the solution but also about the problem and about the basic facts themselves. Each party brings its own history, its own maps, its own grievances and its own language - even when they share a common tongue. These narratives are typically embellished, oversimplified and shockingly devoid of respect for other points of view. They are reinforced and handed down from generation to generation via segregated schools and religious institutions. Religion itself is seldom the only or main cause of dispute - tribal or ethnic factors are more usually the root issue. But it nearly always figures somewhere in the narrative, and it heightens the emotions involved.

Since the Good Friday agreement in 1998, violence in Northern Ireland has largely ended. The two communities are not reconciled. Belfast still has dozens of ‘peace walls’ separating catholics and protestants. But there is, basically, peace. And that peace came about as a result of diplomacy and dialogue at all levels of society. The dialogue included intense efforts at religious peace-building, symbolised most famously by the Corrymeela Community. Corrymeela was founded in 1965 by Christians of different backgrounds to help victims of violence. Corrymeela was awarded a Peace Prize in 1997, in recognition of its contribution to interreligious cooperation, thereby furthering the cause of world peace.

Interreligious dialogue brings individuals and communities together to talk about matters of doctrine and issues of mutual concern in culture, politics and society. The World Council of Churches has produced guidelines on inter-religious dialogue which urge that dialogue should be a process of mutual empowerment rather than a negotiation between people who have competing interests and claims. Partners in dialogue, they say, should be empowered to join a common pursuit of justice, peace and constructive action for the good of all people.

Dialogue carried out in this spirit necessarily encourages tolerance. It treats the dialogue partner as a person worthy of respect whose story and contribution are worth hearing. A Boston College theologian, Catherine Cornille, identifies five preconditions for any meaningful interfaith dialogue: humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy and hospitality. Breaking down the walls that divides faiths while respecting the uniqueness of each tradition requires the courageous embrace of all these preconditions.

Tolerance receives a negative press in some religious circles. It can be seen as a synonym for indifference or even cynicism. As the historian Edward Gibbons once said: “To the philosopher all religions are equally false, to the uneducated equally true and to the politician equally useful.” And,
of course, real dialogue, if it is concerned with mutual empowerment, cannot take place if one side regards the other either primarily as an object of intellectual pity or of political utility. Tolerance as cynical indifference is rightly rejected by believers.

But tolerance has a much more positive sense. It refers to a person who is able to ‘bear with’ with the practices or beliefs of someone else. The tolerant person has a largeness of spirit, a properly educated awareness which frees them from bigotry. This kind of tolerance is to be encouraged and it is a direct product of the attentive engagement that takes place in situations of dialogue.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has written an interesting article called “The Collapse of Tolerance”. He takes this to be a feature particularly associated the West’s attitude to Islam. Thus the question of girls wearing headscarves is regarded as threatening because it is associated with a religion some other of whose expressions are characteristic of extreme Wahabism or Islamic State. A culture of what he calls ‘block thinking’ arises in which different manifestations of Islamic piety or culture are all seen as alternative ways of expressing the same, and potentially threatening, core meaning. As an alternative, he suggests that a real attentiveness to the girls who want to wear headscarves might indicate that, one girl wants to wear a headscarf because she is rebelling against her parents and their kind of Islam, another because she is deeply pious yet utterly revolted by gender discrimination or violence. Block thought persists, Taylor argues, partly because its critics on each side are unknown to those on the other side. Thus dialogue is essential to the creation of understanding, the resistance of block thinking and the growth of genuine tolerance and respect.

In their guidelines on religious dialogue, the World Council of Churches note that through their encounters with neighbours of other religious traditions many Christians have come to experience the meaning of a common humanity before God. This experience is rooted in the biblical affirmation that God is the creator and sustainer of all creation: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” (Psalm 24). Human beings have particular dignity, in the Christian understanding, because we are made in the image of God. There is a particular concern, in the three main monotheistic religions at least, for those whose dignity and rights are most at risk.

This shared concern has found expression recently in concerted action against the evil of modern slavery. In December last year, leaders of the Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu faiths met in Rome to declare their joint commitment to eradicate slavery by 2020 and for all time. Their joint statement said: “In the eyes of God, each human being is a free person, whether girl, boy, woman or man, and is destined to exist for the good of all in equality and fraternity. Modern slavery, in terms of human trafficking, forced labour and prostitution, organ trafficking, and any relationship that fails to respect the fundamental conviction that all people are equal and have the same freedom and dignity, is a crime against humanity.”

I offer this as a concrete example of religious people working together to promote human dignity. And so I have hoped to show in this paper, how in diverse situations – from peace-making in Northern Ireland, to social questions such as headscarves or the problem of modern slavery inter-religious dialogue can indeed be a force for the promotion of tolerance and respect for human dignity.