International Conference on Religions and Political Values

26-28 November 2014, Lebanon

Conference Report

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Introduction

In November of 2012, Adyan Foundation hosted an International Conference on the theme of "Religion and Democracy in Europe and the Arab World." The conference sought to make a critical and positive religious analysis of the changing political framework of the Arab world. Although the region had already begun to experience the violence that followed the Arab Uprisings of 2011, particularly in Libya and Syria, there was still much hope and enthusiasm in November of 2012 for the prospect of a new political epoch in the Middle East, one steadied by both democratic and religious values.

Important disagreements at the conference marked the discussions over the role of religion in this democratic future of the region: Members present from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia, for example, argued passionately about the bright future for religiously-inspired democratic constitutions in their countries; others contested this vision and argued that a more secular approach was needed to allow religion to more fruitfully undergird

their political futures. Despite these differences, there was wide agreement that religions had a role to play in the political future of the region and that this role should be a "values-based" one as opposed to an "identity-based" one.

Adyan's international conference of November, 2014, organized in collaboration with the Lebanese American University, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Institute to Missiology Missio, Religions for Peace and Catholic Relief Services, attempted to respond to this insight in a dramatically altered political and religious landscape, one characterized by the worsening state of war in Syria, the threat of the ISIS, a refugee crisis of unparalleled dimensions and a broader, dark feeling of political failure throughout the region. Adyan's International Conference for 2014 sought to speak to these challenges by making "Religions and Political Values" its theme for discussion. As the conference's concept note wrote, the meeting was designed to,

> "create a forum for different sectors of society to reflect on how to actualize definitions of political values and norms in Muslim and Christian discourse on the one hand, and to explore and promote dialogue about these values from different worldviews on the other hand. This exploration is meant not only from an interfaith perspective but also from a public and scholarly perspective, where religions are invited to operate a shift from a normative discourse, and to endorse a dialogical role as part of a diverse society.
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> In doing so, the Conference seeks to put recent scholarship in social and political philosophy in more direct conversation with social and political theology, in Christianity and Islam specifically, and to confront both with questions and recommendations from leaders and policy makers active in the public domain."

Throughout the three days of the 2014 conference in Byblos and Beirut, 30 scholars, practitioners and religious leaders from 16 different countries (Iraq, Syria, Argentina, Turkey, Germany, Bahrain, Canada, Sudan, Italy, Holland, Argentina, Turkey, Jordan, Austria, the United States and Lebanon) elaborated numerous positions, approaches, resources, recommendations and reflections on how religions and political values can and do interact, support, challenge or even destroy one another. In doing so, they took up Adyan's invitation to engage in religious research and spiritual solidarity as a worthy response to the political and religious crises of the broader Middle East.

As in 2012, scholars disagreed on the sources and solutions that an analysis of "religions and political values" could produce and, in particular, the appropriate or effective responses available to religious leaders, communities and politics to do so. These disagreements reflected the diversity of participants present at the conference and could only be welcomed as a rich variety. Each participant exposed how different political and religious contexts and institutions perform values differently and pose different questions to religious leaders and scholars about the role of values in the world of ideas, in informal politics and civil society, in political parties and in political responses to violence.

Although few papers directly analyzed the origins of the war in Syria or the evolution of ISIS, their reality framed much of the thought and discussion of the conference and lurked behind

the shared feeling of many participants of a critical moment that had been reached in the history of the region, a "civilizational turning point," as Professor Fr. Fadi Daou described it. All of the participants were moved, sometimes to tears, by the stories of suffering that were shared, and the patient conversations of the conference also reflected "the fire that burns within our heart," as one scholar put it.

One of the striking outcomes of the conference was a consistent call by its participants for more, better, stronger religious education and awareness. In doing so, the scholars, practitioners and religious leaders of the conference performed and built up a counter religious discourse. To that end, the scholars of the conference highlighted the need for a hermeneutical change in Islam and in religious discourse. At the same time, they also emphasized the essential importance of international politics, pointing out its injustices and double standards that foster extremism and projects of power instead of projects of state-building. The participants also articulated the failures of singular states within the international system and the weaknesses of citizenship culture which both contributed to and is a result of those failures. Finally, the conference offered hope that within the long dark night of the Middle East today glimmers of (inter)religious renewal were already present that were uniquely capable of accompanying the external transformation of the region and changing reality towards a more positive, flourishing living-together.

In what follows, the report reviews four distinct expressions of this call from the conference for deeper research on "religions and political values" as a response and a means to peace, namely, in the areas of :

1) Philosophy and Religious Thought

2) Formal Politics and Power Realities

3) Informal Politics and Social Practices

4) Spirituality and Religious Humanism

1) Political Values in Philosophy and Religious Thought

A number of the papers in the conference approached the question of religions and political values from a philosophical or theological perspective. Many interpreted the contemporary crisis of the Middle East as a contemporary crisis of religious thought and tried to point the way to critical thinkers in both the Muslim and Christian traditions who could offer insight to the role of religions in sustaining contemporary pluralism and peace. To that end, some participants placed hope on the possibilities created within the various inheritors of the Muslim Reformist tradition and several papers mined the thought of recent Muslim thinkers including Mohammed Arkoun (in a presentation by Dr. Nayla Abi Nader of the Lebanese University), Taha

Hussein, Rasheed Rida, Ali Shariati, and Abdolkarim Soroush. Dr. Abi Nader explained how Arkoun's critical approach to the history of Muslim thought was also an attempt to kick start contemporary Muslim thinking and create a new movement open to greater diversity, and Dr. Mohamad Al Sammak reminded of the fundamental work of Ali Abdul Raziq in the early part of the twentieth century, and his arguments that Islam is a religion not a State. Other papers turned to the discourses and writings of contemporary muslim figures such as Yousuf al-Qaradawi and Wahba al-Zuhaili (by Professor Sami E. Baroudi of the Lebanese American University). Professor Baroudi offered insights into how Qaradawi and Zuhaili's thought could be applied to international relations theories and argued that Qaradawi and Zuhaili's philosophy represented an urge to mutual restraining among States which reflected God's own divine mercy and restraint.

A common theme in these papers was the need for more critical engagement with the holy texts and the fecundity that reflection and interpretation of Quranic exigencies alongside a rereading of the Islamic intellectual heritage could produce for contemporary problems. The historical contextualization and renewal of Islamic thought, many participants argued, were key to this endeavor.

Dr. Tayyib Tizini, for example, professor of Philosophy at Damascus University in Syria, reminded the public of various sayings of the Prophet that called on Muslims in each century to develop and reconstruct Islam, to analyze what they had done and to shed light on what they need to do to make history more humane. Likewise, Professor Abdul Jabbar al Rifai of Iraq spoke elegantly about the silence of the Qur'an, which requires human voice and thought to be heard and understood. This silence, he argued, has political consequences. It requires the protection of freedom of conscience and interpretation; it requires the protection of religious others and minorities. It requires an active, critical human agency to pose the right questions of the time to our revealed, sacred scriptures.

These multiple possibilities which the holy texts and Islamic theological tradition allow, as Professor Wajih Kanso of the Lebanese University noted, imply multiple religious interpretations at any time and inevitably produce contestation over those interpretations as well. In the absence of critical, free religious research and science, however, those contestations are bound to be sterile, politically manipulated and even violent. He thus focused on the need to re-read the historical interference in the formation of religious thought and values, in order to renew Islamic political and theological reflection. As Dr. Abdul Jabbar al Rifai wrote of the mis-development of Islamic reform,

> "they thus came up with a misshapen interpretation of religious texts and a distorted view of piousness whereby religion was stripped of its original substance and true message of quenching ontological thirst, giving meaning to what is meaningless, enriching spiritual life and consecrating moral values. This led to the spread of a piousness that is devoid of any spiritual or moral life, faith and ensuing good deeds, and obsessed with grabbing political power using any legitimate or illegitimate means."

Judge Shaykh Muhammad Abu Zayd of Lebanon took lessons from the diverging life paths of Marwan Hadid and Jawdat Said, both Syrians who formulated dramatically different religious reactions to political oppression. Hadid responded to political imprisonment in Syria with a religiously-inspired revolutionary jihadist approach; Said responded with a religiously inspired, revolutionary yet non-violent approach which turned to civil society for its strength.

In making these arguments, many of the presenters agreed that contemporary Islamic thought must more forcefully challenge these violent, pathological, politically manipulated developments in order to overcome the social, political and spiritual crises of the region. Renewing Islamic thought, these scholars argued, could help quench the ontological thirst that has led so many youth to find meaning by joining the ranks of ISIS and, as Prof. Tizini pleaded, bring balance back to Arab societies and politics, enabling Arab societies to reclaim and overcome, as Dr. Nayla Tabbara put it, what appeared to be a deterioration of culture at the global level. Some participants, including Dr. Markam Ouaiss and Shaykh Muhammad Abu Zayd wondered how religious institutions could be better protected and liberated within and without the State from these pathologies and political machinations.

This philosophical approach to religions and political values was not limited to an analysis of Islamic thought alone. In fact, many of the papers who did focus on the tradition of Islamic fiqh and Islamic thought explicitly appealed to the need for mutual inter-religious learning as a source for contemporary Islamic reform.

Other papers found similar calls to religious renewal in contemporary Christian and Western thinkers, such as Charles Taylor (as Dr. Theo Brinkel of the Netherlands Defense Academy did), Hans Küng and Amin Maalouf (as Prof. Joseph Maalouf of the Lebanese University did) or Pope Benedict XVI (Dr. Fr. Bassem El-Rai) and his secular interlocutor, Jürgen Habermas (Dr. Fr. Bassem El-Rai and Professor Michael Driessen). In turning to these thinkers, the authors inferred several points. On the one hand several of them used these thinkers to affirm religion's role as a promoter and founder of shared ethical understandings about humanity. Thus Dr. Stefan Friedrich, for example, of the *Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung* highlighted how earlier work on ecumenical Christian ethics had equipped post-war Christian Democrats in Germany to overcome divisions among various Christian denominations and promote religiously-grounded values, such as freedom and justice and sanctity-of-life, that could be championed across religious divides for the good of the whole of German society. Likewise Professor Joseph Maalouf, drawing on the thought of Hans Küng and Amin Maalouf, argued that theological insights had led many religious leaders in Europe to recognize that peace could only be established by a shared "minimal ethical" approach based on mutual understanding among all individuals, believers or not.

At the same time, these participants also illustrated how new trends in Christian theology and Christian thought attempted to respond to and shore up the essential public contributions that religious individuals and religious communities offer to a healthy civil society and political arena. As both Dr. Theo Brinkel and Dr. Fr. Bassem El-Rai observed, religious freedom means

both the freedom to live in a plural society *and* the freedom to act according to the dictates of own's religious community. Likewise, Professor Michael Driessen recognized that the post-secular possibilities of public religion in Europe had increasingly attempted to incorporate and encourage the democratic contributions of religious values as a generator of virtues and values and associations which were critical to political development in advanced democratic settings. In a complementary way, and echoing Habermas and Benedict XVI, Dr. Ouaiss and Professor Brodeur pointed out that extremism is not only present in religious thought but also in secular thought. Both have inclusivist and exclusivist dynamics that can lead to political injustice.

2) Political Values in Formal Politics and Power Realities

The optimism, or perhaps better, the ideals expressed by many of the speakers who argued about the capacity of religious thought to renew society, was confronted with the political reality of religion and politics in the region and the religious violence described by many of the other speakers. Rather than focusing on the ideals of religious thought, these speakers often pointed towards the structural, geopolitical, and economic difficulties facing religious and political actors and communities in the region. Several speakers, thus, recalled the continued, thorny legacies of colonialism as well as the great power politics and political interference of the West, particularly the United States, that continues to frame many of conflicts in the region. Others highlighted the recent failures of Islamist political parties and nationalist leaders and political institutions, all of which made the violence engulfing Syria and Iraq more possible today and more difficult to resolve.

Several papers continued the analysis of religion and democracy in the region that was begun during Adyan's 2012 conference. Mr. Kassem Qassir, for example, a Lebanese journalist, sought to draw lessons from the contrasting democratic experiences of Iraq's Islamic Da'wa party, which he largely diagnosed as a case of political failure, and Tunisia's Ennahda party, which he largely diagnosed as a case of political success. As both he and Professor Driessen observed, an important political evolution towards democracy among many, but certainly not all, mainstream Islamist political parties had occurred over the last decade. Turkey's Justice and Development party, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ennahda and the Da'wa party, among many others, had raised the hopes that the commitment of Islamic movements to democracy would help reform the region's politics. Their failure to do so, Qassir argued, particularly in Egypt and Iraq, revealed that the parties had taken the problems of state-building and economic reform too lightly and were not prepared to deal with the political realities of governance. More fundamentally, it revealed that once in power, many religious based political parties testify to counter-values (corruption, bad governance) instead of the values they had been promoting before attaining power.

The implication of these failures is not that religious values have no place undergirding political projects, but that sustainable political movements which will build up and reform democracy in

the region need to dramatically reform their institutional approach to good governance. In a similar light, Professor Driessen of John Cabot University in Rome observed that despite the immense problems facing "post-Islamist" parties in the region today, these parties had already proved that they could evolve in their political projects and that there was much room for values-based formal politics which combine commitments to liberal rights and religious freedoms to contribute to the common good in the Middle East as well in most contemporary democratic settings.

Post-secular trends in Western Europe and the United States, he argued, have attempted to do just that. As Dr.s Driessen, Brinkel and Friedrich all argued, the religious and political legacies of Christian Democracy remain alive and well in Europe today. Christian Democratic parties in places like Holland and Germany, as Dr.s Brinkel and Friedrich pointed out, continue to draw on their intellectual and spiritual traditions to enumerate inspired responses to new political challenges. The lessons these parties learned in how to promote comprehensive values as opposed to exclusive norms and laws might represent one reason why they were able to sustain democratic practices better than the failed experiments that Qassem Kassir described.

3) Religions and Political Values in Informal Politics and Social Practices

One of the ways in which new Christian movements and communities have realized that they can effectively respond to the challenges facing Europe has been through their civic contributions to and leadership within civil society. Following the consolidation of democracy in Western Europe and the major theological shifts accepted by the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council, new Christian movements embraced new vocations outside of the space of formal politics which led them to mobilize their fellow citizens for civic social action.

Dr. Federico di Leo, of the community of Sant'Egidio, shared with the conference how Sant'Egido learned to do just that. By dedicating themselves to a spiritual vocation of solidarity, friendship and communion with the poor and marginalized of the city of Rome, the community of Sant'Egidio discovered how much the poor had to teach them about the deeper needs and essential values of all humanity. These lessons, in turn, allowed the community of Sant'Egidio to more effectively and authentically give these needs and values public voice in Italy and beyond. Although listening to and seeking communion with the marginalized is itself a fullness of living for Sant'Egidio, sometimes this spirit of listening-cum-communion, as Dr. di Leo shared, can lead to spectacular results, as Sant'Egidio found out when they began to mediate international conflicts in countries such as Mozambique, Algeria and Kosovo. In these meditation attempts, as di Leo emphasized, Sant'Egidio has real power not as a political party or a political movement militating for change, but as a community of friends of those suffering from poverty and from war.

Professor Driessen noted a similarity between some of these new Christian movements and the roots they had realized in democratic civil society, and new post-Islamist trends in the Muslim world. Turning to the work of Asef Bayat, he noted that by working within a democratic framework post-Islamist politics have shifted the locus of religious authority and real power towards the everyday religious citizen, who, as Bayat argues, through the very art of their presence, through their "quiet encroachment of the ordinary" or their "everyday cosmopolitanism" constrain and steer and shift the spectrum of what is politically possible for religious politics.

In a similar vein, Dr. Makram Ouaiss described how strengthening religious informal politics represented an important solution towards building post-conflict society in Lebanon. Giving portraits of faith based and interfaith initiatives, he argued how they have endowed individuals with resources to deal with the aftermath of violence to prevent its reoccurrence through well-founded reconciliation. And Dr. Marwan Rowayheb also underlined the role of civil society and informal politics by calling for the promotion of the reflection that is carried out in closed conferences among youth, civil society and religious actors.

Dr. George Fahmi, of the Carnegie Middle East Center, chronicled how a youth-led civil society movement in Egypt, the Maspiro Youth Union, was effectively able to challenge their religious community's authorities (here the Egyptian Coptic Church) so that their community could more authentically reflect the ideals of democracy and a multi-religious society. Fahmi also highlighted the many dilemmas and battles the Youth Union has faced to do so, and he left a portrait of an uncertain future for them.

While none of these speakers argued that these religiously-inspired, bottom-up initiatives could substitute for formal politics or economic reform or regional insecurities, they argued that formal politics could not succeed without the social trust and social cohesion these initiatives were capable of providing.

In all of these remarks on informal politics, and in many of the papers presented at the conference, the role of education and, closely connected, dialogue, were stressed. Professor Alicia Cabezudo, a professor of Education in Argentina and at the UNESCO CHAIR on Culture of Peace and Human Rights, argued for the necessity of building systematic learning processes in order to build cultures of peace, a task, she noted, that requires just as much dedication, will power and energy as war-making does. Individuals, she observed, need formal and non-formal training in order to adopt an interfaith dialogic approach on theological and political perspectives that are capable of building common understandings and fruitful collaborations. She reflected on the double role of education: that of transmission and that of transformation, arguing that we need today to give a more important place to transformation in educational policies.

Likewise, Professor Patrice Brodeur, director of research at the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) spoke about the various theories, methods and typologies of inter-religious dialogue and how international institutions, like KAICIID, are putting dialogue into practice as a political value. He also argued

that incorporating research on interreligious dialogue can make dialogue more effective. He shared with the group about the recent interreligious meeting of religious leaders from the Middle East at KAICIID and the common Vienna Declaration they wrote at the meeting as a striking example of what this approach might look like. In the Vienna Declaration, a broad coalition of high-ranking religious actors across the Middle East denounced violence in the name of religion and sought to protect religious and cultural diversity in Iraq and Syria through strengthening citizenship.

4) Spirituality and Religious Humanism

Political values for peace can be educated and facilitated by dialogue, but religions also understand them as essential spiritual practices. Thus Professor Harald Suermann underlined the importance of a values based approach of politics and several papers, accordingly, contemplated spiritual practices as essential links which could fruitfully tie religions to good politics. Professor Hadi Adanali of Ankara University, who is also coordinator of the activities of the UN Alliance of Civilizations in Turkey, provided an enlightened reflection of the role of empathy in religion and politics. Empathy, Professor Adanali observed, is an essential religious value and norm which empowers the individual to go beyond their narrow world of self-interest and to understand the other. Empathy makes dialogue possible, but it also can be an important guide for domestic and international politics, taming the political drive for power and self-interest and opening possibilities for cooperation and solidarity.

Other participants further developed the possible spiritualities that religions can offer political values. Dr. Ali Khalifé used a quantitative analysis to search within the Torah, the Quran and the New Testament for common emphases on values such as love, service, justice, mercy and their counterparts. Dr. Afag Sadeq and Professor al Rifai both turned to sufi traditions as keepers of Islam's spiritual heritage and sources to ground the values needed by politics today in justice, pluralism, salvation, deliverance and hope.

Dr. Wajeeha al-Baharna reflected on how religious values and human values coincide provided that they are not captured in a hegemonic framework. Dr. Abi Nader articulated Mohammad Arkoun's spiritual understanding of the Quran as something which was best understood as the heart of everyday people's lives, where an active God is in constant relationship with his people. In a similar manner, Fr. Dr. Bassem El-Rai turned to Benedict XVI to emphasize how the spiritual practice of seeking truth is not simply a moral value to be esteemed, but a necessary political practice for any society seeking to create a common good. Mgr. Gabriele Caccia, Apostolic nuncio to Lebanon, who attended one panel of the conference also emphasized truth seeking as a value, in opposition to regarding oneself as owning the truth, that leads to no compromise. These practices, Dr. William Vendley reminded the group, must become "habits of the heart" and that when they do, they can form a foundation of trust and capacity for strong associational life. Such practices of associationalism and social capital are the soil upon which good democracies grow, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed more than 150 years ago in the then youthful United States of America.

In conclusion, trust, empathy and religious humanism become more concrete and more available through a spiritual commitment to dialogue. Such a dialogue can then allow the growth of real religious intelligence in societies, one that is capable of renewing itself and changing reality in the darkest, perhaps especially the darkest, hours.

The Rev. Alistair MacDonald Radcliffe, who could not attend the conference, raised the question of whether building citizenship could be a fruit of this religious intelligence. Can citizenship be considered as both a political value and a spiritual value? This could be the theme of the next conference, focusing on the need for religious thought to shift its framework, as Professor Daou has put it, from "*closed community*" to *society at large*, with all its richly different religious and cultural components.