



THE  
LUTHERAN  
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Islamische  
Theologie

# Religious Plurality and the Public Space

Joint Christian-Muslim Theological Reflections





RELIGIOUS PLURALITY AND  
THE PUBLIC SPACE  
JOINT CHRISTIAN–MUSLIM  
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

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# INTRODUCTION

In many societies around the globe religious plurality is an integral part of public space. How do religious communities understand and interpret this plurality? How do they engage with other communities and stakeholders in the public? As new dynamics in the field of religion and society have emerged there is a renewed academic interest in these matters. Secularization theory has been critically reviewed while, at the same time, the quest for secular space remains crucial. The vibrant plurality of religious commitments is apparent and religious communities and theologians are challenged to interpret their own traditions in ways that enable the constructive engagement with religious plurality. Worryingly, this endeavor is threatened by fundamentalist perspectives, religious fundamentalisms as well as nationalistic and ethnic identity politics that question the very existence of a shared public space in plural societies.

In plural societies the notion of public space is key when negotiating questions pertaining to justice and peace. It is here that people not only come to discuss their distinct interests, but also to present their manifold worldviews. They engage in meaningful conversations about the various visions of the good life, dignity and the well-being of all in society. These visions are shaped by the different religious and non-religious value commitments and influenced by diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds, family constellations, professional expertise and life experiences.

In January 2014, the Lutheran World Federation, in cooperation with the Centre for Islamic Theology in Münster (Germany), organized an international consultation under the theme “Creating Public Space: The Role of Faith in the Public Sphere.” Christian and Muslim theologians as well as social scientists looked at the role of faith commitments in society, examined the distinctions and relations between religious communities and the state, and analyzed anthropological and theological assumptions guiding the understanding of public space.

Most of the essays included in this publication were first presented at the 2014 consultation. The theological perspectives in the first chapter provide in-depth rationales for why and how Islam and Christianity can contribute to building a shared public space. Three Muslim scholars reflect on Islam’s contribution to the political culture of democracy. They challenge exclusivist agendas and, arguing for dialogue, they defend an understanding of the state as a secular entity that not only is compatible with Islam but, for theological reasons, also necessary. Furthermore,

three Lutheran theologians discuss the role of the church in the public space, insisting on the active and committed engagement in society. They question hegemonic claims of religious communities in the public sphere, affirm the importance of mutual interaction, underline the significance of critical and self-critical theological reflection guiding engagement in the public and highlight the concept of citizenship.

These systematic outlines are deepened through essays in the following chapters that look at more specific dimensions of religious life in the public sphere. As the Bible and the Qur'an are normative reference points for Christianity and Islam respectively, the interpretation of these scriptures strongly influences how these communities engage in public space and how they deal with politics and power. Two contributions discuss the interpretative principles that guide the reading of the scriptures.

Chapter three examines the key question of whether and where we find actual space for conversations between different religious communities. A historical contribution tracks the occasions and conditions for Christian-Muslim dialogue in pre-modern times while reflections on contemporary complex realities come from three different places: Palestine, Brazil and Nigeria. Issues of domination are addressed as well as the complex entanglement of religion and politics. Furthermore, the vital role of creative minorities for plural societies is highlighted.

The final chapter revisits the understanding of secularity, with a contribution from the perspective of the social sciences and the other one from the field of interreligious studies. These two conceptual papers conclude the book and provide insights into how to configure secularity, interreligious relations and public space today.

This publication provides enlightening insider perspectives which have been presented in a dialogical setting and thus represent important public contributions: Muslim and Christian scholars give theological rationales for constructive contributions to public space in plural societies. Scholars coming from twelve different countries around the globe explore theological, scriptural, historical, contextual and sociological perspectives in relation to religious plurality and public space. The contributions come out of dialogical interaction and engagement, and thereby convincingly present and embody the process of jointly creating shared public space.

*Simone Sinn, Mouhanad Khorchide and Dina El Omari*

# THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES



# STATE AND RELIGION IN ISLAM— ISLAM’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF DEMOCRACY

*Mouhanad Khorchide*

The academic debate on religion and politics has been witnessing an increased interest in the return of religion to public life. Within the context of Islam, mention has been made of a “politization of religion,”<sup>1</sup> raising the interesting question of whether or not Islam is compatible with the fundamental principles of liberal democracy.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of their legitimacy, existing power structures within democracies are inevitably based on the fundamental idea that all power emanates from the people, and it may only be legitimately exercised if this is done in accordance with the will of the public.<sup>3</sup> Democracy sees it as its under-

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<sup>1</sup> Schirin Amir-Moazami, *Politisierte Religion: Der Kopftuchstreit in Deutschland und Frankreich* [Politicized Religion: The Hijab Debate in Germany and France] (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2007). Here and passim, author’s own translation.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Riva Kastroyano, “Der Islam auf der Suche nach ‘seinem Platz’ in Frankreich und Deutschland: Identitäten, Anerkennung und Demokratie” [“Islam in Search of ‘Its Place’ in France and Germany: Identities, Recognition and Democracy”], in Michael Minkenberg and Ulrich Willems (eds), *Politik und Religion* [Politics and Religion], *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, Special Issue 33/2002, 184–206; Linda Woodhead, “Secular Privilege, Religious Disadvantage,” in *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 59 (1/2008), 53–58.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Karl Loewenstein, *Verfassungslehre* [Constitutional Theory] (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1959), 148.

lying calling to guarantee individuals' freedom.<sup>4</sup> However, this must not be confused with an absolute and limitless freedom (a libertine concept of freedom); the term "freedom," as understood in a democratic context, means that all people are endowed with certain rights which must be guaranteed and protected by state authorities. This includes fundamental civil rights, such as the right to life; human dignity; the freedom of persons, faith, conscience and others; as well as fundamental political rights, such as the right to vote, or fundamental social and economic rights, for example the right to work. State authorities cannot suspend these rights. The main tool in order to meet these requirements is

[...] the permanent guarantee of control mechanisms for the governed vis-à-vis the governing; the people must have access to specific mechanisms enabling them effectively to control those in power in order to accomplish the normative objective of safeguarding freedom.<sup>5</sup>

Democracy aims to establish an order with the objective of

[...] maintaining a peaceful society and reconciling competing claims to religious truth in their public relationships to each other [...]. The main aim is to guarantee that these competing claims to truth and convictions of people with regard to their personal religious beliefs—where an unconstrained correspondence can no longer be assumed—may be upheld and practiced without impinging on the same right of all other people.<sup>6</sup>

In states governed by the rule of law, democracy represents a political system that only institutionalizes those minimum standards as mandatory that guarantee that all citizens may be as diverse in their cultural and religious convictions as they deem right out of free will. One characteristic of intolerance is the attempt to force one's own beliefs and one's own conception of truth on people adhering to other faiths. Even if the respective believer considers their own truth as the ultimate truth, it should not be turned into a binding truth for everyone. Such an approach is in fact the

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. René Klaff, *Islam und Demokratie: zur Vereinbarkeit demokratischer und islamischer Ordnungsformen, dargestellt am Beispiel der Staatsauffassung Khomeinis* [Islam and Democracy: On the Compatibility of Democratic and Islamic Systems of Order, the Example of the Khomeini's Concept of State] (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1987), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Meyer, *Was ist Demokratie? Eine diskursive Einführung* [What is Democracy? A Discursive Introduction] (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009), 46.

foundation of a theocracy and is at odds with the fundamental principles of a democracy governed by the rule of law. If one really were to decide between claims to religious validity in public life based on the issue of truth, then “[...] states governed by the rule of law as well as democracy would become not only expendable but also illegitimate obstacles to life itself.”<sup>7</sup> However, this does not mean that the issue of truth is ultimately void nor leads to a prescribed form of relativism. What it represents is an institutionalized respect for the issue of truth, as people are free to pursue this question without coercion, and no one is forced to accept one truth or another. Democracy does not require any one religion to renounce its claim to the truth; what it calls for is not making this claim universal. This is a prerequisite for people adhering to different faiths and different ideologies living together in peace and justice within one joint public sphere. Consequently, whether or not a religion is compatible with pluralism is decided by the very question of its ability “[...] to leave the question of truth unanswered in a dialogue on community, its foundations and its ethical and political projects when it comes to other people’s faith.”<sup>8</sup> Interreligious dialogue certainly provides an important contribution to respecting the “other,” as such encounters convey in a comprehensible manner how each party views and justifies truth.

Muslims and non-Muslims who are of the opinion that Islam may not readily be integrated into European states characterized by religious neutrality argue that in Islam the order of society is provided and prescribed by God, while the order of society in a state characterized by religious neutrality is established via an open process of democratic negotiation. As the Qur’an and the Prophetic Tradition (Sunnah) are considered the main sources of Islam, they are also viewed as the main sources for an Islamic order of society. By pointing out the lack of democratic structures in most Islamic countries, people accuse Islam of being one of the main obstacles to the democratization of these countries; vice versa, Christianity as such is portrayed as a religion compatible with democracy. Empirical studies are referred to in order to confirm this. For example, data provided by Freedom House shows that more than seventy percent of predominantly Islamic societies are governed by dictatorial regimes, while of the 145 non-Islamic states included in the survey seventy-six percent have a democratic constitution.<sup>9</sup> The highest proportion of democratic systems is said to be

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ines-Jacqueline Werkner and Antonius Liedhegener, “Einleitung: Von ‘Demokratie und Religion’ zu ‘Religionen und Demokratie’ ” [“Introduction: From ‘Democracy and Religion’ to ‘Religions and Democracy’ ”], in Ines-Jacqueline Werkner et al

found amongst states characterized by Christianity. Manfred G. Schmidt sees a clear correlation between Christianity and democracy,<sup>10</sup> and this selective view reinforces Samuel Huntington's theory of an unavoidable clash of civilizations and the call to the Western world to tackle the threat posed by Islam.

However, a number of research projects draw entirely different conclusions. Alfred Stepan, for example, considers the assumption that Christianity is a prerequisite to democracy to be based on false conclusions.<sup>11</sup> Ulrich Willems is another researcher according to whom liberal democracies are "neither solely [owed to] Christianity nor is their justification in and support of by other religious and ideological traditions an impossibility."<sup>12</sup> The results of the empirical studies conducted by Merkel<sup>13</sup> confirm this view, as both non-Christian democracies and Christian non-democracies exist.

This article will put forward the proposition that the question of whether or not Islam is compatible with democracy is not to be resolved by means of a theological discourse. On the contrary, this question depends on cultural, societal, political and economic frameworks. It is not religions'—including Islam's—primary function to provide a legitimization for democracy but

[to provide] important contributions to motivating a large number of citizens to act as constitutional democrats by sharing an enlightened and liberal concept of religion. Consequently, it is not a possible monopoly of any one religion to en-

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(eds), *Religionen und Demokratie. Beiträge zu Genese, Geltung und Wirkung eines aktuellen politischen Spannungsfeldes* [Religions and Democracy: Contributions to Genesis, Validity and Impact of Current Political Tensions] (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009), 9–14, here 10.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Manfred G. Schmidt, *Demokratiethorien. Eine Einführung* [Theories on Democracy. An Introduction] (Opladen: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2000), 444f.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Stepan, "Religion, Democracy and the Twin Tolerations," in *Journal of Democracy*, 11/3 (2000), 37–57, here 44.

<sup>12</sup> Ulrich Willems, "Weltanschaulich neutraler Staat, christlich-abendländische Kultur und Laizismus. Zu Struktur und Konsequenzen aktueller religionspolitischer Konflikte in der Bundesrepublik" ["Ideologically Neutral State, Christian-Occidental Culture and Laicism"], in Manfred Walther (ed.), *Religion und Politik: Zu Theorie und Praxis des theologisch-politischen Komplexes* [Religion and Politics: On Theory and Practical Issues Regarding the Theological-Political Complex] (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2004), 303–28, here 314.

<sup>13</sup> Wolfgang Merkel, "Religion, Fundamentalismus und Demokratie" ["Religion, Fundamentalism and Democracy"], in Wolfgang Schluchter (ed.), *Fundamentalismus, Terrorismus, Krieg* [Fundamentalism, Terrorism, War] (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2003), 61–86.



able modern democracy which counts but the contribution to a political culture characterized by democracy.<sup>14</sup>

As reasons and motives underlying human actions do not always add up, it is not only the justification of individual fundamental human rights that matters but also the question of whether human actions are actually driven by these fundamental rights. “The question of whether in this specific case drawing on religious sources of truth bridges a gap or widens it remains unanswered and can only be answered by concrete experience.”<sup>15</sup>

Political developments in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last few years have demonstrated that the hypothesis according to which Christianity and democracy are compatible whereas Islam and democracy are incompatible, meaning that a process of democratization in Islamic countries is only possible by means of external pressure, also has a political dimension. As early as 1905, Max Weber<sup>16</sup> put forward a similar proposition according to which Protestant ethics were said to be the driving force behind European capitalism. To him, it was the inward asceticism of Protestantism that prepared the ground for ethically rigorous elements, in particular to access the world of business, thus creating an ethical concept based on capitalism.

However, considering the adherence to Islam as the reason for the lack of democratic structures in many Islamic countries fails to grasp the complexity of historical developments. The decentralized structures characteristic of pre-modern European societies, with their small and competing feudal communities, favored the emergence of independently acting middle classes at the periphery of these communities, which in turn proved favorable to the development of capitalism, industrialization and processes of democratization. Oriental societies, on the other hand, were—independent of their predominant religion—mainly characterized by centralized, despotic states with weak structures of decentralization. Within these societies, the entire middle class was subjected to a ruling minority; this has been an obstacle to social transformation and therefore democratization, partly to this very day.

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<sup>14</sup> Meyer, *op. cit.* (note 6), 51.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism and other Writings*, ed. and transl. by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York and London: Penguin Books, 2002).

## RELIGION AND STATE

While the USA saw the establishment of a modern state and the connection of religion and human rights without any religious wars or conflicts between state and church, the democratization of societies in continental Europe was accompanied by severe conflicts between state and church and the Christian faith. The fact that they were so closely linked to the Ancien Régime was one of the reasons why Christianity and the church were opposed.<sup>17</sup> Whereas religious policies in the USA aim to prioritize the protection of religion above the state, modern continental European states tend to favor an approach that prioritizes the protection of the state above religion. Up until the fall of the German Empire in 1918, Christianity had a certain claim within the public sphere in Germany. Ever since the French Revolution of 1789, secularization and privatization brought about changes in the status of religion in communal life. Christianity, which up until then had served a constitutional function, was replaced as a means of legitimizing political systems. Since then, Catholicism has also seen a change from conservative traditionalistic concepts to liberal democratic ideas.

This change is accompanied by the increasing importance of the role of liberal political Catholicism, which is mainly distinguished from official church positions by its close link to everyday life. The relationship between Catholicism and democratic constitutional states can no longer be understood by means of official church documents and stances alone; it must rather—in line with cultural and social contexts of Christianity—also be viewed from the perspective of more encompassing church trends (lay Catholicism) and the activities of Catholics as citizens and politicians.<sup>18</sup>

According to Tocqueville, religion mainly conveys general norms for the behavior of individuals towards each other, as well as their connection to the social order; however, the specific form this takes depends on the individual culture. Religions are

[...] by way of their very nature used to viewing human beings as they are, without taking into consideration how laws, customs and traditions of a specific country may have modified the general human character in a certain way. Their main func-

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Rudolf Uertz, “Katholizismus und demokratischer Verfassungsstaat” [“Catholicism and Democratic Constitutional States”], in Manfred Brocker and Tine Stein (eds), *Christentum und Demokratie* [Christianity and Democracy] (Darmstadt: WBG, 2006), 114–130, here 114 ff.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

tion is to order people's relationship with God and general rights and obligations of people towards each other, regardless of the form a society takes.<sup>19</sup>

It follows that Tocqueville distinguishes between religion as such and its cultural implications. In terms of a comparison between Europe and the USA, he comes to the following conclusion: Christian faith, based on its nature, is by no means tied to a specific type of societal or political system, such as monarchy, aristocracy or democracy. On the contrary, it may be combined with various structures of political power. The differentiation between theological-biblical elements and political-cultural factors, which has a firm basis in Christianity, was the driving force behind the change from traditional and conservative ideas to democratic political ethics based on human rights in the nineteenth century. However, it is only since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) that this differentiation has been firmly established as part of the official social doctrines of the church.

### **ISLAM—A LEGALISTIC RELIGION?**

The call by some Muslim fundamentalists for the establishment of sharia as an alternative legal system in Europe seems to suggest that Islam is characterized by a complete legal system that is universal and applies to all aspects of life. The legislative aspect of the Islamic sources (Qur'an and Sunnah) in particular creates much tension and partially provokes fears amongst European societies—hence the question of whether or not Islam is compatible with specific national constitutions. The hypothesis is often put forward that Islamic jurisprudence, or at least parts of it, are incompatible with the fundamental values of European societies. This hypothesis is not just upheld by critics of Islam but also by Muslim fundamentalists who use this very reasoning in order to call or hope for the establishment of sharia in Europe. However, neither the Qur'an nor Sunnah refer to a complete legal system. Of the 6 236 Qur'anic verses only a few refer to legal aspects; the situation for the Sunnah is similar. In the Qur'an, Muhammad's message as well as the Qur'an itself are referred to as *huda*, an all-encompassing term for the purification of the heart, piety, divine love, human love, sincere actions and similar concepts. It follows that *huda* does not refer to legal aspects. The Qur'an's key message is the transformation of people's inner being. The Prophet Muhammad expressed it as follows: "I was sent in order

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<sup>19</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Der alte Staat und die Revolution* [The Old Regime and the Revolution] (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1969), 23.

to perfect the character of humanity.”<sup>20</sup> Muhammad saw his message as a spiritual and ethical message, not a legal one.

After Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had abolished the Caliphate in 1924, Ali Abdarrazıq wrote a book entitled *Islam and the Foundations of Power*. In this book, he criticized the system of the Caliphate, as the Caliph’s claim to holding a position of ruling power based on a divine right or, as some Caliph’s referred to it, being “God’s shadow on Earth,” is nothing other than a superstitious cult based on images.<sup>21</sup> This notion is incompatible with monotheism. Abdarrazıq provides a very important insight to the discussion on Islam and politics by pointing out that the Qur’an contains no detailed instructions as to how states should be governed. Consequently, it makes no sense to interpret the Qur’an as a legal code, setting standards for the governance of states; this would even be at odds with the spirit of the revelation. As a consequence, Abdarrazıq calls for a clear distinction between Muhammad’s prophetic mission and his role as political teacher in the Medinan community. According to him, Muhammad can only claim religious authority by acting as a prophet, not in his role as political leader. A number of more modern Muslim scholars, such as Muhammad Said al-Ashmawy, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid and Fuad Zakariya, pick up on Abdarrazıq’s thoughts.<sup>22</sup> The following section will elaborate on the distinction between Mohammad’s role as a prophet and his role as a politician.

## MECCAN VERSUS MEDINAN QUR’ANIC VERSES

According to the Islamic faith, the Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by God—via the intermediary of the Angel Gabriel—over a time span of twenty-three years (CE 610–632). Until 622, Muhammad lived in Mecca and, later (until 632), in Medina. This means that according to Muslim belief the Qur’an was not revealed all at once but piece by piece. For twenty-three years, Qur’anic revelations were a tangible part of people’s lives and addressed various topics. The Qur’an is not an abstract book, removed from people’s lives; its aim is to provide guidance to humanity, which is also an expression of God’s mercy.

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<sup>20</sup> Passed on according to Mālik.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ali Abdarrazıq, “L’Islam et les bases du pouvoir,” in *Révue des Études Islamiques*, vol. VII (1933), 353–91 and vol. VIII (1934), 163–222.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Heiner Bielefeldt, *Muslime im säkularen Rechtsstaat. Integrationschancen durch Religionsfreiheit* [Muslims in the Secular State Governed by the Rule of Law. Opportunities for Integration through Religious Freedom] (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag 2003), 77.

However, what does “guidance” mean in this context? A very common notion, also among Muslims, is that of guidance primarily referring to legal aspects. According to this notion, the Qur’an is mainly a legal book, establishing a comprehensive legal system for all aspects of human life. According to this logic, Islam is mainly about complying with specific laws, which the Qur’an explicitly describes and makes mandatory for all times and all places. This is the dominant understanding of Islam nowadays, which also results in many people in Europe being afraid of a religion that stakes a claim to introducing its own laws, partially competing with existing laws in the respective nation states. However, the fact that only two percent of all Qur’anic verses refer to legal aspects (and of these a large number make reference to religious practices such as prayer, fasting, etc.) necessitates a more differentiated discussion of the Qur’an. The contents covered by the Qur’an can be summed up under the following categories:

- Contents referring to belief (monotheism, resurrection)
- Religious service (ritual prayer, fasting, etc.)
- General ethical principles (sincerity, honesty, social responsibility, etc.)
- Narrative passages
- Liturgy
- Legislation

The Qur’anic verses revealed in Mecca (610–622) focus on the revelation of monotheism, Judgment Day as well as fundamental beliefs and general principles, such as justice, equality, freedom and others. It is not until the Medinan Phase (622–632) that legal aspects, such as inheritance law, legal sanctions for transgressions in society, etc. were revealed. In this phase, the Prophet Muhammad was concerned with laying the foundations for a state. For example, the Meccan surah 17 forbids adultery, murder and theft, amongst other things. It reads:

Nor come nigh to adultery: For it is a shameful [deed] and an evil, opening the road (to other evils). Nor take a life—which Allah has made sacred [...]. Come not nigh to the orphan’s property, except to improve it.<sup>23</sup>

However, the Meccan surahs do not establish legal sanctions for the violation of these prohibitions for the here and now. The Medinan verses on the other hand do refer to legal action in the case of adultery, murder and theft:

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<sup>23</sup> Qur’an 17:32–34.

The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication—flog each of them with a hundred stripes.<sup>24</sup>

O ye who believe! The law of equality is prescribed to you in case of murder: the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the woman.<sup>25</sup>

As to the thief, male or female, cut off his or her hands.<sup>26</sup>

Within this context, the question must be raised of how Muslims are to deal with the legal mechanisms mentioned in the Qur'an and the Prophetic Tradition that concern the order of society. Are these to be understood as divine norms which must be literally applied to Muslims living today and in Europe in order for them to lead a life as Muslims? Or are they to be understood as principles? The principle of justice as the highest principle of a social order and the means of bringing about a just social order in particular would then vary according to context, depending on human expertise. In other words: on the one hand, we must be concerned with the question of how revelation is to be interpreted; on the other, with the role of the Prophet Muhammad conveying God's message and his role as head of state.

The Qur'an was revealed in a discursive manner; it is the result of dialogue, debate, argumentation, acceptance and rejection.<sup>27</sup> It was revealed over twenty-three years, different passages at different times and in various places as well as political, economic and social contexts for which it offered the correct option for the specific context each time, leading to various options. The Qur'an is by no means a divine monologue directed at humanity, but a dialogue between God and humanity in order to meet people's interests. The following five principles are the underlying maxims of laws and regulations pertaining to the social order mentioned in the Qur'an:

- Justice
- Inviolability of human dignity
- Freedom of all people
- Equality of all people
- Social and ethical responsibility of humanity.

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<sup>24</sup> Qur'an 24:2.

<sup>25</sup> Qur'an 2:178.

<sup>26</sup> Qur'an 5:38.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Naşr Hāmid Abū-Zaid, *Gottes Menschenwort. Für ein humanistisches Verständnis des Koran* [God's Human Voice. For a Humanistic Interpretation of the Qur'an] (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2008).

On the one hand, these five principles serve as guidance for deductive methods (*istinbāt*) of individual legal provisions taken from the text; on the other, they represent a universal framework for the religious legitimization of legal provisions and provisions pertaining to the social order.

## PROPHET VERSUS HEAD OF STATE

In order to understand Islam's spiritual and ethical message as being compatible with modern constitutional democracies, as opposed to a definition of Islam as a legalistic religion, it is necessary to distinguish between Muhammad's role as prophet, proclaiming the divine message, and his role as head of state (in particular in Medina), when he attempted to establish a constitutional state.<sup>28</sup> In his role as prophet, Muhammad preached monotheism and religious practices as well as general principles valid for all societies. In later years, as head of state in Medina (from 622), it was Muhammad's objective to implement these principles, drawing on the resources and knowledge available to him on the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century. However, Islamic scholars, who view Muhammad's attempts and the respective Qur'anic passages as part of his divine message, consider all legal provisions and the entire social order in Medina, including gender roles, as mandatory divine laws, independent of context, to be aspired to by all Muslims, including the ones in modern Europe. Yet, such an interpretation prevents any opportunity to develop the legal order of Medina further from even arising and hampers the acceptance of any other form of social order. Such an interpretation stipulates backward thinking for all Muslims.

Some Islamic scholars primarily focused on the literal wording of Qur'anic and prophetic texts and looked for clearly defined, general criteria for establishing norms; the social context was disregarded. Islamic scholars cannot resolve legal, political, economic, medical and scientific issues, but they should call on relevant experts to act to the best of their knowledge and belief in order to safeguard and realize people's interests. What is needed in order to achieve this is interdisciplinary cooperation.

What legal scholars agree on in a state governed by the rule of law can be termed "Islamic"—regardless of whether or not this specific state is Islamic—if the interests of the general public are upheld and none of the five principles mentioned above is violated, precisely because safeguarding people's interests is the objective of Islamic jurisprudence. This logic is

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Šihābu d-dīn Al Qarāfi, *Al furūq* [Differences] (Beirut: Dār al-furqān li-n-našr wa-t-tawzīʿ, 2002), 221.

particularly important for Muslims in Europe in order to dispel the myth of a discrepancy between “Islamic” and “European” laws construed by some fundamentalists.

## **DO WE NEED A QUR’ANIC JUSTIFICATION FOR DEMOCRACY?**

One of the key characteristics of modern constitutional democracies is the absolute validity of individuals’ fundamental rights. The latter set limits for the decision-making powers of majorities. Muslims rejecting democracy accuse it of a “dictatorship of relativism,” as any truth claim could then be questioned by secular reasoning and be put into perspective by alternatives. It is said that only religious truths based on absolute certainties could guarantee social order and serve as safeguards against the attacks of relativism. But even with a certain form of relativism forming indeed part of democracy, universal fundamental rights (including mainly freedom, justice, solidarity, pluralism, tolerance, respect for others, responsibility, etc.) set inviolable limits. It follows that modern-day relativism is not bottomless.

In order to uphold its own suppositions, restricted cultural relativism presupposes a framework of universal fundamental rights and rules for democratic decision making which is precisely not subject to relativism.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, relativism in the context of democracy does not mean that anyone is prevented from finding absolute truth for themselves and from living accordingly. What democracy does prevent is making one absolute truth binding for everyone in a community. The relativism inherent in democracy thus guarantees a peaceful coexistence of diverse ideologies and religions in the public sphere.

Therefore this pluralism is the necessary prerequisite for enabling truth in modern cultures [...]. Whoever wants to suspend it in favor of a competing religious stance essentially aims for a dictatorship, if “only” one of the mind.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, some Muslim reform scholars attempt to find an “Islamic” foundation for the fundamental values of democracy. In a talk on sharia and the values of the Enlightenment in 2009, Tariq Ramadan evokes the scholar al-Guwainī (who died in 1085) and lists six aims as the most important aims of the Islamic sharia:

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<sup>29</sup> Meyer, *op. cit.* (note 6), 51.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.



The first principle is religion, *din*, which must be protected without fail, to be more precise anything from the Qur'an and Sunnah. The second principle is the person, *nafs*, i.e., personality or personal integrity. The third principle is intellect, *aql*, which is safeguarded and respected by the Qur'an. It is against this backdrop that we must understand the Qur'anic prohibition of alcohol. When we are drunk we lose ourselves, our own intellect, and therefore show no respect towards our own being. The fourth principle includes the protection of family and relationships, and the fifth goods, *mal*, at our disposal. Al Qarafi then also adds *erd* which translates to something akin to dignity. This is a very important principle as anything Islamic aims to guarantee dignity.<sup>31</sup>

Ramadan concludes that important values can be deduced from this, "such as freedom, equality and the inviolability of human dignity" and that "fundamental values of the Enlightenment can be deduced from the fundamental principles of the sharia."<sup>32</sup> However, continuing to read al-Ġuwainī's explanation of how he came to the objectives Ramadan refers to it becomes obvious that he did not base them on reason. In the Qur'an and Sunnah, he searched for things that are to be protected according to Islamic teachings and the violation of which would lead to legal consequences (corporal punishment). By using inductive reasoning he came up with five prohibitions, in turn deducing five things which are to be protected according to Islamic teachings. From the prohibition to change one's religion he deduced the protection of religion; from the prohibition of murder (of a Muslim) he deduced the protection of life; from the prohibition to drink alcohol he deduced the protection of the intellect; from the prohibition of theft he deduced the protection of property; from the prohibition of adultery he deduced the protection of the family. According to this reasoning, the general aim of Islamic teachings is the protection of these five things.<sup>33</sup> This method is a purely legal approach, and al-Ġuwainī's reflections were very simple. He put forward the hypothesis that God wants the protection of these things and therefore decrees corporal punishment in cases of non-compliance. And as sharia only decrees corporal punishment for non-compliance with the above-named things, their protection is to be viewed as sharia's highest aim. Taking into consideration this background information, it seems anything but reasonable to agree with

<sup>31</sup> Tariq Ramadan, "Scharia und Werte der Aufklärung" ["Sharia and the Values of the Enlightenment"], in Klaus von Stosch and Hamideh Mohagheghi (eds), *Moderne Zugänge zum Islam* [Modern Approaches to Islam] (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010), 88.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Cf. 'Abdu l-malik al-Ġuwainī, *Al burhān* [Proof] (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-'ilmiyya li-n-našr wa-t-tawzi', 1997), 923ff.

the observation that values such as freedom and equality can be deduced from these thoughts. For example, based on capital punishment stipulated for falling away from Islam, al-Ġuwainī considers the protection of religion as the most important objective of sharia.

Within this context, it must be questioned whether or not Muslims must find a Qur'anic verse corresponding to each value of the Enlightenment in order to make Islam compatible with the rule of law. Is it necessary to derive democracy from the Qur'an in order to prove its compatibility with Islam? What is the role of human reason as an independent form of guidance to humanity? Muslim scholars who insist on basing all their deductions on Qur'an and Sunnah put forward the argument that these Islamic sources contain detailed regulations for everything, including the order of society. According to this approach, reason is limited to understanding texts and deducing norms from this text; however, it is unable to come up with an order for society on its own accord.

The eighth century saw the emergence of a question that is crucial to our discussion, i.e., the question of whether good and evil are characteristics of actions or categories established by God: does Islam stipulate something because it is good; or is it good because it is stipulated? The Ash'arites were of the opinion that only God may decide what is good or evil; human reasoning may not make this decision while the Mu'tazilites maintained that good and evil are characteristics of actions. Consequently, reason is able to distinguish between good and evil, regardless of the revelation. According to the Ash'arite concept, people act in a good way when they obey God; according to the Mu'tazilite concept, they do so by following what their reasoning suggests to them is good. Reason therefore can be the path to eternal salvation, and the Mu'tazilites believed in reason as an independent source of normative propositions.

This Mu'tazilite position allows for revelation and reason not to be played off against each other. It is not necessary to prove that what reason suggests must previously have been suggested by revelation. To take the thought even further, we could say that reason is a medium of revelation. While according to Islam the Qur'an is God's ultimate Word, God still reveals Godself through human reasoning. Following this thought, we do not need to find a Qur'anic foundation for achievements through reasoning in order to find legitimacy in an Islamic context as long as nothing is at odds with Qur'anic principles. It would then be revelation's duty to call people to reflect, to remind them of their ethical and social responsibility and to allow for them to experience God in a spiritual manner.

According to this understanding, there should be no such thing as a specifically Muslim form of social order. Following Tocqueville, it is possible to make a distinction between Islam as a religion and its cultural

implications. What Tocqueville puts forward for the Christian faith is also true for Islam. Following this logic, Islam is by no means limited to a specific social and political order based on its essence; on the contrary, it can be combined with different forms of governance, provided they are not at odds with the general principles of the Qur'an, including mainly justice, human dignity, equality, freedom and the social responsibility of humanity.

The distinction between theological-Qur'anic elements and political-cultural factors within an Islamic context (including the distinction between Muhammad's role as a prophet and his role as head of state) is a necessary condition for a transformative process taking us away from a definition of Islam as a legalistic religion towards a spiritual and ethical religion. The history of Islam has witnessed several examples of democratic approaches which Muslims did not consider incompatible with Islam. In his book *Parliament and Shura*,<sup>34</sup> Michael Mitterauer outlines the liberal reforms at the beginning of Sultan Abdul Hamid II's term of office. Back then, in 1876, a constitutional draft was drawn up which read:

The Sultan remains Caliph, religious head of the Muslims and head of state; the Sultan has full sovereignty; however, the people's representatives may object to acts of despotism; the people's representatives are elected representatives, their election being based on the census; all subjects of the Turkish Empire, regardless of faith or nationality, have active and passive franchise; the ministers are appointed by the Sultan and are accountable to the people's representatives.<sup>35</sup>

The question of whether or not Islam is compatible with democracy should not be posed or treated as a purely theological question. The actual issue is the social framework which allows for political participation. Mitterauer hits the mark when he writes:

It is not political discourse that creates political life. Political theory refers back to an existing reality. It then does not suffice to assume a history of terms. It is not the meaning of "estate," "parliament" or "shura" which matters. Much more generally, it is the continuity or discontinuity of institutions for political participation that matters, regardless of how this was referred to by the people of a certain era.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Mitterauer, *Parlament und Schura. Ratsversammlungen und Demokratieentwicklung in Europa und der islamischen Welt* [Parliament and Shura. Council Meetings and the Development of Democracy in Europe and the Islamic World] (Wien: Picus Verlag, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Cited according to Mitterauer, *ibid.*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 18f.

Processes of political transformation can only be successful if they take into consideration independent cultural traditions from a specific culture. With regard to the Muslim world, Mitterauer suggests developing the “Shura approach”; he would like to see this implemented in politics. When looking back in history to when the first Caliph was appointed it becomes apparent that there was no general definition of Shura; none of the early Caliphate elections resembled one another. If Shura is considered the main Islamic political principle, then this principle remains trapped in the seventh century. Any further development is prevented. It follows that we must understand the principles of Shura as mentioned in the Qur’an as something culturally specific and not treat it as a religious phenomenon; by doing so, it is possible to develop this principle further, in line with modern democracy.

# DIALOGICAL CONVERSATION TO SEARCH FOR PRINCIPLES OF INTERFAITH RELATIONS: THE FUTURE OF PLURALISTIC WORLD ORDER

*Abdulaziz Sachedina*

## **INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

In my initial research on the topic of freedom of religion and conscience in my earlier work on *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*<sup>1</sup> (2001), I found that I was confined to and even trapped in familiar and conventional concepts of Islamic juridical tradition, unable to expand the horizons of the possible and desirable interpretation that was sometimes implicit and at other times explicit in the Islamic revelation.

Against the backdrop of my research since this time, I now believe that without the recognition of religious pluralism as a principle of mutual recognition and respect among faith communities, and without affirming the identification of religious morality with moral rationality of public discourse, the community of nation states is faced with endless violence and radical extremism, propelled by an uncompromising stance in the matter of exclusive religious truth and perspectival rather than objective morality.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Posner, *The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6, maintains that there is no trans-historical or extra-cultural authoritative source for our moral obligations. A form of moral relativism is dominant in an adaptationist conception of morality, in which “morality is judged nonmorally [...]

Whereas I have taken up the challenge of endorsing the universal morality that undergirds the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR] and to demonstrate that Islamic theological ethics holds enormous foundational potential to support the principles of universal moral law that govern social cooperation that are common to all human societies, the problematic of exclusivist theology that undermines this universality remains to be unpacked.

I can assert without any reservations that the impending danger to human relations and the human rights regime will come from both moral relativist arguments as well as exclusionary theological doctrines. Moral relativist arguments are self-defeatist in the sense that the moment cultural relativism enters human rights discourse they unwittingly endorse human rights violations as acceptable in the context of the particular cultural valuation of human dignity.

For the last forty years I have observed the emergence of interfaith dialogue. Differences, even as they appear irreconcilable, are an indispensable part of each community's unique collective identity. No community, however enlightened, is willing to abandon its exclusive religious identity and its claim to salvation. Interfaith dialogue, in my opinion, has essentially remained political-academic without much impact on the ordinary believer's negative perceptions of the religious "other."

## **AREAS OF CONFLICT BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS NORMS AND ISLAM**

The requirement to abide by religious and metaphysical neutrality in the public sphere is at the heart of all public claims regarding consensual politics to advance constitutional democratic governance. Such a requirement excludes that moral and metaphysical claims have a bearing on political choices in terms of specific religious doctrines and commitments. The theoretical presupposition of the UDHR, undeniably, is constructed in terms of the neutrality requirement in the public domain so that human rights norms find their cross-cultural application in the secular mode of morality, without any reference to revelation or religion. This presumption

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by its contribution to the survival, or other ultimate goals, of a society or some group within it." Such a view would ultimately lead to the irreconcilable differences among world communities regarding universal moral values that provide human rights norms their validity internationally. I do concede that cultures retrieve and apply these norms in the context of their social-political experience variedly; but they cannot afford to negate them as being relative to their humanity, otherwise it will be impossible to speak about the fundamental right to freedom of conscience and religion.

about the normative universality attached to the UDHR is rejected by the Muslim traditionalists, who assert the right of individuals and groups to voice their religious commitments in the public sphere. The latter aspect of traditionalist public theology is also a major source for the deep-seated suspicion of modernity and its negative ramifications for the sacredness of the revealed texts that function as the foundation of traditional legitimacy.

Taking the case of freedom of religion, for example, one can detect three major areas of differences in reflections related to international human rights norms of freedom of religion and the Islamic juridical tradition in the context of diverse Muslim cultures:

- First, the freedom of the individual to choose a religion other than Islam of which they are a member
- Second, the relationship between Muslim political authority and religious belief and whether the state has the right to enforce religious beliefs and considerations
- Third, the irreconcilable claims of the exclusive and final Islamic truth and its implications for intercommunal and international public order.

From an Islamic juridical perspective, the first area of difference dealing with conversion leads to ascribing apostasy, heresy and promotion of religion or belief and proselytism that negatively impact upon the community-centered salvation in Islam. The Islamic laws of apostasy are totally at odds with the human rights articles and their insistence on every human being having the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which includes the right to change religion or belief.

The second area of difference raises the implications of the state-religion relationship on the rights of religious minorities in Islamic states, where a Muslim majority claims a privileged relationship with the state, and where state and religion are intertwined to create a national religion with special considerations in imposing its values in the public square.

The third area of difference between Islamic tradition and the universal human rights standards is associated with the relationships among different faith communities when Islamic doctrines of superiority and exclusivity impinge upon the essentially pluralist nature of the modern nation-state and its commitment to the international human rights standards based on neutrality in matters of religions and beliefs.

In the Islamic tradition, there is a tension between whether human beings are endowed with the natural capacity to choose and act, and whether all their actions are predetermined by God.

It is worth keeping in mind that the essential element in the above-cited three areas of disagreement between Islamic tradition and international human rights is the exclusionary theology and its implications for the freedom of religion article (Article 18 of the UDHR) that promotes individual autonomy to determine their spiritual destiny without any interference from religious or political establishments. From the traditionalist point of view, what appears to be a predicament for religiously minded people is that while the declaration (UDHR) supports the individual's right to believe what they wish regarding the implementation of divinely ordained norms and values, it does not endorse the freedom of one's decision to act upon one's convictions. This contradiction is not so much in Article 18 as it is in its implementation within those Muslim states with a Muslim majority. According to these religious scholars in states with a Muslim majority, while on the one hand the UDHR upholds the freedom to believe and to manifest one's belief in practice, on the other, it negatively evaluates religiously inspired political activity and even considers it incompatible with democratic governance. However, what has been overlooked in this critical assessment of the UDHR is any attempt to rethink the sharia values in order to bring them in line with universal norms of human rights articles and to account meticulously for extra-revelatory sources of international law that are based on a secular estimation of religious pluralism as a principle of coexistence and cooperation among various inter- and intra-faith communities.

Muslim religious discourse on the subject of pluralism indicates that there is a vehement rejection of any such notion that would take away the unique claim of Islam as the only religion that is acceptable to God. At the foundational level, and, more particularly, in affording the international document cultural legitimacy in Muslim societies, religious discourse is not only licit but indispensable for developing reciprocity of reason-giving features of global society in which the human rights regime must guarantee the right freely to exercise one's religion.

In comparison to the traditionalist exclusionary theology, modern educated Muslims, who see their faith in cultural terms as an important source of their identity, have shown little resistance in complying with appropriate public discourse that does not deny the integrity of their religious identity and yet complies with non-sectarian rationality that undergirds the freedom of religion article in the UDHR. Nevertheless, as my fieldwork suggests, even among the educated Muslims there is no whole-hearted acceptance of the culturally dominant secular morality of the West which they believe undergirds the universal declaration.

My readings on the present militantly radical Islamic movements force me to be cautious in suggesting the secularization of the Islamic tradition with its comprehensive doctrines that claim relevant application in all



spheres of human society, both spiritual and temporal. Such a proposition has become the breeding ground for radicalism and reactionary politics of Muslim extremism. In the Muslim world, the modernist discourse is associated with agnostic secular culture that defines the public forum and its discourse. It is culturally illegitimate to speak about the form of secularism that not only asserts hegemony over discourse in the public forum, but also aspires to transform Islam into its image and likeness.

From its inception, Islam, as a source of spiritual and temporal life of its community, has been directly involved in setting the purpose of government and regulating inter-human relationships in society. At present, with the weakening of the state's overall influence in directing the moral and political life of its citizens, Islam has once again stepped in to assume its critical role in providing guidelines for an ideal public order. However, under its traditionalist interpreters, historical Islam lacks the conceptual framework to develop a modern notion of citizenship. Historical Islamic tradition has grown to be notoriously exclusive in its theology and discriminatory in its juridical tradition. Whereas the Qur'an treats the diversity of religions as a divinely ordained system, and the unification of all humanity under one confessional tradition beyond human power, Islamic juridical tradition empowers Muslim governments to impose restrictions and discriminate against non-Muslim minorities by reducing them to second-class citizens.

The fundamental problem in establishing the freedom of religion in the Islamic tradition has been a lack of serious conceptual analysis to distinguish between the strictly religious and the strictly political. Muslim jurists were, more or less, aware of the two separate spheres of human activity in the realm of spiritual and temporal existence. Accordingly, they had distinguished separate jurisdictions in formulating the spiritual in distinction from the temporal in Islamic jurisprudence. The human-God relationship, *ibadat*, as part of the strictly spiritual relevance, permanently remains beyond the reach of human institutions, including political power; in contrast, human-human relationships, *mu'amalat*, retain their secular relevance under the legal and consensual actions that must be undertaken as part of one's reciprocal responsibility in all human institutions. This separation of jurisdictions in the sharia could have served as the foundation of freedom of religion and conscience which was beyond any human institutional control.

## **TRADITIONALIST ENGAGEMENT WITH PLURALISM**

There are three variable categories of Islamic tradition that continue to exercise influence on and shape the public forum and its discourse in Muslim societies. Essentially, Islam as a world-embracing tradition inspires and

sustains a civilization based on a civil religion that embraces pluralistic ideas and concern for those who are not adherents of its creed and practice. This kind of Islamic understanding provides moral grounds that enable the faith community to establish relations with other communities. The second kind of Islam, which many modern Muslims find relevant to their situation in the context of ever-shrinking national and cultural boundaries and the emergence of global universalism at many levels of their material and cultural connection to the larger human communities, is guided by conventional wisdom and moral insights provided by one's participation in a plurality of communities under the dictum of "live and let live." The third kind of religious discourse encapsulates the unique and exclusive experience of Islamic truth that is based on the fundamental doctrine that human prosperity in this and the world to come is restricted to the adherents of Islamic revelation. This kind of religious discourse does not take interfaith dialogue as an intellectual and sincere endeavor to understand the religious "other" as one's equal. Rather, it is taken as an opportunity to convert the "misguided other" to one's own tradition. Hence, it is viewed as mission work, not very different from the evangelical efforts to save the "pagan other."

The phenomenological integrity of Islamic public theology depends on the acknowledgement of the differences between the traditional and modern perspectives on human nature, society and the world at large. Such an analysis can lead to the deciphering of the ways in which scriptural resources were retrieved and manipulated to justify one or the other interpretation that impacted on the reality of religious diversity in terms of interfaith relations or freedom of religion in Muslim societies. Both modernists and religiously-oriented intellectuals fail to emphasize the fact that, to a large extent, social and political history impacts upon the hermeneutics of the revealed texts. Remarkably, different periods of Muslim history have generated different interpretations of the Qur'an in consonance with the social and political conditions that faced the community. A lack of awareness regarding the historicism of the normative sources in traditionalist Muslim scholarship leads to many misunderstandings and unjustified accusations about Muslims and their scriptures among non-Muslim powers.

The recognition of religious pluralism within a community of faithful promises to advance the practical principle of inclusiveness in which the existence of competing claims to the religious truth need not precipitate conflict within religiously and culturally varied societies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David Novak, *Covenantal Rights: A Study in Jewish Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5ff. discusses the relation between "person" and "community" and human existence in terms of a person's participation in a series of communities.

Religious pluralism, it is worth emphasizing, is not peculiar to the modern world of increasing interdependence brought about by the phenomenal technological advancement that has changed the way in which we think about the “other.” All religious communities have required the faithful to search for peaceful ways of dealing with comparable and competing claims of exclusive salvation in other faith traditions. The major task confronting the early Muslim community was to secure identity for its followers within the God-centered worldview on which different groups had claims. The community provided necessary instruments of integration and authenticity without denying other religious groups their due share in God-centered religious identity. Muslim polity was founded on some form of inclusiveness in the public sphere to deal with the broad range of problems arising from the encounter of Muslims with non-Muslims living together. These historical and scripture-based precedents should lead contemporary Muslim societies to institutionalize pluralism without having to succumb to secularizing Islam and sever its connection to the transcendence founded upon God-centered pluralism. More pertinently, it should lead them to affirm the right of all human beings to freedom of religion and conscience.

The ability to accept or reject faith and to pursue an ethical life presupposes the existence of an innate capacity that can guide a person to a desired goal. This innate capacity is part of human nature—the *fitra*—with which God shapes humanity (Q. 91:7-10). This innate capacity encompasses the faculty of moral reasoning. Conscience in the Qur’an is connected to the source of ethical knowledge because its point of reference is human nature and its inherent ability to shape laws of conduct

God’s guidance is an exaltation of individual conscience as opposed to forcible, collective conformism; hence, the responsibility for the salvation of each Muslim lies in their own hands rather than with any religious authority.

If the function of religious guidance through revelation is to provide precepts and examples to all men and women in worshipping God and in dealing justly with their fellow humans, then it presupposes individual responsibility that flows from an inward stance, a “natural faith”<sup>4</sup> that lies at the heart of any religious and moral commitment. The Qur’an differentiates between formal submission to the sacred authority—which could become mere utterance of the formula of faith without any real commitment to uphold God’s commands—and the faith born of the voluntary consent of conscience, free of external coercion, developing from a keen spiritual and moral awareness and motivation.<sup>5</sup> The faith that enters

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<sup>4</sup> I have adopted the phrase from Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-kabīr*, Vol. 25:120, where he believes this to be sufficient for the proper affirmation of the unity of God as explained in the revelation.

<sup>5</sup> Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *al-Mizān*, Vol. 18:328 and Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī zilāl al-qur’ān*, Vol. 6:3349 make a distinction between a deeper commitment through *īmān* and formal submission

the “heart” (another term for “conscience” in the Qur’an) is the result of a choice innately available to all human beings, which is then strengthened and assisted by revelation. In this sense, faith is freely and directly negotiated between God and human beings and cannot be compelled. This is an extremely important observation about individual autonomy in matters of faith. The Qur’anic utterance “No compulsion is there in religion” (Q. 2:256) seems to be saying that a person cannot be deprived of civil rights on account of a religious conviction, no matter how distasteful it might be to the dominant faith community.<sup>6</sup>

The free exercise of religion and beliefs is an inalienable right of all human persons. The cornerstone of religious pluralism is the verse “No compulsion is there in religion.” Since no authority can coerce an individual to believe or to accept a particular faith, human beings are free to negotiate their personal faith and its consequential connection to a community to which that faith commitment relates the individual. Whereas in the matters of private faith the position of the Qur’an is “non-interventionist,” that is, human authority in any form needs to defer to individuals’ acting on their own internal convictions; in the public projection of that faith, the Qur’anic stance is based on the coexistence among faith communities, even if one among them enjoys a majority in terms of membership and political power. Without denying the uniqueness of its own message, the dominant community needs to leave the public space non-coercive and cognizant of the other communities’ right to follow their religious practices without any impediment. In this particular sense, religious discourse needs to recast its spirituality into moral commitments, materially equivalent to those of secular morality, so that it can participate in the universalistic aspirations of the public order to establish justice for all, regardless of their creed, gender or color. It is in no sense a thoroughgoing moral reduction of religion to morality, as Immanuel Kant would have put it in the context of Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

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through *islām*. As Quṭb points out explicitly: “This external *islām* is the one that has not as yet fused with the heart in order to become transformed into a trustworthy and dependable faith.” And, although God accepts this *islām* because He is most forgiving and merciful, it is not the expected ideal faith.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī zilāl al-qur’ān*, Vol. 1:291 and Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *al-Mizān*, Vol. 2:342–43, for representative commentaries of the Sunni and Shī’ite thinkers, respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 98, argues that the real content of religion is that secured by the rational requirements of a universal morality. Morality is identified with rationality, that is, acting on reasons grounded in discursive reflection. Kant’s pluralism is underscored by his statement: “There is only *one* (true) *religion*; but there can be *faiths* of several kind.”

## DEALING WITH RELIGIOUS EXCLUSIVISM

Although at one level Qur'anic rationality can capture secular universality and produce an inclusive public theology to solve the problem of diversity of human faiths in the public sphere, at another level the same theology can breed exclusivist claims that can completely destabilize social and political cohesion. The problem is the difficulty connected to the affirmation of any particular moral position, whether secular or religious, as the universal morality secured through sound rational argument. Unless people share life experiences framed by the same moral and metaphysical assumptions, it is impossible to discover common moral premises and rules of moral evidence to solve problems of social and political injustices around the globe. Competing moral visions in international communities need to endorse the normativity of a particular understanding of reasonableness of revelation-based rationality in order to deal with fundamental freedoms—including the freedom of religion—to promote universal human rights norms.

My field experience in Iran, Iraq and Jordan suggests to me that, even modern educated men and women, at one time or another, reveal this exclusivist tendency and its natural accompaniment, that is, intolerance if not outright bigotry. Traditionally, Muslims had developed a theory about Islam's self-sufficiency in relation to other religions, and had regarded Islam in possession of the religious and moral truth required by all humanity until the end of time. The Qur'an spoke of Prophet Muhammad as "the seal of the prophets," who confirmed the revelations to previous prophets where they were sound, and corrected them if they had been corrupted. This doctrine also implied that there would be no other prophet after Prophet Muhammad, so that he was God's final word to humanity. This theology was the foundation of Muslim exclusiveness. The finality of Islamic revelation, in addition to the corporate solidarity founded on the sacred sharia and Muslim rule, formed the resilient self-assurance with which Muslims considered the exclusive truth they believed to possess over against the abrogation or supersession of other traditions such as Christianity and Judaism.<sup>8</sup> In light of this theology, Muslim religious opposition to international human rights stems from the fear that endorsement of the document would deny them their exclusive claim

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<sup>8</sup> See, Kenneth Cragg, "Islam and Other Faiths," in *Theology of Religions: Christianity and other Religions* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1993), 257–70. Cragg's essentialist and reductionist analysis of the selected passages of the Qur'an is undertaken to assess the possibility of dialogue with Muslims in the light of their religious exclusive claim to religious truth and its finality founded upon the doctrine of supersession. It is worth pointing out that a similar case can be made for the most exclusive theology for Christianity and its relation to other religions.

to the religious and moral truth—the important sources of the community-centered salvation. In supporting freedom of religion and conscience human rights advocates seem to be saying to all the faith communities that in order to prevent discord, enmity and violence, they need to stress the commonalities of the world's major religions, and avoid the temptation of maintaining that their religion possesses absolute truth to the exclusion of other faiths.

There is much in this pluralist presumption for interreligious dialogue that is realistic and conducive to outwardly better relations between dialogue participants. The proposal that the practitioners of different religions must be encouraged to accept the historicity and cultural specificity of their traditions to engage in searching for the common orientation to the divine to strike some kind of parity in their endeavors of relating properly to it, is sound and practicable. However, in a dialogical conversation it is not realistic to expect that people will not adhere to exclusive views about their religious beliefs. In view of entrenched self-righteous attitudes among adherents of major religious traditions, it is not irrational or immoral for these staunch believers to think of their religion as the only source of human salvation.<sup>9</sup>

## THE CHALLENGE OF MUTUAL RESPECT

Some religious groups in the Muslim community have not hesitated to commit inhuman acts towards peoples of other faiths with whom they disagree, whether doctrinally or politically. Although it is not difficult to find political or economic reasons to account for discriminatory behavior towards non-Muslim minorities, religious intolerance seems to be the root cause of human rights violations. While it is true that communal religious histories that recount the victimization of the minority by the dominant majority cannot be rewritten to generate a variant form of reconciliatory

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<sup>9</sup> W. T. Dickens, "Frank Conversations: Promoting Peace among the Abrahamic Traditions through Interreligious Dialogue," in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 34, number 3 (September 2006), has critically evaluated John Hick's revisionist pluralism and has proposed fresh grounds for a more fruitful dialogue to achieve peace among the followers of the three Abrahamic traditions. Whether Sunni or Shi'ite, majority of the religious leaders representing the traditionalist scholarship reject the notion of "relative" truth claim in order to produce a theology of interreligious dialogue. Several articles and books that were published in the late 1990s, when pluralism was the catchword of the new world order in which the UDHR was asserting its moral authority to promote freedom of religion, prominent Muslim leaders, while rejecting revisionist pluralism that denied exclusive truth claim to the faith communities, reasserted the Qur'anic notion of pluralism as a source of social co-existence. For details of this debate, see Sachedina, *op. cit.* (note 1).

collective memory, religious leadership with its exclusionary theology has been least interested in bringing diverse communities together on a pluralist platform that can be extracted from the revealed texts of Islamic tradition.

To add to these violations of human rights in the matter of freedom of religion on the ground, now, with the help of internet technology, the interreligious and intra-faith warfare is being conducted in cyberspace. The interreligious battles are no longer local; they have become global and are being fiercely waged by the so-called “Soldiers of God.” More than ever before, cyberspace is faced with the spreading of intolerant and immoral messages about one or another religious group, dampening any hope for salvaging the deterioration of equitable relationships between communities based on the recognition of the inherency of human dignity and mutual respect due to all humans. It is apparent that no religion is immune from such abuse by its own followers. Abrahamic faiths with their political vision for humanity have more than ever become a weapon for encouraging discrimination and violation of basic human dignity. In view of the growing potential in modern day religious revival for discrimination and violence against those with whom one disagrees, who can one turn to for retrieving authoritative moral-religious resources to instill mutual respect among diverse religious and ethnic groups that make up modern citizenry?

Traditionalist Muslim scholars and their large following among the masses remain the most conscious of directing Islamic public order in Muslim majority societies, with a clear understanding that political governance can attain legitimacy by committing itself to implementing the sharia. In this conscious commitment to founding a public order based on the divinely ordained sharia, Islam has been accurately described as a faith in the public realm.<sup>10</sup> In comparison to the performance of religious-moral duties, laid down in minute detail in the sharia, official creed plays a secondary role in orienting the faithful to this goal. It is relevant to note that communal identity among Muslims is, even today, therefore, defined less in terms of a person’s adherence to a particular doctrinal position, and more in terms of their loyalty to one of the officially recognized rites of the sharia.<sup>11</sup>

Religious pluralism as a sociological fact, as far as the sharia was concerned, was not simply a matter of the accommodation with competing

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<sup>10</sup> Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 336.

<sup>11</sup> The term “rite” or “legal school” is the translation of *madhhab*—a system of rules that cover all aspects of human spiritual and moral obligations (*taklif*, plural of *takālif*) that a Muslim must carry out as a member of the community. Four *madhhab*s, Mālikī, Ḥanafī, Shāfi’ī and Ḥanbalī, were ultimately accepted as legitimate by the Sunnis; while the Shī’ites formulated and followed their own rite, known as Ja’fari.

exclusive claims over religious truth in the private domain of an individual's faith, where it had to begin anyway. It was and remains inherently a matter of public policy in which a Muslim government has to acknowledge and protect the God-given right of each and every person to determine their spiritual destiny without coercion. The recognition of freedom of religion in all matters related to human moral and spiritual life is the cornerstone of the Qur'anic notion of religious pluralism, both at the level of interreligious as well as intra-religious relations.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the Qur'an lays down the foundation of theological pluralism that takes the equivalence and equal rights of human beings as a divinely ordained system. The statement that "the people are one community" (Q. 2:213) in the Qur'an indicates that while this sense of unity among diverse peoples needs to be acknowledged theologically as part of God's activity, it is attainable in the sphere of ethics and its function in sustaining just relationships between peoples of diverse faith traditions.

However, political ascendancy of Muslim rulers had far-reaching consequences for the ways in which the Qur'anic teachings about pluralism were side-stepped in favor of the discriminatory rulings in the sharia to gain control over the conquered peoples. The active engagement of the contemporary militant leaders with these discriminatory rulings in the juridical corpus to seek political solutions to the problems faced by Muslims living under their autocratic rulers points to the ongoing tension that exists between the Qur'anic principles of justice and fair treatment of non-Muslims and the political demands of maintaining the Muslim public order.

Religious systems have traditionally claimed absolute devotion and exclusive salvation history for themselves. Even within a single faith community it was by no means always conceded that the direction taken by dissenting schools of thought, for instance, the Shi'ite in the larger context of the majority Sunni community, could lead to authentic salvation.<sup>13</sup> Some classical Muslim scholars of the Qur'an attempted to separate the salvation

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<sup>12</sup> I have treated the matter of freedom of conscience from the Qur'anic point of view in my earlier work: "Liberty of Conscience and Religion in the Qur'an," in *Human Rights and the Conflict of Cultures: Western and Islamic Perspectives on Religious Liberty*, co-authored with David Little and John Kelsay (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 53-100.

<sup>13</sup> Historically, Muslims, like other religious groups, have demonstrated a far greater intolerant attitude towards dissenters within their own ranks. Muslim history is replete with instances of intra-religious violence, not only between the majoritarian Sunni and the minority Shi'ite communities; but also among the Sunni adherents of different legal rites, such as the Hanafi and the Hanbali schools. See Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), 1-34; G. R.



history of the Muslim community from other Abrahamic faiths by attesting to the superseding validity of the Islamic revelation over Christianity and Judaism.<sup>14</sup> In an attempt to demand unquestioning acceptance of the new faith Muslim theologians had to devise terminological as well as methodological stratagems to circumscribe those verses of the Qur'an which tended to underscore its ecumenical thrust by extending salvific authenticity and adequacy to other monotheistic traditions.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The process of cultural self-identification in the Muslim community was carried on through shared religious beliefs, practices and attitudes. The religious commitment to a community-oriented belief system inevitably led to the formulation of an exclusivist theology in which all pre-Qur'anic revelations were considered superseded. Politically, this theology was not neutral; it led to the negation of pluralism, overshadowing the ethical mission of creating a just society founded upon the universal obligation to call people to good and forbid evil. The community was tempted and did succumb to the abandonment of the ethical element in Abrahamic monotheism, which demanded attention to the concerns, needs and capabilities of common people, irrespective of particular religious affiliation.

The predicament of conflicting claims to exclusive salvation had to be resolved if the Muslim community was to prove its universal excellence as an ethical and spiritual paradigm

The Qur'anic universe is moral. Human beings are by nature moral beings, that is, capable of knowing right from wrong, good from evil and to act accordingly. In order to protect this nature in its original form it is fortified by faith. Accordingly, the criteria for the "best" community are

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Elton, "Introduction," in *Persecution and Toleration*, vol. 21 of W. J. Shields (ed.), *Studies in Church History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), xiii-xv.

<sup>14</sup> Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), has done extensive work on the verses dealing with Muslims perceptions of Christians through the exegetical works produced both by the Sunni and the Shi'ite commentators, from the classical to the modern period. Her study accurately concludes that the issue of the prophethood of Muhammad remained an important element is affording non-Qur'anic "Peoples of the Book" a share in salvation. However, in the midst of this exclusivist soteriology there have been Muslim commentators, more in the modern period of the interfaith hermeneutics, who have regarded the promise in Q. 2:62 as still important in constructing inclusive theology founded upon belief in God, the Hereafter and the right action as overriding criteria in attaining the salvation.

both ethical and religious: ethical in instituting good and preventing evil, and religious in responding to God's guidance. Inasmuch as the fulfillment of other-regarding ethical obligations justifies and even requires institutional structures like government agencies that could use reasonable force to ensure justice and fairness in all interpersonal human situations, the self-regarding duty of faith is founded upon a non-interventionist approach.

At this juncture, the "best" community faces its greatest challenge: how can it create an inclusive political society if the guiding principle of its collective identity as a confessional community is strictly founded upon shared religious doctrine? How about the Qur'an's repeated reminder that if God had willed "whoever is in the earth would have believed, all of them, all together" and that people cannot be constrained "until they are believers" (Q. 10:99)? Does this not contradict the emphasis on a comprehensive shared religious doctrine in a political society?

The Qur'an severely criticizes the exclusive claims of the pre-Qur'anic communities, which led to hostilities among them and the destruction of life, including the lives of God's prophets, who were unjustly killed while calling people to serve God's purposes. In fact, to alleviate the negative impact of such behavior, the Qur'an went back to the very source of the monotheistic tradition, namely, "submission to the Divine Will" (Q. 3:19). Essentially and fundamentally, it is the acceptance of the same Creator that determines the spiritual equality of the followers of diverse religious traditions. Nevertheless, this God-centered pluralism of the Qur'an clashed with the historical, relative experience of the new political society, which regarded its own system as the best.

The juridical thesis that Islam does not make a distinction between the religious and the political requires revision in light of what has been argued in this paper. God-human relations are founded upon individual autonomy and moral agency regulated by a sense of accountability to God alone for any acts of omission or commission. Inter-human relations, in contrast, are founded upon an individual and collective social-political life, with personal responsibility and social accountability as the means of attaining justice and fairness in human relations. This latter category of inter-human relations has customarily provided Muslim governments with the principle of functional secularity that allows them to regulate all matters pertaining to interpersonal justice.

# THE SECULAR STATE AS A RELIGIOUS NECESSITY. AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

*Adnane Mokrani*

## CHALLENGES TO RELIGION

Today, religions face the challenges of modernity in different ways, particularly in relation to politics and democracy. These challenges are part of a larger issue, i.e., the relationship between revelation and history, between the eternal and the temporal. The problem is how to distinguish between principles and values and their historical forms and modes of application.

The world has changed radically and classical religious thought is rooted in a historical phase that no longer exists. Therefore, a radical reform and a profound renewal are needed to enable religion to be more open, particularly to dialogue with the world's new realities. It entails a radical innovative effort, *ijtihād*, and not merely a simple superficial reform.

The history of political thought has known great changes and developments. We have experienced the following epochs:

First, the classical state, where the criterion for belonging to the state was to be a member of the governing religious community or tribal coalition and where the followers of the other groups and communities were considered second class subjects (and not citizens). To a certain extent, this is the case of the current hereditary monarchies, which persist in many ways even today, despite the caliphate having been abolished in 1924.

Second, the postcolonial national state that represents an intermediate phase situated between the classical and modern phases—a dictatorial state, often with a democratic or ideological façade. Like the classical state, the national one carries an exclusivist character, in the sense that those belonging to other ethnic

groups, linguistic and cultural minorities are considered second-class citizens, though this is often not officially declared (incomplete citizenship). Atatürk in Turkey, Reza Shah in Iran, Bourguiba in Tunisia are clear examples; also included are the liberation movements, often secular leftists, such as the FLN in Algeria.

Third, after the failure of the national state and its secular leadership to achieve the promised development—full independence and liberation—militant Islamism invaded the political scene as a radical opposition force in the 1970s and 1980s. The Iranian revolution of 1979 was the culmination of this phase.

Following the terrorist massacres in Algeria in the 1990s and the crisis of the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially after the 2009 elections and the Iranian green movement (the green wave), the Islamist discourse began to lose ground. In my opinion, the appearance of Al-Qaeda on the international political scene is the exception that proves the rule. It is an apocalyptic ideology which does not have any project for the future.

While the initial image of Arab revolutions, the so-called “Arab spring,” reinforced the idea of “post-Islamism,” it seems that we are heading toward a “neo-Islamism.” But even this wave of Islamist post-revolutionary governments seems rather to be a quasi-obligatory passage to reach a real and mature democracy.

The fourth step is represented by the democratic state, based on full citizenship without any discrimination, albeit under construction, characterized by strong hesitation and resistance. The main sign of change is the growing collective consciousness of a need for democracy, freedom and human rights, especially among young people.

## **OBSTACLES ON THE WAY TOWARDS CIVIL AND POLITICAL MATURITY**

In order to arrive at this level of civil and political maturity, where the human being is at the center of attention and interest, democracy has to meet certain challenges:

- Resistance imposed by religious and nationalist systems, especially in a globalized world where fear of losing one’s identity is widespread, which is nothing other than the persisting desire to maintain the same thought and lifestyle in a world that is rapidly changing. This kind of resistance is the main topic of this paper.
- The dominance of money or “money-crazy” (and not democ-racy) or even “money-latry” (idolatry of money), is another great temptation that takes on powerful forms. This is a serious risk for the development of democ-

racy which becomes reduced to a mere procedural form in the hands of those who have the financial means and who control the mass media.

Obviously, the fusion of these two types of resistance is possible and is evidently manifested in certain cases, a fact that makes humanity's journey towards a more equal and just society more difficult.

Regarding religious resistance, the question, from a religious perspective, is whether it is necessary and legitimate to attain this democracy based on full and complete citizenship. Are we dealing with a new heresy or a fundamental ethical principle? And if this principle is accepted, how can religions contribute positively to the development of democracy, especially to the development of a democratic culture?

## RELIGIOUS OBSTACLES

In the following I shall discuss some problems which could pose obstacles for the total acceptance of democracy in the area of Islamic culture, given the presence of religion as a determining factor:

First, a certain image of God, as an absolute king sitting on the throne, ("Doer of whatever He wills", Qur'an 11:107 and 85:16), could directly or indirectly influence despotic thought. The same problem arises with the metaphorical image of hell (or paradise) in the Qur'an, full of terrible torture, which, if understood literally, is incompatible with modern human rights.

We have a dominant theology that confirms God's freedom at the expense of human freedom. This is for instance illustrated by the debate between the Mu'tazili school of theology and the Ash'ari one about the creation of human acts and the rational capacity of human beings to distinguish between good and bad.

The same concerns are true with regard to a certain understanding of God's sovereignty, *ḥākimiyya*, based on Qur'anic verses, such as: "Judgment (the command, power, all authority to govern) belongs only to God," Qur'an 6:57 and 12:40, 67, see also Qur'an 5:44, 45, 47. The slogan entered the political sphere for the first time with the Kharijites, as a slogan against the acceptance of arbitration by 'Ali b. Abī Ṭālib during the battle of Ṣiffīn in the year 657. In this context, Imam 'Ali famously commented, "This slogan is right but they are taking its meaning wrong." The same slogan returned with the Islamist movements of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) is considered one of the most important theorists of this trend. See Sayed Khatab, *The Power of Sovereignty: the Political and Ideological Philosophy of Sayyid Qutb* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

In the juridical approach to religion, a political theory based on this concept inevitably assigns a key role to jurists, *fuqahā'*, as the only élite capable of transforming fundamental texts, the Qur'an and the Sunnah, to a series of commandments and norms that organize the entire life of the believer from morning to night, from birth to death, covering every detail in his daily life. The extreme effect of the religious legalism is the education of a passive citizen, unable to take initiatives and decisions, always preferring that others, in this case jurists, decide for them. This is what can be called "fatwa politics."

The problem that can arise from this perspective is the choice between the sovereignty of God and the sovereignty of the people. The traditional image of the common people, the masses, is rather negative; power, according to the traditional definition, is very elitist. Governance was the task of *ahl al-hall wa al-aqd*, literally, men who "dissolve and tie the knots," i.e., "those who have binding authority," the decision-making élite *de jure* or *de facto*.<sup>2</sup>

Leadership in classical political theory is considered the task of the élite and not of the crowd or common people, knowing that the number is not the criterion of Truth. The expression *akthar al-nās*, "most of the people," which could be heard as "the majority of the people," appears in twenty verses of the Qur'an (2:243; 7:187; 11:17; 12:21, 38, 40, 68, 103; 13:1, 16, 38; 17:89; 25:50; 30:6, 30; 34:36; 40:57, 59, 61; 45:26), and is always accompanied by negative qualities, such as "most people have no knowledge."

This religious approach to politics became more complicated because of the challenge of modernity and the cultural and political clash with the West. Therefore, democratization is seen by some conservative Muslims as Westernization, introducing foreign laws and models of government.

In cases in which parliament is legitimated, it remains controlled and conditioned by sharia law through a constitutional council of jurists or "the Guardianship of the Jurist," *wilāyat al faqīh*, the political religious theory of Khomeini (1902-1989), operative in Iran since 1979.

Many constitutions in the Islamic world include clauses such as "the religion of the state is Islam" and/or "sharia is a/the primary source of legislation." This is a way of confirming that the sovereignty of the parlia-

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<sup>2</sup> Classical Islamic political theory deviated from sagacious and religious legitimacy, preferably with the consent of the people, towards the factual legitimacy based on power to avoid civil war and social disorder giving priority to unity based on the governor's legitimacy. This theory became the theory of the Sunnis for many centuries, as represented in the school of thought of al-Māwardī (972-1058) in his book, Wafaa Wahba (trans.), *The Ordinances of Government: al-ahkām al-sultāniyya w'al-wilāyāt al-dīniyya* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2000).

ment is actually under the sovereignty of God, even when the application of sharia is limited to the “island” of family law.

The expression “Islamic state” did not appear until the twentieth century, and then in a polemical context. A state is an institution that should govern the public affairs of society and not a person who may or may not believe.<sup>3</sup>

## CONCEPTUAL AMBIGUITY OF “SECULAR STATE”

The ambiguity of the concept of the “secular state” was a problem of definition when the modern concept was first introduced in the Muslim world. In the European context, secularity originally meant “the separation between state and church,” which is meaningless in the Islamic context, because in Islam there is no formal hierarchy. The second definition that secularity is “the separation between state and religion” is also unacceptable for people who believe that ethics are essentially religious; it is like saying “a state without religion” or “a state without ethics,” practically saying “a corrupt state,” which the Islamist movements try to Islamize and moralize. From this perspective, “the Islamic state” means an honest, just and uncorrupted state.

Secularity has not only been inadequately presented as a political theory but also implemented in a very questionable way by certain regimes declaring themselves as secular but having nothing to do with democracy. So-called secular and sometimes anti-religious despots have led to a strong prejudice against secularity seen as secularism, as an ideology, a sort of “masked atheism.”

Another important point to consider concerning secularity and modern democracy is their diverse meanings and forms that are rooted in European and Western history. To some Muslims, this justifies the use of cultural and religious particularisms or a certain independence and cultural autonomy in rejecting a system considered foreign. The problem also resides in a wider context, which poses this question, When is cultural particularism a true condition to guarantee pluralism in a world threatened by global homogeneity? When is this same particularism used as a pretext to justify dictatorship and conservative politics?

## POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

It is not my task to answer all these difficult questions and resolve all these complex problems. Neither I nor any Muslims on their own could achieve this,

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<sup>3</sup> See Abdullahi Ahmad An-Na'im, “Islam and the Secular State. Framework for Christian-Muslim Relations”, in *Islamochristiana* n. 35 (2009), 157–69.

since part of the problem is common to all religions—with diverse nuances and shades. I therefore consider it my task to propose the right questions and present issues for reflection, which I believe are of a particular importance. There are some fundamental concepts that might prove helpful.

### **PRINCIPLES NOT SYSTEMS**

First of all, we do not find well-defined political and economic theories or systems in the fundamental textual sources of Islam; on the contrary, what we find are general ethical principles and guidelines. Such flexibility should allow creativity and adaptation of new ideas and systems. There is an interpretative space for juridical discernment; this space is not because of an accidental slip or an oversight but, rather, due to mercy and freedom.

The key verse for this aspect is: “[They conduct] their affairs by mutual consultation” Qur’an 42:38. This verse does not indicate the manner of the consultation, neither who conducts it, nor its subject. Historically, each of the four Caliphs (successors) of Prophet Muhammad was chosen in a different way. The Umayyads in Damascus adopted the Byzantine hereditary system while the Abbasids in Baghdad were nearer to the Persian Sassanid version of government.

It is important to explore and to put into practice all the theological and political implications and potential of some Qur’anic verses (which were historically neglected or limited), like the verse of the consultation mentioned above, or the verses about religious freedom:

There is no compulsion in religion (Qur’an 2:256).

Therefore do remind, for you are only a reminder. You have no control over them (You are not a dictator over them) (Qur’an 88:21-22).

Other verses confirm religious pluralism as a legitimate fact desired by God:

To every one of you We have assigned a right way and an open road. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good deeds: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about (Quran 5:48, see also: Qur’an 2:148 and 42:8).

From this perspective, the only political system that guarantees coexistence and harmonious collaboration between different religions, in our time, is the secular state. However, this does not refer to a secular ideology, like a “pseudo-religion,” replacing religion.



## RETHINKING THE MISSION OF RELIGION

It is not the role of religion to offer a political system but rather to educate and prepare the human being for being a good citizen: a person free from egoism, ready to serve, full of love and altruism, constructive and not violent, with a critical mind. This is not the task of politics, nor of the parliament. It is a religious task *par excellence*; it is the religious mission of religion, its real mission. The object of religion is truth, it is a question of free conscience and pure hearts; the object of politics is the administration of public interests. The first is not dependent on numbers or votes, while the second requires votes and consensus.

Many historical reasons favor the dominance of a juridical vision of religion (in the past, ideological and populist tendencies in the present) marginalizing other understandings. There is a need to restore the balance between the various approaches towards religion, to reconsider the moral and spiritual ones and radically to review the juridical system as it has been historically understood.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to give priority to the spiritual and theological approach of religion. Islamic theology includes a fundamental pillar, coming right after the doctrine of the Oneness of God. This is justice.<sup>5</sup> The duty and mission of the believer is to realize the closest model to justice, and, consequently, any form or practice that experience proves to be unjust or disrespectful to this sacred principle must be eliminated or modified. This is what is meant by theology taking priority over law; the latter should be inspired by fundamental Islamic principles and should not become a creed in itself.

Other important concepts in Islamic legal theory such as *maṣlaḥa*, public interest, and *‘urf*, custom, could be expanded in order to embrace new concepts and systems, like democracy as part of the “heritage of humanity,” as a “common good.” There is no notion, including religion, which does not have an environment from which it originates; however, when it shows its concrete validity in everyday experience, it can go beyond its

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<sup>4</sup> In this context a moratorium on corporal punishment, for instance, is needed as the first stage of reform even if it will not suffice as a solution. In 2005, Tariq Ramadan launched “an International call for a Moratorium on corporal punishment, stoning and the death penalty in the Islamic World,” which was opposed by some institutions and religious leaders in the Arab world in a very polemical and aggressive way to the point of accusing him of apostasy. See <http://tariqramadan.com/blog/2005/04/05/an-international-call-for-moratorium-on-corporal-punishment-stoning-and-the-death-penalty-in-the-islamic-world/>

<sup>5</sup> The first school of systematic Islamic theology, the Mu’tazilites, was called “the people of justice and unity [of God],” *ahl al-‘adl wa al-tawhīd*. This was within the context of protests against the injustice of the Umayyads.

own limits: human history is full of these fruitful exchanges. This is the case with democracy.

It follows that we have to look for positive definitions of secularity and democracy that find resonance in Islamic thought. Obviously, this only applies to someone who does not see an insurmountable contradiction between secularity and Islam, if we perceive the secular state as a guarantor of justice and equality, two fundamental principles in Islamic ethics. This allows for going beyond the pragmatic and utilitarian approach towards secularity (religious minorities are generally pro-secular in order to escape from the dominion of the majority), adopting a more comprehensive and insightful concept. The laws and rules of a country can be accepted as *status quo*, with an attitude of honesty and civil discipline. This is what we consider the minimum level of integration, which does not come in contact with the basic values of democracy. A profound integration demands a cultural intelligence that goes beyond form, orienting itself towards the spirit and the foundation of the norms themselves. One cannot reach this step without a formation which is profoundly Islamic and, at the same time, profoundly European.

To demonstrate the substantial link between secularity and democracy is crucial, especially after the failure of the nationalist and Islamist ideologies and models of government, and after the growing awareness of the importance of democracy among young people. Historical experience has confirmed the validity and utility of democracy, notwithstanding it still being in need of continuing improvement. Slogans and empty rhetoric no longer suffice for new generations, as long as the political system does not offer the possibility of peacefully influencing politics through free and transparent elections that enable the alternation of power. True democracy does not exist without true citizenship based on equality before the law, and only the secular state can serve as a guarantee against any type of discrimination. This is what authoritarian or Mafia regimes, nationalist or religious, even with their democratic façade, cannot offer.<sup>6</sup>

The secular state is not a non-religious or anti-religious state but rather a neutral one which treats all citizens equally. The need to recognize the neutrality of the state is a religious and Islamic imperative; a neutrality that allows the full expression and actualization of religious values with conviction and freedom, inasmuch as forced faith is nothing but hypocrisy, *nifāq*, a phenomenon condemned repeatedly and severely in the Qur'an (see for instance: 2:8-20).

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<sup>6</sup> Abdullahi Ahmad An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

Especially during the era of its founders, the Islamic juridical system was established independently of the state, if not to say in opposition to the state. Almost all the founders of the juridical schools were persecuted by the governors of their time.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, Islamic jurisprudence developed as a moral ideal with no executive power, an alternative to the corrupted state which was no longer following the prophetic example. This happened in spite of the successive compromises between state and jurists.

Every state system adopted by Muslims throughout history has been a system developed by human beings. In fact, all interpretations of the sharia are human efforts that can be subject to critique and reform. On the one hand, the problem of fundamentalist governments lies in the fact that they have adopted the worst of the state models mentioned above, the modern totalitarian regime. No empire or state in Islamic history has ever reached this level of control. On the other, fundamentalist governments have adopted the Western idea of one juridical code as their own, a novelty in Islamic law, which has always recognized immense juridical diversity and pluralism.

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<sup>7</sup> It is the case of Abū Hanīfa (699-765), al-Awzā'ī (707-774), Mālik b. Anas (713-795), Ahmad b. Hanbal (780-855) and others, all are founders of juridical schools.



# CONSUMER OR CITIZEN: RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

*Antje Jackelén*

## **THE PUBLIC ROLE OF THEOLOGY**

When I speak of theology, I mean the critical and self-critical reflection on the content and effects of a religious tradition. Since I am a Christian theologian my point of reference here will be mainly the Christian tradition in a European context. *Mutatis mutandis*, what I will state in the following may also be applicable to other religious traditions.

We cannot speak of the public role of theology without reminding ourselves of a relatively simple, yet often neglected, distinction: the distinction between religion or faith and theology. The public role of religion is constituted by the fact that religious experience can be regarded as universally human. As some researchers have put it, we seem to be hard-wired for religion. Religious experience is open to discourse for everyone. While voicing one's opinion about religious faith is not necessarily dependent on a certain level of knowledge, the same is not true of theology. Because theology requires particular knowledge regarding language, methods and facts, it is as exclusive as for instance molecular biology. As self-evident as it sounds, this distinction often fails to be honored, even in academic circles, let alone in public discourse in various media, including the so-called social ones.

In the science-and-religion dialogue, I have often noticed that the exclusivity of the natural sciences is taken for granted: a theologian is expected to have acquired some adequate knowledge before entering into dialogue with a biologist or an astrophysicist. At the same time, it is sometimes taken for granted that you can discuss theological issues without any significant,

previous knowledge. Such an imbalance is an impediment to fruitful dialogue. It is likely to contribute to distortion, misunderstanding and polarization. These, in turn, contribute to increased stress levels in a society.

When speaking of the public role of theology, I imply both the public relevance of theology and its responsibility to relate to the public sphere. I understand the public sphere as comprising a diversity of overlapping publics, such as religious institutions or organizations, academia, society at large, local and global and everything in between. The public sphere is thus marked by a differentiated relationality. Although it sounds like an abstract principle, this differentiated relationality finds concrete embodied expressions, for instance in the academic who is a church member, citizen in a specific society and often also a world citizen.

The public role of theology requires continuous analysis of the surrounding world, dialogue in and with the current context of space and time, as well as skillful popularization of the results of theological research.

Based on these remarks, I want to argue that the public role of theology is both possible and necessary.

## **THE PUBLIC ROLE OF THEOLOGY IS POSSIBLE**

It is possible because it is inherent in theology as an academic discipline, which requires public debate, public accountability in terms of research and in the dissemination of results of research to the public. In this respect, theology is somehow caught between a sense of authority and a sense of being radically questioned. On the one hand, in many universities, faculties of theology belong to the oldest faculties and thus carry a certain authority based on tradition. On the other, the academic status of theology is questioned due to its content. There are various sources and motivations for this questioning: secular humanists who promote an atheist agenda, politicians who find the neutrality of the state at odds with theological teaching and research at state universities, religious organizations who prefer a strictly confessional training of their religious leaders to an academic one. Last but not least, there is also an intrinsic reason for the questioning of the academic status of theology: it belongs to the nature of theology that it always has to deal with what I call the apophatic surplus, that which cannot be caught within the confines of cataphatic/positive science. (Along the lines of the adage: That which you can put in a formula is not a poem; that which you can force into a scheme is not God.)

The public role of theology is possible because it is inherent in theology itself and motivated by its task. "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in

you” (*Etoimoi aei pros apologian panti to aiounti umas logon peri tes en umin elpidos*, 1 Pt 3:15). In light of this appeal, one may describe the task of theology as follows: it is the task of theology to deliver an apology, an *apologia*, that is, a defense based on *logos*, good reasons, for *elpis*, hope. Since it is the nature of hope to be contested—because hope postulates a reality that is not yet there—the apology has the role of a defense. Which is a good and basic academic custom: after all, we defend our theses before we become PhDs.

From its very beginnings, theology has been in lively exchange with its surroundings and its surrounding publics. For example, in the early church, theological work led to Christological language that was, expressed in the terminology of our own time, interdisciplinary. When in early 200 CE the church father Tertullian asked with some irritation, “What has Athens got to do with Jerusalem?”<sup>1</sup> this very question indicates that the exchange between Athens, the center of (in contemporary terminology) “secular” knowledge and Jerusalem, the center of religious knowledge, was a lively one. According to Jaroslav Pelikan, the integration of the Christian and Greek thought on *Logos*, laid an invaluable ground for the public communication and thus “internationalization” of Christian faith and theology:

By the fourth century it had become evident that of all the various “titles of majesty for Christ” adapted and adopted during the first generations after Jesus, none was to have more momentous consequences than the title *Logos*, consequences as momentous for the history of thought as were those of the title King for the history of politics.<sup>2</sup>

Why? The word *logos* has multiple meanings, such as word, mind, reason, structure and purpose. The identification of Jesus as *Logos* had tremendous intellectual, philosophical and scientific implications. “For by applying this title to Jesus,” Pelikan points out,

the Christian philosophers of the fourth and fifth centuries ... were enabled to interpret him as the divine clue to the structure of reality (metaphysics) and, within metaphysics, to the riddle of being (ontology)—in a word, as the Cosmic Christ.<sup>3</sup>

*Logos* came to be understood as the Word of God that made the world possible, and also as the structure that makes the world intelligible. The history of

<sup>1</sup> “Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis,” *De praescriptione haereticorum*, chap. 7, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 58.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

science and the history of theology exemplify how this understanding of Christ the *Logos* could work as a stimulus to explore both nature and ideas. The belief in partnership between divine revelation and human reason has fostered an understanding of creation as nature and cosmos, and of nature and cosmos as creation.

Pelikan's praise of the dialectic inherent in the concept of Christ as *Logos* has some bearing on the public role of theology. On the one hand "the divine Reason disclosed in Christ had endowed human reason with a capacity for penetrating the workings of created nature,"<sup>4</sup> thus calling for an exploration of the cosmos and for a scientific story of creation. On the other, the *Logos* is and remains the *Logos* of God, so that the very structure of the universe is not easily accessible to the human mind. In this sense, the concept of *Logos* preserves an awareness of the limitations humans experience in their capacity of understanding ultimate reality. Due to this dialectic "the cosmos was reliably knowable and at the same time it remained mysterious, both of these because the *Logos* was the Mind and Reason of God."<sup>5</sup>

Growing familiarity with theological voices that have emerged from cultural and philosophical contexts other than Western theology(ies) has opened our eyes to the fact that even our "genuine" Western theology has been shaped by processes of syncretism. Hence, the fact that there are course syllabi that still tend to distinguish between theology and contextual theologies is worth some critical and self-critical reflection.

African, Asian and Latin American theologies have shaped the public role of theology by making us understand that the norm cannot be an absolute and pure theology, where syncretistic influences are the heretical exception. The norm should be a theology that in light of the public seeks language that can motivate and nourish hope. This does not happen by means of a theology that is absolute; it takes a theology that is resolute in its critical and self-critical reflection to achieve this. Such a theology is never free from syncretism. Or, since the word syncretism usually comes with strong negative connotations, let me rather speak of the inevitable hybridity of theology. The hybridity of theology demands publicity.

The public role of theology is possible, because the current context is crying out for it. There has been so much said and written about the failure of the standard secularization thesis and the new visibility of religion that I do not need to elaborate this further. Let me briefly sketch some issues that are of particular interest for a theology that will not hide from the public.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.



First, there is some new thinking out there regarding the relationship between secularization and modernization. The questioning of simple theories of secularization also entails new definitions of the terms private, personal and public when it comes to religion and theology. What does it mean to speak of a de-privatization and de-territorialization of religion in combination with a growing global denominationalism (José Casanova)?<sup>6</sup> What does it mean that we notice believing without belonging (Grace Davie) and belonging without believing (Danièle Hervieu-Léger)? These may be rather complicated phenomena. The least that can be said is that they call into question any neat division between a public space that is free of religion and private religiosity. Maybe that division never worked, not even in the framework of the self-conscious French *laïcité*.

Second, postmodernism with its critique of metaphysics (with capital M), meta-narratives and the so-called onto-theology should be taken into account. The gap between different interpretations of postmodernism on the one hand and an upfront aggressive rejection on the other seems to be widening. Those who take postmodernism to mean total relativism stand against those who embrace a more moderate interpretation, implying that not everything is construction, but pretty much everything presents itself to us embedded in construction. In my opinion it is the latter that holds potential for theology in the public sphere.

Third, in the course of the last century, theology has moved from the focus on the “totally other” (Karl Barth), via the discovery of the inevitable contextuality of theology, toward a more balanced notion of alterity, expressed in a theology of incarnation that provides a language for the differentiated relationality that keeps together yet distinguishes immanence and transcendence.<sup>7</sup>

Fourth, we are living at a time when migration and globalization shed new light on issues of identity regarding nationality, ethnicity and religion. We are able to observe a process in which factors that shape identity shift their significance. In multicultural societies, the significance of religion as a marker of identity tends to increase. This has repercussions on theological discourse and its relevance in light of the public sphere.

Fifth, we find ourselves in a situation where both religious fundamentalism and secular humanism seem to increase: if not in numbers of

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<sup>6</sup> José Casanova, “Political Challenges from Religion in the 21st Century.” Paper presented at the Conference “Religion in the 21st Century: Transformations, Significance and Challenges,” University of Copenhagen, 19–23 September 2007.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Werner G. Jeanrond, “Gudsbegrepp och alteritet—teologi i den postmoderna diskursen,” in *Guds närvaro. Teologiska reflexioner I* (Lund: Arcus, 1998), 51–69.

adherents, they do so at least in terms of outreach, aided by the growing power of social media. This leaves us with contradictions: on the one hand decades of solid training in hermeneutics and Bible exegesis for religious leaders, on the other a more or less “public” image of literal reading as the hallmark of a true believer; on the one hand years of critical and self-critical reflection on mission and missiology in light of post-colonial critique and development of models of accompaniment, for example, on the other the claim of John 14:6 (“I am the way ... No one comes to the Father except through me”) as the only way to relate to people of other faiths (or no faith); on the one hand decades of constructive dialogue between science and religion, on the other fresh attempts to present faith and science (the theory of evolution on particular) as each other’s opposites.

All these phenomena and tendencies call on the public role of theology, not only as possible and desirable, but as necessary.

### **THE PUBLIC ROLE OF THEOLOGY IS NECESSARY**

For its own sake, theology needs to be exposed to interdisciplinary and public discussion. It is impossible to pursue critical and self-critical reflection without relating to something beyond one’s own area. In other words, all theologies are texts in a context, and therefore contextual. I belong to a generation of theologians, however, who were brought up to think that only some theologies were contextual, and those were largely marginal. They often came from what we perceived as the margins of the world, and it took a while critically to dismantle the hierarchy of the one standard discourse of theology over and above the others. Standard versus deviation, center versus margins, true versus less true. In our days, it should be obvious that reading texts together with their contexts makes for better access to truth than neglecting the contexts.

To put into relationship is not the same as relativizing. In the age of globalization it stands clear, also for theology: internationalization without contextualization is imperialism. High standards of quality and truth require continuous reflection on how common notions and definitions interact in and with different public contexts.

Religion is pretty powerful. When religion goes bad, things can go very bad indeed. This is an important reason why public discourse on religion is needed. Public discourse is a better protection against the bad sides of religion than the relegation of religion into the private realm and its exclusion from public intellectual discussion.

The public critique of religion in societies such as Sweden and Germany oftentimes lacks knowledge and sophistication. All too often it bears wit-

ness to a massive religious and theological ignorance. Prejudice thrives in its shadow. Religion becomes its own caricature: irrational, prone to violence and conflict, rigid and caught in a pre-scientific worldview with a dualism between natural and supernatural as its main characteristic. The alternative offered by secular humanists is sort of the second coming of European Enlightenment philosophy. Notwithstanding the great merits of the Enlightenment, we are no longer living in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Enlightenment anthropology has proven outdated, both in regard to modern theology and modern science. Therefore, the public role of theology is necessary in order to improve the quality of contemporary critique of religion.

The public role of religion is called for in face of the challenges facing humanity at this time. Let me give a few examples. Environmental challenges and climate issues are maybe the most prominent ones. New alliances have been formed by people of faith, people of different faiths and scientists. Already in 2007 *The Economist* reported

In many other parts of the world, secular greens and religious people find themselves on the same side of public debates: sometimes hesitantly, sometimes tactically, and sometimes fired by a sense that they have deep things in common.<sup>8</sup>

Biologist Edward O. Wilson, well known since the publication of his book on sociobiology in the 1970s as well as for his critical stance on religion, appealed specifically to religion in his 2006 book, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*.<sup>9</sup> The book is written as a letter to a fictitious Baptist pastor. The message is: “Pastor, we need your help. The Creation is the glory of the earth. Let’s see if we can’t get together on saving it, because science and religion are the most powerful social forces on Earth. We could do it.”<sup>10</sup> Quite similar thoughts can be found in religious studies scholar Mary Evelyn Tucker’s work. She is a leader of the project *Religions of the World and Ecology*, resulting in a multi-volume book series with the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions. The reason she gives for the public role of religion: “Religions provide a cultural integrity, a spiritual depth and moral force which secular approaches lack.”<sup>11</sup> This development calls for theological attention and analysis. What Wilson

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<sup>8</sup> [www.economist.com/node/9832922/print?story\\_id=9832922%2520](http://www.economist.com/node/9832922/print?story_id=9832922%2520).

<sup>9</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from [www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1012/profile.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1012/profile.html)

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit. (note 8).

and Tucker suggest is more than what traditionally goes under the label dialogue. Rather it is diapraxis. “We have got a job to do,” as Wilson puts it.

In 2008, the Archbishop of the Church of Sweden, Anders Wejryd, called an International Interfaith Climate Summit in Uppsala which led to the publication of *An Interfaith Climate Manifesto*.<sup>12</sup> It has since been spread and quoted internationally, for example in connection with an appeal signed by, among others, the Dalai Lama, in connection with Rio +20 in 2012. Within the World Council of Churches (WCC) it is being referred to in its work on climate.<sup>13</sup> Below some quotes from the Manifesto *Hope for the Future!*

The world religions are a source of empowerment for change in lifestyles and patterns of consumption. Religious faith remains a powerful force for good among a considerable number of the human family. We undertake this mission in a spirit of responsibility and faith. [...]

For the earth, salvation is about more than new technology and green economy. Salvation is about the inner life of human beings. [...]

We urge political and religious leaders to bear responsibility for the future of our planet and the living conditions and habitat preservation of new generations, assured in this of support and cooperation from the faith traditions of the world. The climate crisis is a fundamental spiritual question for the survival of humanity on planet Earth.<sup>14</sup>

Similar things can be said about many challenges facing humanity these days. Good solutions require the best knowledge from science, technology and theology and religious wisdom. This applies to population issues as well to the HIV/Aids pandemic. In the latter case, differences between theologies may in effect equal the difference between life and death for people. Thus, the question is not if theology is public but how it is public.

British researchers have examined how people discuss ethical questions. Their analysis indicates that people often raise theological questions and that these questions are often misunderstood by the experts as well as the media. Experts usually stick to one technical or legal question at a time and ignore the broader existential questions; media often treat the same questions as emotional and irrational talk. The consequence is a serious gap in communication. This can be a rather serious situation in democratic states, since democracy is dependent on successful public communication.

<sup>12</sup> [www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=664984](http://www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=664984)

<sup>13</sup> <http://safcei.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Interreligious-Statement-Towards-Rio1.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Uppsala Interfaith Climate Manifesto 2008, 10, 11, 13. Available online at [www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=583489](http://www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=583489)

The British researchers who had examined communication concerning genetically modified food concluded:

Theological perspectives may now be indispensable in helping explain to largely secular institutions the sources and dynamics of conflicts now threatening to paralyze the development of what is being posited as a key technology for the twenty-first century.<sup>15</sup>

If they are right, then the public role of theology is not the wishful thinking of a handful of believers but a necessity for a democratic society.

This is a challenge for all those who are used to arguing: a democratic, multicultural society requires a neutral, religion-free public center. Research from Britain suggests instead that precisely in order to function as a democratic and multicultural democratic society, theological discussion needs to be part of the public sphere.

Good solutions in many areas require cooperation between the best scientific, technological and theological knowledge and skills. Religion, its doctrinal expressions and its rites are robust and changeable at the same time. New challenges will shape new alliances across religious communities. In the process, the religious geography of this world may be up to some surprising changes.

The public role of theology is not only possible but also necessary. The question is not if but how theology plays its public role. It is an analyzing and interpreting role, as well as a bridge-building role, a role of listening, speaking and acting. At this time, the public space of theology needs to be not only dialogical, shaped by dialogue, but diapractical, shaped by joint engagement with issues of common, public concern. Also, this public space needs to be increasingly international and interreligious. For a Christian theologian, the motif for such engagement is simple but powerful. Martin Luther brought it to the point: “Also ist die Welt vol von Gott. In allen gassen, vor deiner thür findest du Christum. Gaff nicht ynn himel.”<sup>16</sup> So is the world full of God. In every alley, at your own door, you find Christ. Don’t stare at heaven.

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<sup>15</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond and Bronislaw Szerszynski with Robin Grove-White (eds), *Re-Ordering Nature* (London, New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 22.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther, “Sermon on 30 September 1526, [on Matthew 22:34 ff],” in D. *Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. .20 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1898), 514.

## ARE PEOPLE OF FAITH AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS UP TO THE CHALLENGE?

The answer I would give is, not yet. Furthermore, there are forces that counteract that this could happen. There are two tendencies that worry me: the inclination to withdraw from burning issues of the world and the inclination to act as consumer rather than citizen. In the context of increasing polarization, this is even more dangerous.

About fifteen years ago, the *Eurobarometer on the Europeans and Biotechnology* revealed some embarrassing facts for religious communities.<sup>17</sup> The percentage of negative responses to the question whether one has ever discussed modern biotechnology fell in line with the degree of religious inclination. As many as sixty-six percent of those who described themselves as “extremely religious” had never discussed modern biotechnology with anyone, whereas only twenty-six percent of “agnostics” had never discussed these issues. With fifty-three and forty-one percent respectively, the gap was less between “quite religious” and “atheists,” but it was still remarkable in size. Sociodemographic analysis of the data showed that in a number of respects religious people were less informed about and less engaged in central issues pertaining to citizenship in democratic states than their antireligious, agnostic and atheistic fellows. While religious and spiritual values are pertinent to many issues of public concern, and religious traditions are in charge of powerful concepts that could contribute to raising the level of a conversation, often limited by emotions and rigid opinions, religious communities do not seem to be good stewards in making these resources available for a fruitful and successful public dialogue. I would be happy to be convinced that this has changed during the past fifteen years, but I am not sure it has.

Second, in more and more of our relationships we tend to be treated as customers and consumers rather than citizens. Consumers are occupied with one freedom, namely the freedom of choice from alternatives provided by others, in a sense a quite passive freedom. This changes as soon as consumers are understood and understand themselves as citizens who are able to turn technical consumer concerns into public concerns about shaping a good society. The difference that this alteration of perspective makes is similar to the difference between attempts at understanding public opinion with or without its theological underpinnings. In comparison with the idea of citizenship, the consumer perspective is impaired by some serious reductionist flaws. Although freedom of choice per se is important, its effects are negative when it is separated from intrinsic values.

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<sup>17</sup> The analysis is based on data from 1999.

I come from a fairly rich church that for decades has had the opportunity to employ staff for most of the tasks to be done in the parish. There are many advantages to that. However, in a consumer-oriented culture, this kind of wealth promotes consumerist behavior in the church and redefines its self-understanding. Instead of the people of God, called in baptism to love God and neighbor in word and deed, the church becomes the place where professionals provide religious services and experiences for members/consumers. In fact, this is a death-bringing culture, deeply at odds with the self-understanding of a Christian church, let alone a Lutheran church.

As Martin Junge, Secretary General of the LWF, has remarked:

the ability of the [Martin Luther's] Ninety-five Theses to connect with people and the social debate at the time was related to Luther's profound pastoral motivation, his diaconal concern—a concern for the suffering neighbor—which inspired him to offer the theses for disputation.<sup>18</sup>

Belief in the incarnation, God becoming human in Jesus Christ, is central to the Christian tradition, and understood as an expression of God's will to engage with the world in love and towards its salvation. On that ground,

Because of their faith, churches are caught in that divine tide that moves them into the world. The public space, therefore, is the only natural place for the church to be.<sup>19</sup>

As the church understands itself as being part of God's eternal and permanent movement towards creation and all human beings, thus it is sent into the public and acquires citizenship. Herein lies the root of its citizenship.<sup>20</sup>

Let me conclude at this point by sharing yet another quote from Junge, grown out of his substantial global experience:

I recognize a feature here that I have seen replicated in many churches of different denominations around the world: their ability to position themselves in the public space goes hand in hand with their loving engagement with the world and the people. The relevance of their message is tested in their ability to listen, to see, to touch, to accompany and to discern and then to offer its own insights out of the rich and deep treasures of faith. It is the love for the neighbor that ushers theological

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Junge, "Owning Citizenship—the Church in the Public Space. A Theological Approach to the Church's Role in the World." Presentation at Världens fest, Revised version pp. 63ff. in this publication.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

insights and treasures into the public, sometimes even by gently kissing awake these insights and treasures from peaceful, sometimes even complacent, sleep.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.



# OWNING CITIZENSHIP— THE CHURCH IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

## A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN THE WORLD<sup>1</sup>

*Martin Junge*

### **THE CONCERN FOR THE SUFFERING NEIGHBOR**

It is said that Dr Martin Luther had been quite troubled when he realized the revolutionary impact of his Ninety-five Theses. I actually just wanted to provoke a theological debate, he must have explained later, almost apologetically. Luther was surprised by the power of these ninety-five sentences and, in retrospect, may have even wondered about his naivety at having nailed the theses for disputation to the door of a church, and therefore in a public space. Initially, he had wanted to restrict the debate to a few academics only. We know what followed: within a few days after 31 October 1517 his Ninety-five Theses transcended the originally intended boundaries of a theological academic debate. Ordinary people took ownership of them—read them, debated and distributed them and even further developed his ideas. Luther's theological reflections had irrupted into the public space and his Ninety-five Theses became what today is known as “public theology.” A theology in the public space that addresses the questions and dilemmas of the human family, offering insights based on what it knows and holds to be true because of faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Revised version of a paper first presented at the Vålens fest, Malmö, Sweden, 7-9 September 2012.

An exhaustive analysis of the reasons that led to this remarkable public reception would take too long. However, there is one specific reason that I would like to mention, because I believe it speaks directly to the topic of this essay. According to my interpretation, the ability of the Ninety-five Theses to connect with people and the social debate at the time was related to Luther's profound pastoral motivation, his diaconal concern—a concern for the suffering neighbor—which inspired him to offer the theses for disputation.

Luther had already much earlier set forth the theological insights of the Ninety-five Theses. Therefore, for those who had listened to him before there was nothing really new in what he was writing. Yet, the almost revolutionary newness of what he had to say, and how these thoughts resonated with people on the streets and in the villages, only surfaced and became so dramatically relevant when these theological insights associated themselves with a deep and passionate care for the neighbor. The Ninety-five Theses were written out of concern, care and pain: Luther had observed that people relied on false securities for which they spent money that they did not actually have. Because of what he saw, he felt compelled to write, to argue, to challenge and to propose alternatives. The message of justification by faith alone, which he offered with the Ninety-five Theses, was a quasi-dormant insight, until it was associated with the loving care for those suffering spiritually and materially, which enticed this message out into the public.

I recognize a feature here that I have seen replicated in many churches of different denominations around the world: their ability to position themselves in the public space goes hand in hand with their loving engagement with the world and the people. The relevance of their message is tested in their ability to listen, to see, to touch, to accompany and to discern and then to offer their own insights out of the rich and deep treasures of faith. It is the love for the neighbor that ushers theological insights and treasures into the public, sometimes by gently kissing awake these insights and treasures from a peaceful, sometimes even complacent, sleep.

This overall dynamic that moves the church's theology and praxis out into the public space captures a fundamental dimension of the Christian faith. This is so because this movement toward the world follows the movement that God initiated by choosing the incarnation in Jesus Christ as the way in which to reveal to humanity and the entire creation who God is all about. God offered that first step, moving out of the realm of untouchability, out of the space of "apartheid," and entering with profound compassion into the joys and sufferings, the hopes and pains of this world. In Jesus Christ God celebrated the joy of a wedding in Cana, ensuring that there would be enough wine for all. In Jesus Christ God went through the torture and the humiliating death on the cross, thus making sure that every dimension of human life, even the most cruel and painful experience, would carry the promise of God's presence.

Despite this clear message that comes from God's revelation in Jesus Christ, I perceive that something seems to have happened to the common understanding about God, often putting God so distant, often picturing God as motionless, often assuming such numbness in God. God's radical movement toward creation and compassionate approach to human beings as shown in Jesus Christ speak quite a different language. If God so compassionately faced the world—can churches afford to turn their back on it? If God became so daringly involved in all dimensions of life—can churches afford to stay away and lean back? Certainly not. Because of their faith, churches are caught in that divine tide that moves them into the world. The public space, therefore, is the only natural place for the church to be.

I see the notion of the "citizenship" of the church, which I use in the title of my essay, as originating in this theological perspective. I owe the concept of citizenship to the Chilean Pentecostal theologian, Juan Sepúlveda, who describes the transition of evangelical Christians in my home country, Chile, from being a politically, socially and religiously marginalized people to becoming full citizens with all rights and duties in the social and political fabric of the country. *From Pilgrims to Citizens*<sup>2</sup> is the revealing title of his book. It traces in a wonderful way the process of political transformation that needed to happen so that churches could claim their citizenship.

But the book also describes the process of the theological transformation that the churches themselves had to undergo regarding their self-understanding, so that they would actually want to step out from the margins and claim their citizenship. The church's citizenship is first and foremost a matter of its theological identity and self-understanding. As the church understands itself as being part of God's eternal and permanent movement towards creation and all human beings, thus it is sent into the public and acquires citizenship. Herein lies the root of its citizenship—regardless of the ways in which this is later expressed in legislation, or the relationship of a given church to the state, or the size or age of a church. Regardless also of its gravitas in a given society.

As a Lutheran Christian from an insignificant, small church I was blessed to have been brought up in a church that understood its citizenship during very difficult times. This was not due to its size, nor its social and political weight, or consensus around the difficult questions of human rights violations, but out of its sense of being called into God's compassionate movement into the world. I was blessed enough to have grown up in a church that took the suffering and pain in my country as an occasion for renewed scrutiny of God's call to the church in its own context.

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<sup>2</sup> Juan Sepúlveda, *De peregrinos a ciudadanos. Breve historia del cristianismo evangélico en Chile* (Chile: Fundación Konrad Adenauer, 1999).

A church does not have to be in a majority situation in order to undertake such scrutiny. Nor does it have to look back at centuries of existence, or enjoy a privileged relationship with the state. This was true for my church, back in Chile, and this is true for congregations, parishes and churches around the world. Their citizenship is based on the fundamental question at the core of every church, What does God want the church to be? How does it continue to participate in God's deep compassion for human beings and God's zeal for justice? How does it carry and express the message of God's love to every single human being in word and deed, today and here?

Secularization, multiculturalism, religious pluralism and declining membership—these challenges and changes should not constitute obstacles to a renewed and sustained reflection on and discernment of the church's call into God's mission. Rather, it should provide an opportunity to define how the church claims its citizenship anew, and how it defines its presence in the public space. It is not a matter of size, age, weight or cultural alignment; ultimately it is a question of its missiological self-understanding.

## **FAITH-BASED PERSPECTIVES ON CURRENT CRISES**

In the following, I shall look at the contribution that the church makes to that space with reference to Martin Luther's theological insight that God's favor can be neither achieved nor bought; it is a free gift out of God's love (justification by faith alone). This insight is in itself not novel but, rather, a dormant treasure.

I believe that the church draws on these very treasures—whether dormant or not—when it engages in the public space. The distinctiveness of what the church can offer in the public space is rooted in the fact that its voice and witness are based on faith. It is a faith-based perspective and contribution and a witness based on faith in the Triune God. No church should shy away from that identity. Rather, it should offer it with joy and humility to the shared public space, where indeed other voices with different insights and perspectives will also be heard. It requires an effort, though, so that these insights, rooted in faith and put into words through theological reflection, are adequately communicated. These remain two distinct categories: the preaching on Sunday morning, and the participation in the public discourse.

This faith-based perspective is very much sought after today as communities, nations and the human family at large deal with current trends, challenges and even major threats. It is an acknowledgement that such current challenges as climate change and the financial crisis require an interdisciplinary approach in order to be addressed appropriately. The financial crisis, for instance, has for quite some time been an expression of a

disturbance that goes far beyond the technicalities of borrowing and lending. It is an expression of the limits of an ideology, neoliberal thinking and its underlying value system, a deeply disturbing approach to relationships with the neighbor and with the entire creation and an understanding of freedom that no longer seems to be accountable. Is it a surprise then that the question of regulation remains the biggest stumbling block to any change in the financial industry? It is evident: regulation would imply accountability.

The financial and ecological crises are two sides of the same coin since they are an expression of the same fundamental problem: the human family intends to live on resources that do not exist. Financially and ecologically, the current lifestyles—at least of an important section of societies in this world—are unsustainable.

Current attempts to address these global issues have been somewhat disappointing. It is becoming evident that national interests prevail, and that the fate of the global human family sometimes becomes hostage to election campaigns in particular sovereign states. The shared interests of the global human family are subjected to the national interests of some powerful countries. For me, the most pressing challenge today is the absence of both a mindset and the structures for a global citizenship and the requisite structures to address global issues in their global dimension.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) attempts to assume the citizenship of churches around the world in its global dimension. In 1947, different Lutheran churches came together and decided to exercise their global responsibility and for this purpose founded the LWF. At the time, the major call to these churches came from the plight of millions of refugees and displaced persons in Europe—a challenge that could not be addressed at the national level but required a different and global approach. Churches gathered in the LWF to give their citizenship an adequate structure in order to respond to the dramatic situation of refugees. But there was more that motivated them to do so: at the time, Lutheran churches felt compelled to become part of the immense task of reconciliation between peoples, nations and even churches that were experiencing fragmentation, deep suspicion and even hostility as a consequence of the devastating Second World War.

This architecture that our forefathers and foremothers designed in order to express the responsible citizenship of churches at a global level is neither obsolete nor outdated. On the contrary, the ability of churches to connect globally is required with the same urgency. Our current times are paradoxical: never before in history has there been a time of such wealth of resources and means to communicate with people, communities, nations and churches across the globe. Yet, these enhanced means of communication do not appear to have improved communication per se. On the contrary, the easy availability of means of communication sometimes even seems to have triggered helplessness, if not

fragmentation, in communication. Whether one looks at societies, nations, cultures, religions or churches, there appears to be an overall mood of withdrawal into safe comfort zones, reflecting a refusal to deal with the complexity of alternative identities and the challenging reality of overwhelming diversity. Or even worse: wanting to ban or eradicate, sometimes even violently, what is different.

I believe that today the citizenship of churches in this world calls for resistance against this mood and to develop “counter-cyclical” attitudes to this tendency of withdrawal and fragmentation, both locally and globally. The faith-based nature of churches calls them today into the public space as bridge builders and strong advocates for peace with justice.

In the final part of my presentation, I shall refer to the two global challenges mentioned earlier: the financial and ecological crises as two sides of the same coin. How do churches come in here? Is the discussion not too specific, too complex? Are even members of parliament in European countries not often helpless as they have to deal, sometimes overnight, with highly complicated matters? Do they not already acknowledge that they increasingly feel dependent on experts and lobbies in order to exert their duties?

I believe that what is required today are interdisciplinary discussions and that the churches and religions should be part of these discussion, bringing their own distinctive voice into the conversation while being ready to understand what other disciplines know and have developed.

For example, the LWF manages a refugee camp complex in Dadaab, Kenya, which has time and again been given considerable media attention. Close to 360,000 refugees still live in the camps and funding has not always been easy. In 2012, for instance, the LWF received information from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that funding had dramatically declined and that schools needed to be shut down. As a result, 165,000 youth and children were deprived of their right to education. At the same time, impressive safety nets were being set up in order to stabilize the financial industry in Europe which had failed because of irresponsible risk taking, leaving the vulnerable neighbor, near or far, totally unprotected. Failed fundraising for some few million US dollars in order to respond to the right of education for refugee children and youth, yet a successful boost to the tune of several billion US dollars to the different stabilizing mechanisms required by a collapsing financial industry?

Highly specialized expertise is needed in order to address the complexities of the financial crisis, and tough decisions need to be taken. But what are the ethical framework and the value system that will inform decision making? Or is the value system increasingly defined by the urgency of decisions to be taken regarding the financial crisis?

Religious communities need to be part of this conversation. They owe their own, distinct contribution to that conversation. It is one that largely

transcends the realm of the economy, and touches on the very question of how the human family intends and agrees to live together in this one world that we all share. It is a conversation about how the human family intends to express its agreement that every human being has inalienable rights that cannot and must not be violated, even in exceptionally challenging situations. It is a conversation about whether there is still consensus that vulnerable populations, although living at the margins, should remain a central concern.

Finally, I shall look at the other side of the coin: the ecological crisis. I do so by recounting a brief story or telling observation from daily life: the way in which indigenous people in Latin America catch monkeys. Monkeys are fast and smart. They normally keep a safe distance from human beings and stay out of reach of their weapons. Hence it is not an easy task to catch them. But monkeys, too, have their weak points. In order to catch monkeys, indigenous people take a coconut and make little holes in it, just big enough so that monkeys can get their hands into the coconut. Then they put the most fragrant fruits into the coconut, the type of fruits that indigenous people know too well monkeys cannot resist. They attach the coconuts with ropes to the ground, and then wait. The monkeys will come down from the trees, attracted by the alluring fragrance of the fruits in the coconut, and will try by all means to get at the fruits. They carefully introduce their little hands into the coconut and grasp the fruits. Once they have the fruits in their grip, a reflex, an anxiety, kicks in, and they will keep their grip on the fruit, regardless of what happens. Yes, they will not loosen their grip when they try to get the fruit out of the coconut. Yet, the hole in the coconut only allows for an open hand to get in, but a fisted hand will not come out. Their grip thus becomes a deadly trap for the poor monkeys that do not let go of the fruits, even when the indigenous people approach to catch them.

This is how monkeys are caught in Latin America. How can they be so stupid?, one might be tempted to ask. But for most of us this is probably just an initial reaction because soon we realize not only the tragic situation, but also the painful analogy to the trap in which humanity finds itself today: the fisted hand. It is our ongoing attempt to secure survival, life and freedom, by grabbing, not realizing that we are at the juncture of history in which all of this—survival, life and freedom—can only be secured by opening the hand, by letting go.

The magnitude of the challenge requires enormous expertise so that it can be adequately challenged. Indeed, the ongoing development of technologies and alternatives that emit less CO<sub>2</sub> will be crucial. The ability to adapt of communities living in the fault lines of climate change will be vital. Yet, all of this does not make the urgency of the question regarding

lifestyles that more readily correspond to the available ecological resources any less urgent. This is a conversation that must go beyond the aspect of innovative technologies and address the very fundamental question about the way in which we understand ourselves in this world, and about human beings' relationships with the ecological fabric into which we are carefully woven. Similar to the "stupid" monkeys, we have to ask ourselves today whether we see space to move beyond the reflex of grabbing, and are able consciously to let go, thus realizing new dimensions of what it means to enjoy freedom.

### **THE GIFT OF FREEDOM AND THE ACCOUNTABILITY TO THE NEIGHBOR**

I believe that churches, particularly those in the Lutheran tradition, have a treasure to share in this discussion. It is the clear insight that freedom, according to the traditional Lutheran understanding, is never to be understood as an absolute freedom. It is a freedom that finds its boundaries in the neighbor, particularly in the suffering and vulnerable neighbor. According to the Lutheran understanding, the gift of freedom, to be enjoyed by everybody, is framed by that accountability to the neighbor. It is therefore a freedom that does not understand the individual as an isolated being, but as placed in relationship to others. Can churches be a voice, helping the human family to realize that the time has come to move beyond a concept of freedom that knows no limits and is not accountable? Should churches today not go beyond the traditional theological understanding of freedom as bound to the neighbor, and introduce a much stronger ecological perspective into its discourse: a freedom not only accountable to the neighbor, but also to God's good creation, in our own language, or to the ecological system, or nature, in the language of others.

The participation of the church in the public space should never be understood as a one-way street, in which the church generously shares with others from its deep treasures of faith. It is a two-way street, in which churches also receive and learn, and need to be humble enough to do so, and are challenged and questioned, as they join those local and global conversations as an expression of the church's ongoing claim of citizenship. It is the participation in the public space under the sign of the cross. Never engaging with hegemonic pretensions, avoiding all theocratic tendencies, aware of the own ambivalence of both believers and the churches, yet joyfully bringing those treasures to the table, which we recognize because of our faith in the Triune God.



# PUBLIC SPACE, AGENCY AND DIALOGUE IN PLURAL SOCIETIES

*Simone Sinn*

## **DISTINGUISHING THE RELIGIOUS FROM THE POLITICAL SPHERE—A GLOBAL CHALLENGE**

Politicians and religious leaders, citizens and scholars ask how people of different faiths and value commitments, including those holding non-religious worldviews, can peacefully live together and share public space. While, in itself, the question is certainly not new, it comes with renewed urgency as identity politics and reconfigured political and/or religious hegemony haunt communities and societies in many parts of the world. This is exacerbated by socioeconomic disintegration, shrinking public space and violent religio-political conflicts. In light of the interaction between local and global dynamics, a global and intentional interreligious dialogue on these issues is needed. The times when each community could find answers for themselves are past.<sup>1</sup>

The key issue is how the political relates to the religious sphere and vice versa. These spheres are often, either explicitly or implicitly, entangled and, mostly in times of conflict, mechanisms are sought to disentangle them. Furthermore, other societal spheres such as the economic or academic one also interact with and influence the entanglement/disentanglement processes

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Linda Hogan and John D’Arcy May, “Visioning Ecumenics as Intercultural, Interreligious, and Public Theology,” in *Concilium* 47/1 (2011), 70–84; Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World. A Postmodern Theology after Postmodernism* (New York: T & T Clark 2004).

between religions and politics. The constitution of a country provides the basic framework for how this relationship is configured, and longstanding socio-cultural practices provide tools for living out this relationship in everyday life. Each region and country comes to such a configuration with a distinct historical trajectory that is nonetheless connected to neighboring trajectories. Often used binary classifications such as “religious countries” on the one hand and “secular countries” on the other do not do justice to complex realities.<sup>2</sup> In the following, critical issues shall be exemplified by brief references to realities in Asia and in Europe.

Cultural and religious plurality as well as ethnic diversity have long been a hallmark of many Asian societies. An amazing overall plurality exists side by side a tangible and dangerous fragility. In the twentieth century, authoritarian political regimes and ideologies have significantly shaped the region. In numerous countries, asymmetries between religious groups have gained increasing political or cultural significance, and the dominance of one religious tradition has become burdensome on others, such as the rise of Hinduism’s political significance in India, Islam in Malaysia, or of Buddhism in Myanmar for instance. Discrimination on religious grounds is sometimes overt and sometimes covert.

The European religious and political architecture is marked by the impact of a series of events: the Reformation movement, the confessional wars, the Westphalian Peace Treaties, Enlightenment thinking, democratization processes as well as totalitarian regimes. Crucial for seventeenth-century continental Europe was the question regarding how different Christian denominations could peacefully coexist. The solution was to separate the religious from the political sphere in order to free the state from religious power struggles. In the twentieth century, political totalitarianism became a major challenge since it tried either to coopt religion, turning it into a handmaiden to totalitarian aspirations, or to destroy it. Today, European societies especially are called to rethink the historically dominant place of Christianity. How does the Christian faith relate to anti-religious movements, to religious illiteracy and indifference, or to the sister traditions, Judaism and Islam, and to spiritual seekers? These questions emerge both on the conceptual as well as the practical level. Classic concepts and theories such as secularization theory have been put in question; some

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Christian Walter, *Religionsverfassungsrecht in vergleichender und internationaler Perspektive* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Christian Walter, “Religionsfreiheit in säkularen im Vergleich zu nicht-säkularen Staaten. Bausteine für ein integratives internationales Religionsrecht,” in Georg Nolte (ed.), *Pluralistische Gesellschaften und Internationales Recht. Referate und Thesen*, Berichte der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Völkerrecht 43 (Heidelberg: C. F. Müller, 2008), 253–92.

quickly abandoned these while others endeavored to refine them so that they respond more accurately to current complexities.<sup>3</sup>

Religious communities have distinct perspectives on the relationship between faith and politics. However—and this is crucial—all religious traditions that have taken root in more than one country or political entity have developed multiple perspectives on the relationship between religion and politics. They “know” systems in which they are allies of the political powers that be, whether they are in a majority or minority position, as well as situations where they are “in opposition” or merely bystanders. Within their own rich theological traditions they find manifold resources and can develop distinct rationales to justify their respective position. The validity of such rationales does not simply depend on rational or logical argumentation. Rather, they become increasingly influential and convincing for a wider audience if they resonate with people’s religious and socio-political experience.

In order to reach increasing clarity on how to navigate in religiously plural societies, in both conceptual and practical terms, this article will examine the guiding principles for dealing with religious pluralism and the interaction of the religious and political spheres. This needs to be discussed from at least three perspectives:

- What are guiding perspectives for dealing with religious pluralism from the side of the political sphere?
- What are guiding theological perspectives on agency and authority in individual religious communities?
- What are guiding perspectives deriving from interreligious encounter?

These three questions will be discussed in the following sections with the reference point for each section being a specific region and time, so that the argumentation is as concrete as possible. At the same time, there is

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ingolf U. Dalferth, “Post-Secular Society. Christianity and the Dialectics of the Secular,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78/2 (2010), 317–45; Detlef Pollack, *Rückkehr des Religiösen?* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); Charles Taylor, *Ein säkulares Zeitalter* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2009); Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 2008); Jürgen Habermas, “Die Dialektik der Säkularisierung,” in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 53 (2008), 33–46; David Martin, *On Secularization. Towards a Revised General Theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

the underlying assumption that insights gained from each of the specific contexts can also be helpful to discern perspectives in others.

### **THE POLITICAL CHALLENGE IN EUROPE TODAY: BEYOND MANAGING DIVERSITY TOWARD STRENGTHENING AGENCY**

Since the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) the political powers in Europe have focused their attention on peacefully managing religious diversity. As the potential for conflict between religious communities became obvious and tangible, the political powers that be felt responsible for taming and domesticating religion. Or, metaphorically speaking, religions had been experienced as wild animals that had suddenly become unpredictable. In order for human beings to live with such animals, their brute force had to be domesticated, and each animal had to be put in a cage. This brought about the increasing privatization of religion in a number of European countries. Politics did not force this on people, but the political climate triggered it as a societal dynamic. Some even proclaimed that they would rather abandon the “animalistic” side of life altogether, and become more cultivated without religion.

Within such a mental framework, politics puts itself above religion, rather like an animal trainer in the zoo. This is one form of disentanglement, one dimension of secularization, which has been combined with the principle of state neutrality vis-à-vis religion. Instead of the elusive concept of neutrality, scholars have recently proposed the more refined concept of impartiality or equidistance of state institutions to religious actors. This model helps to manage relationships between religious communities. They are protected from undue interference from one another and the political sphere not only sets itself apart from but above religion in order to tame religion and manage religious diversity. Are the role and place of religion adequately captured when perceived primarily in terms of security concerns?

Another mental framework is captured in the freedom of religion and belief clauses in constitutions and international treaties. Here it is very clear that conscience and religious commitment are at the core of a human being's integrity as a person. No state or political institution is allowed to control this dimension of human existence from above. In order for a person to be a responsible actor in society, there must be freedom of religion or belief that supports the freedom of an individual or community, in public or private, to manifest religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. Once again, metaphorically speaking, religion is not human beings' “animalistic” side but their “heart and mind.” It is life-giving and

motivating, providing a sense of direction and holds the individual accountable. It is there where an educated and cultivated way of human existence can be developed. Value commitments, whether religious or non-religious, are an indispensable part of human agency. Democratic societies depend on the mature agency of their citizens. Such maturity is not reached by denying or privatizing the role of value commitments, but by acknowledging their significance as the prerequisite of a mature society.<sup>4</sup>

Seen from this perspective, religious vitality is not a threat to the public sphere but, rather, a resource for a liberal, plural society. If societies do not attempt to relegate religious commitments to the private sphere, but acknowledge their public role, then one of the key areas needing attention is education, both religious and civic. Religious education needs to equip believers with dialogue skills, nurturing their religious literacy and empowering them to be active agents in dialogue. Another issue is the question of how religious leaders are being trained, and how theological training can be offered at university level for different religious communities. In a number of countries, new chairs for Islamic theology or confessional Islamic studies have been established in order to respond to this need.

The role of the political sphere is to contribute to conditions conducive to enhancing and strengthening citizens' agency. The concern for agency needs to be at the center of the political discourse, and security concerns need to be understood in relation to this primary concern.

### **THE THEOLOGICAL QUEST IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE: MARTIN LUTHER'S PERSPECTIVES ON AUTHORITY AND VULNERABILITY**

If one looks into the theological rationales for the relationship between faith and politics, one realizes that the issues of agency and authority are vital. What constitutes authority—spiritual and theological authority

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<sup>4</sup> Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, "Geschenkte Freiheit. Von welchen Voraussetzungen lebt der demokratische Staat?," in *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* 49 (2005), 248–65; referring to the dictum of Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde: "The liberal secular state lives on premises that it cannot itself guarantee. On the one hand, it can subsist only if the freedom it consents to its citizens is regulated from within, inside the moral substance of individuals and of a homogeneous society. On the other hand, it is not able to guarantee these forces of inner regulation by itself without renouncing its liberalism." Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, "Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation [1967]," in Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *Recht, Staat, Freiheit. Studien zur Rechtsphilosophie, Staatstheorie und Verfassungsgeschichte*, revised edition (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2006), 112.

on the one hand, political authority on the other? How does legitimate authority come into being? How is it sustained? What are the mechanisms to delegitimize authority?

The Lutheran tradition claims that Martin Luther shed new light on these questions. His insights are of relevance far beyond his time and place. First of all, Luther challenged the way in which spiritual and ecclesial power was conceived at the time. God's grace is a free gift that does not depend on ecclesial hierarchy. The "priesthood of all believers" became a concept that embodies an empowering dynamic: Luther insisted that there is no other authority than Godself who, in God's Trinitarian activity, liberates and empowers people and strengthens their agency. This message resonated with many people and the Reformation movement gained momentum. This not only changed the religious landscape, but also affected how power is conceived in the political and economic realms:

The intense solidarity Luther showed with people in need, in terms of economic issues, for example, can then bear fruit also in the political realm. It is significant that even Luther himself could open cracks in the monolith of authority and obedience.<sup>5</sup>

Luther provided the theological basis for reclaiming the significance of active citizenship and professional vocation. The Lutheran tradition, at its best, continues to highlight the creative freedom of human beings that finds its most tangible expression in the relationship with the neighbors:

Because they are free, Christians are able to begin something new, for example to initiate new relationships or to restore old ones through forgiveness and reconciliation. As free agents, Christians share in divine creativity. Only a free person is able to give true love: a love that seeks the best interests of others.<sup>6</sup>

Luther developed a distinct and bold understanding of authority, proclaiming God's unique authority and agency in matters of salvation, and reconfiguring humankind's authority and agency in matters of justice and peace. It needs to be mentioned that, in retrospect, a number of people see an

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Altmann, *Luther and Liberation. A Latin American Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 131.

<sup>6</sup> Hans-Peter Grosshans, "The Freedom of a Christian according to Evangelical Lutheran Theology," in Simone Sinn and Martin L. Sinaga (eds), *Freedom and Responsibility. Christian and Muslim Explorations*, LWF Studies 01/2010 (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2010), 70f.

“a-synchronicity” of Lutheran theology and Lutheran practice, especially regarding the separation of the religious and political spheres.<sup>7</sup>

I believe the seminal part of Luther’s new perspective on authority and agency to be the epistemological insight that is connected to it. Luther’s theology of the cross most clearly describes the place from which Christians are to understand this world and the authority and agency within it.<sup>8</sup> Luther finds the prime model for his understanding of authority and agency in Mary’s Magnificat (Lk 1:46–55). As God comes to meet Mary in her lowliness (*Niedrigkeit*) she experiences God’s agency as one that constitutes her own agency and empowers her. No other outward human authority guides her, but “her own experience.”<sup>9</sup> What Mary says about God is true, because she experienced this as true: God has seen her lowliness, God has come down to meet her in that position of lowliness and has raised her up.<sup>10</sup> Luther dedicated his treatise on Mary’s Magnificat to the eighteen-year-old Duke Johannes Friedrich of Saxony, strongly urging this future political leader to take Mary as a model for how to think about his own authority and agency.

### **INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT IN INDONESIA TODAY: EXPERIENCES OF VULNERABILITY AND CONNECTIVITY**

In order to understand more deeply the relationship of authority and agency in multireligious settings, Indonesia provides an illuminating contemporary example. The archipelago’s capacity to embrace a wide religious and ethnic plurality is well-known. *Bhinneka tunggal ika*—unity in diversity—is

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<sup>7</sup> E.g., Rochus Leonhardt, “Glaubensgewissheit und Religionsfreiheit. Zur religionspolitischen Ambivalenz des reformatorischen Erbes,” in Antonius Liedhegener/Ines-Jacqueline Werkner (eds), *Religion, Menschenrechte und Menschenrechtspolitik* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010), 98–125.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God. The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Martin Luther, “Das Magnificat, verdeutschet und ausgelegt [1521],” in *WA* 7, 546, 22.

<sup>10</sup> “But where there is this experience, namely, that He is a God who looks into the depths and helps only the poor, despised, afflicted, miserable, forsaken, and those who are nothing, there a hearty love for Him is born. The heart overflows with gladness and goes leaping and dancing for the great pleasure it has found in God. There the Holy Spirit is present and has taught us in a moment such exceeding great knowledge and gladness through this experience.” Martin Luther, “The Magnificat,” in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 300.

the slogan that the Garuda eagle prominently carries on his wings in the Indonesian coat of arms. Religious diversity is a living reality in Indonesia, where a number of individuals and institutions promote interreligious engagement. Yet, at the same time, diversity and dialogical engagement continue to be threatened and contested.<sup>11</sup> Today, the country suffers from the repercussions of thirty-two years of authoritarian rule under President Suharto (1966–1998). Reverting once again to our metaphor, with regard to religion as well as other dimensions of life, his regime clearly understood itself as an “animal trainer.” The Suharto regime provided a place for different religious communities, but kept them firmly under control. He gave a limited yet secure space for religion, especially for those communities that are numerically in a minority.

In post-Suharto Indonesia the situation has become more open, religious communities have more freedom and liberalization and pluralization have led to the thriving of religious life in Indonesia. At the same time, two dynamics pose new threats: majority hegemony on the one hand, and religious extremism on the other. Religious groups with dissenting theological perspectives and religious practices, and also non-religious people, feel more vulnerable than ever before. In light of this, people from different walks of life openly ask, Is this the Indonesia that we knew? What is happening to Indonesian identity? Moreover, the Indonesian public remembers the legacy of the first president, Sukarno, and the framework that he established.

Sukarno acknowledged that the nation required a solid constitutional framework that allows space for religious plurality. Together with the majority in the committee preparing for independence in the 1940s, he rejected the call of some Muslims for an Islamic state. Although over eighty-five percent of the population were Muslim, Indonesia was not to become an Islamic state. At the time the constitution was drafted, primal and several world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity—had for centuries been practiced in the archipelago; these religions were all “at home” in Indonesia. During the struggle for independence, Indonesians of different religious persuasions had been united in fighting the colonial powers. They should therefore also be united in a free Indonesia.

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<sup>11</sup> Simone Sinn, *Religiöser Pluralismus im Werden. Religionspolitische Kontroversen und theologische Perspektiven von Christen und Muslimen in Indonesien* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened. Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia's New Order* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006); Bernard Adeney-Risakotta, “Religion, Violence and Diversity: Negotiating the Boundaries of Indonesian Identity,” in Carl Sterkens/Muhammad Machasin/Frans Wijzen (eds), *Religion, Civil Society and Conflict in Indonesia* (Münster: Lit-Verlag 2009), 12.



In 1945, Sukarno proposed five basic principles, *Pancasila*, as the state philosophy for Indonesia. These were subsequently included in the preamble of the constitution: 1) belief in God; 2) just and civilized humanism; 3) the unity of Indonesia; 4) representative democracy; 5) social justice. The first principle refrains from making reference to any specific religion, but aims at giving space for religious plurality. When Sukarno introduced his idea of *Pancasila* he maintained,

Each Indonesian shall belief in God, his respective God. Christians worship God according to the teaching of Jesus, the Messiah, Muslims according to the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad, Peace be upon Him, Buddhists perform their religious duties according to their books. But let us all belief in God.<sup>12</sup>

Sukarno then calls on Indonesians to practice religion in a “civilized manner”: “This means: in mutual respect. Prophet Muhammad, Peace be upon Him, has given sufficient evidence about *verdraagzaamheid*, about the respect for other religions. Also the prophet Jesus has taught *verdraagzaamheid*.”<sup>13</sup>

Is this legacy alive today in people’s everyday experience? How do religious communities in Indonesia perceive one another in their local settings? In a field study of four different regions in Indonesia, qualitative interviews were conducted with lecturers in Christian theological seminaries and Islamic universities. The study identified nine different interpretative models in dealing with religious plurality.<sup>14</sup> They can be grouped in two categories:

Foundational theological perspectives:

- Religious diversity is God’s gift (theology of creation)
- Believers are called to be a blessing to others (anthropology/ethics)
- Believers are called to assert their distinct faith (apologetics)
- Believers are called to win the other over (theology of mission).

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<sup>12</sup> Sukarno’s speech on 1 June 1945 is reprinted, in R.M. A.B. Kusuma (ed.), *Lahirnya Undang-Undang Dasar 1945. Memuat Salinan Dokumen Otentik Badan Oentoeik Menyelidiki Oesaha Persiapan Kemerdekaan* [The Birth of the Constitution in 1945] rev. ed. (Jakarta: Fakultas Hukum Universitas Indonsia, 2009), 150–67, here 163.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. In this sense, it is reaffirmed in the main body of the Indonesian constitution. Article 29 declares: “(1) The State shall be based upon the belief in God. (2) The State guarantees all persons the freedom of worship, each according to their own religion or belief.” In principle, this constitutional provision allows the different religious communities to interact on an equal footing.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Sinn, *op. cit.* (note 11), 315–39.

Theologically grounded relational possibilities:

- Believers suffer from being discriminated against by the other (*martyria*)
- Believers are asked to keep harmony (political ethics)
- Believers are invited to share local cultural traditions as a bridge (wisdom)
- Believers are invited to be compassionate with the other (solidarity)
- Believers are invited to cooperate with the other for the well-being of all (public theology).

All of these have an experiential as well as a normative theological dimension; the activation of one or the other depends on context and theological emphasis. Some distinguish harmony as required by state authorities, from harmony as the result of local cultural practices. Some focus more on the concrete neighbor in need, others on Indonesia's well-being as a whole. Both Muslims and Christians are sensitive with regard to the hegemonic aspirations of the other. Both feel potentially vulnerable: Muslims carry the memory of living under Christian colonizing powers and worry about the effects of international politics on them today, while Christians fear discriminatory majority politics. Furthermore, many interviewees not only discussed interreligious relations, but also pointed to the significance of intra-religious relations since the internal pluralization in religious communities is being perceived as an even bigger challenge. Not only communities as a whole claim their space in the public, but also individual believers and small sub-groups claim agency and authority and question traditional structures.

### **PARTICIPATION AND DIALOGUE—KEY PRACTICES IN CREATING SHARED PUBLIC SPACE**

Traditionally, many religious communities have focused on rulers and state authorities as decisive actors and guarantors for justice and peace. Today, with the focus shifting to citizens as the key actors in society, civil society has become an important space within democratic societies. "Citizenship" has become a crucial concept in plural societies. It enables the establishment of a public space where people of different religious, ethnic, gender and other identities can interact as different yet equal persons. The concept of citizenship helps to critique discourses of majority vs. minority groups, it allows us to name injustice and oppression and jointly to develop visions of a just society. In order constructively to engage with plurality, a dialogical attitude and methodologies have become an important dimension of how we engage and walk together with others.

In the twenty-first century there seem to be more relational possibilities than ever before, and more opportunities to strengthen the agency of vulnerable people. Nevertheless, there are at the same time strong forces that point in exactly the opposite direction. Because of intensified global economic, political and media-related interdependency, structures of accountability and responsibility have become obscured. The individual seems to become increasingly invisible as a person, only the multiple traces in online and offline systems are of interest, not the person in their integrity.

If non-responsibility is one of the basic features of globalization, invisibility is the other. [...] It is not that these people are translucent, or that they can be seen through, but that their individual existence is so dispensable that one does not want to see them, to be responsible towards them.<sup>15</sup>

Such threats to the agency and integrity of human beings expose forms of vulnerability other than the ones we know from overt power struggles between religious communities or between the religious and the political spheres. The *humanum* itself seems to be at stake. What can religious communities contribute in response to this challenge? First of all, they can affirm citizenship as an important category in today's societies. In order for it to be a meaningful category, active participation in political and civil society processes are vital.

Furthermore, a culture of dialogue needs to be nurtured, providing a framework within which people can confidently and openly interact with one another. Dialogue entails outspokenness and attentive listening to the partners involved. Dialogue not only refers to the actual conversation between different people, but characterizes a basic attitude toward the other, a way of life or an ensemble of interaction. Instead of simply living side-by-side, different communities and different people intentionally and constructively want to live together and to relate to one another. Participation and dialogue are concrete practices that contribute to creating shared public space. Participation and dialogue are the cornerstones of plural societies as they empower people and strengthen their agency and identity as persons.

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<sup>15</sup> Vitor Westhelle, *After Heresy. Colonial Practices and Post-Colonial Theologies* (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2010), xvii.



# SCRIPTURAL INSIGHTS



# NO ABIDING CITY? BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE

*Clare Amos*

## **REACTING TO THE ROMAN EMPIRE**

My first professional job was as course director of St George's College, Jerusalem. It was a real privilege for me as a young biblical scholar and teacher. St George's College was attached to the Anglican cathedral in Jerusalem and offered short courses (then up to three months in length) for clergy, theological students and interested laity, giving them the opportunity to encounter the Holy Land, its geography and history, and its religious significance in greater depth than was possible on normal pilgrimages.

Although some of our teaching was classroom based, most of the time we were out and about, using the Holy Land, and particularly the city of Jerusalem, as our primary teaching aid. One of my favorite experiences was to travel with the group from Jericho to Jerusalem (or in reverse)—walking for at least a chunk of the way. Linked to that I devised a lecture which I used to offer to our students—to help them reflect on and dig deeper into the biblical story, and also explore what it might mean for ourselves as contemporary Christians in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The lecture was called “Reacting to the Romans.” I am not sure if I still have the original notes I made for it—having moved from Jerusalem to Beirut then Cambridge then London then Kent and now Geneva—I suspect they may have got lost somewhere on the way. But my essential thesis was as follows: in the time of Jesus Christ the phenomenon of the Roman Empire dominated the horizon of people in Palestine, one of Rome's eastern subject territories. It affected economic and social issues, politics

and religious concerns. I suggested that there were three ways in which the Jewish inhabitants “reacted to the Romans.” They might seek to fight Rome, or collude with Rome, or try and get away from Rome (although in fact even those who tried to “get away” were still influenced by the imperial reality). Broadly speaking, the first option was the response of the Zealots, the second of the Herodian party and the Sadducees, and the third of people I fairly loosely called the Essenes. What I was also able to point out was that between Jericho and Jerusalem, according to the Synoptic Gospels of Jesus’ final journey towards his passion, geography and archaeology offered physical examples of each of these three “options.” The Herodian/Sadducee option was perhaps the most obvious in physical terms. Above Jericho, on what is now called the “Mount of Temptation,” there were the remains the Herodian fortress palace of Douka, guarding the eastern fringes of the Empire, and of Herod’s own realm. There was also a magnificent winter palace down in the valley in the city of Jericho itself—about which more later. And in the wilderness, between Jericho and Jerusalem, one could come across traces of aqueducts built in Herodian times to transport water from place to place across the arid wilderness to ensure the accoutrements of Roman civilization. By definition perhaps the Zealots left less physical traces—though further south in the Judean wilderness one could see the stamp of their occupation of Masada. Yet, the so-called Inn of the Good Samaritan by the roadside, for all its Ottoman provenance, acts as a symbol of the use of this wilderness area by violent or alienated groups. As regards the Essenes, there was of course the settlement at Qumran linked in some way to the Dead Sea Scrolls. Perhaps, too, the ruins of monastic buildings from the Byzantine era, scattered in several spots in the Judean wilderness, reinforce the role of the wilderness as a refuge for those who seek to distance themselves from the whirl of political life. What precisely was the function of these buildings is still debated, but it forms a visual marker for the choice that Jesus did not make. He did not turn aside towards this isolated settlement as a way of refusing to face the challenges that inexorably lay ahead for him as he approached Jerusalem.

It was also interesting however to point out that from the Judean wilderness—looking up and westwards towards Jerusalem—the skyline, formed by the Mount of Olives, is dominated itself to this day by three tall towers: the Russian Orthodox church of the Ascension; the German Lutheran tower of the Augusta Victoria hospital; the tower of the Mount Scopus campus of the Hebrew University. Representing in some ways modern “empires,” they constituted themselves a physical reminder of the political pressures on the modern history and life of the Holy Land.

The argument of my talk was that Christ was crucified because he refused either completely to affirm or completely to deny any of the three



options for “reacting to the Romans.” On entering Jerusalem his actions in the Temple were a vivid statement of his refusal to collude with the authorities, yet he equally seems to have disappointed those who had hoped “that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Lk 24:21) politically by leading a revolt. And yet, his decision to continue to Jerusalem rather than divert into wilderness quietude was also significant—even though prayer was at the heart of the events of Jesus’ passion, nowhere more strongly than the prayer he offered in Gethsemane shortly before his arrest.

### **CHURCH AND STATE—AN AMBIGUOUS RELATIONSHIP?**

I believe that a similar ambiguity about the relationship between church and state runs through the New Testament as a whole. There is the well-known (and much used) insistence on the part of Paul for loyalty to the governing authorities: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom 13:1). But against that there needs to be set the passionate hostility toward Rome by the writer of the Book of Revelation, expressed above all in the writer’s identification of Rome with Babylon, and exultation of its longed for fall, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!” and the instruction to the author’s audience to “Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins” (Rev 18:2, 4).

The historical reality that Jesus would almost certainly have suffered his death by crucifixion outside the city walls of Jerusalem is drawn on to make a theological point about the need for the Christian community to live with a sense of provisionality in relation to the political structures of the time, “Jesus also suffered outside the city gate [...]. Let us then go to him outside the camp [...]. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb 13:12–14). Intriguingly, the use of Old Testament metaphors in 1 Peter, drawn particularly from the Book of Exodus, which in their original context described God’s people in quasi national terms, are now used to subvert the relationship between the early Christians and the Roman state, “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people. [...] Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles [...]” (1 Pt 2:9, 11).

The two thousand years of Christian history could be summed up as a wrestling with and for the “correct” relationship between Christianity and the state or public square. There is Constantine and there is the Anabaptist movement, perhaps representing the two poles, and there is a whole gamut of viewpoints in between. It is a very “live” and significant question in Europe today, with the tradition of state or quasi state churches still existing

in many countries, but also a sense of embarrassment and unease among Christians about this reality and what seems like a gradual nibbling away at and dismantling of such structures. The growth in numbers and voice of Muslim communities in western Europe has been one factor that has increased the questioning of the church's role in wider society, although Muslim attitudes to the relationship between religion and state have in some situations ironically been quite supportive of the role of Christian leaders when they intervene in national political or social concerns.

Although "state" and "public square" are not identical, there is a clear relationship between them, at least as far as the church is concerned. Attitudes to the state are interwoven with the question of the church's relation to the public space. There are at least three options. Should the church:

- Ignore the state/public space?
- Collude with or affirm the state/overtly allow the state to control the public square?
- Challenge the state or "become the state"/seek to take over the public space?

There are, of course, possible biblical underpinnings for all three options.

## **DOES RELIGION CONSERVE OR TRANSFORM REALITY?**

Linked to this issue is the underlying question whether it is the task of religion, and specifically Christianity, to seek to "conserve" or to "transform" current realities. Passages in the Bible can be found to substantiate both options, and the Bible itself can be used for both apparently contradictory purposes. I often compare and contrast how the Bible is described in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and in a story told by Howard Thurman. *The Handmaid's Tale* is the story of a repressive future society, which keeps the Bible locked away. It is only accessible to the commander of the household (male) and even so, is heavily censored. The handmaid of the story, who is called Offred, observes that the Bible is kept locked up "so the servants wouldn't steal it [...]. It [the Bible] is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it."<sup>1</sup> Very different is the picture given by Howard Thurman, a famous black American preacher and theologian. Thurman recounts the following story about his grandmother who was a former slave.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Virago Press, 1987), 98.

My regular chore was to do all the reading for my grandmother—she could neither read nor write [...]. With a feeling of great temerity I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. “During the days of slavery,” she said, “the master’s minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves [...].” Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: “Slaves be obedient to your masters [...]. As unto Christ.” Then he would go on to show how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

That key question as to whether the Bible seeks to conserve or to transform oppressive realities is the subject of an influential article by the US Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. First published in 1979 as an article in *Journal for Biblical Literature*<sup>3</sup> it has since appeared as a chapter in a collection of Brueggemann’s writings. Its thinking has also influenced Brueggemann’s magisterial Old Testament theology. In the language of the *JBL* article, Brueggemann argued that there were two trajectories that ran through the Old Testament which he named as the “royal” trajectory and the “liberation” trajectory. In later writing he has preferred other terms, such as “consolidatory” and “prophetic” respectively. Both trajectories, according to Brueggemann, reflect attitudes to the state, although of course these attitudes are rather different. The “royal/consolidatory” trajectory is the voice of the royal court, the Jerusalem priesthood, the urban “haves.” From their perspective the “state” is a divinely sanctioned instrument of order, control, stability, tradition, hierarchy. The “liberation/prophetic” trajectory on the other hand is the voice of the rural peasantry, the dispossessed, key prophetic or later apocalyptic groups, and even possibly certain priestly classes who had lost out in various politico-religious struggles. From their perspective, the state as it existed was an oppressive force that needed to be challenged and transformed, to enable their more egalitarian vision, which they also believed to be sanctioned by God, to come into being. In his article Brueggemann offered a number of examples of both, running through the entire spectrum of Israel’s history.

The Pharaoh of the Exodus was a prime example of the “royal” trajectory, so were the kings of Israel and Judah, and in the post-exilic period the high priestly party. The “liberation” trajectory was reflected in the Mosaic

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1949), 30–31.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98/2 (1979), 161–85.

period by the liberation of slaves from Egypt, during the monarchy by various prophetic voices, and in the post-exilic period by those who were opposed to the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, and the quasi political role given to the high priest.

The two trajectories are also represented by different strands of biblical material: the royal trajectory, for example, being reflected in parts of the Book of Genesis, especially the “P” strand, and many of the psalms, while the “liberation” trajectory is found par excellence in “D” material, not simple Deuteronomy itself, but also historical and prophetic texts produced under its influence. Brueggemann instances several examples when the “royal” and the “liberation” trajectory come into direct conflict with each other. These include Nathan’s admonition of David in 2 Samuel 12:1–15, Elijah’s challenges to Ahab in 1 Kings, and the clash between Jeremiah and Jehoiakim in Jeremiah 36:1–32. Brueggemann comes close to defining the royal trajectory as “bad” and the liberation trajectory as “good,” but just about escapes that particular trap. For me, one of the most important insights of his thesis is that it is the moments, such as Isaiah 40–55, where the two trajectories encounter each other in a sort of creative dialectic, which are the high points of Old Testament theology—and indeed reflection on the “public space.”

But whether the state is viewed positively or negatively, both trajectories are in effect created by their response to it. Engagement with political realities is fundamental to the biblical story. As I was preparing this article I happened upon David M. Carr’s recently published introduction to the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> I was struck by how this book is structured not by biblical books, not by literary genre, not by the canonical divisions of the Hebrew Bible (Torah, Nevi’im, Ketubim), nor even directly by chronology. Instead, it is organized with reference to political realities, whether internal (e.g., the monarchy) or external (e.g., the Babylonian Empire) to Israel. Examples of the titles of the chapters include, “Echoes of Past Empires in Biblical Wisdom, Love Poetry, Law and Narrative” and “Torah and History in the Wake of the Assyrian Empire.” The premise of the book is not simply that biblical literature cannot be understood without reference to political realities, but that such realities have been fundamentally creative for what we now call a sacred text.

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<sup>4</sup> David M. Carr, *An Introduction to the Old Testament. Sacred Texts and Imperial Contexts of the Hebrew Bible* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

## INTERPRETING THE BIBLE TODAY

Such an understanding of the Bible inevitably has consequences for how it is used today. One of the most significant interpreters of Brueggemann's trajectories model is the South African biblical scholar, Gerald O. West, who has applied the model to the issue of how the Bible is understood in contemporary South Africa. In his chapter "Contending with the Bible" in the collection *The Bible in the Public Square*,<sup>5</sup> West compares the situation today with that of the time of the influential Kairos document of 1986, during the death throes of apartheid. The Kairos document had referred to three different kinds of theology: "state theology," the theological viewpoint of the regime in power in 1986; "church theology" (in some ways Brueggemann's royal trajectory) the political-theological expression of much of the church leadership who recognized the injustice of the situation but whose views about the necessity for structural change were ambiguous; and "prophetic theology" (effectively Brueggemann's liberation trajectory), which was the viewpoint adopted by the Christian writers of the Kairos document who were arguing for the radical transformation in society. West suggests that twenty to twenty-five years on from the Kairos document however the "church theology" model has become the dominant expression of institutional Christian life in South Africa now, and he finds that regrettable.

In reflecting on the Bible and the public space, I would want to set alongside Brueggemann's work some of Paul D. Hanson's insights. Hanson focuses in particular on the understanding of time in the biblical (especially Old Testament) material. It is explored in depth in his classic work, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic*.<sup>6</sup> Hanson suggests that the importance of intersecting with a point in time—with a *kairos* moment if you like—is what marks out biblical faith. He contrasts the timelessness of mythological traditions (which receive some expression within the biblical material) with the stress given to the "now," the point in time, in which heaven is translated down to earth, which he believes marks out the classical prophetic material. Putting Brueggemann and Hanson together can we suggest that biblical thinking about faith and public space characterized by dialectic, provisionality, paradox, but with

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<sup>5</sup> Gerald O. West, "Contending with the Bible: Biblical interpretation as a Site of Struggle in South Africa," in Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Ellen Bradshaw Aitken and Jonathan A. Draper (eds), *The Bible in the Public Square: Reading the Signs of the Times* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2008), 101–16.

<sup>6</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic. Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1979).

a sense of *kairos* or urgency about it? Is “truth” to be found in an urgent interplay between the two trajectories?

I would also suggest that just as dialectic is an important feature within the biblical tradition, so it is also a vital part of the wider question of how we do biblical interpretation. For it is increasingly recognized that biblical interpretation demands a dynamic interplay between text, context and re-text: the world of the text, the world behind the text and the world in front of the text. The word “translation” is a key one for Christian biblical hermeneutics: as Andrew Walls famously commented “the translation principle” is written into the fabric of Christianity.<sup>7</sup> And this, in turn, must have implications for biblical reflection on public space. For Christians engagement with state and public space is unavoidable and essential for our faith, yet, at the same time, it presents us with questions rather than offering us easy answers, with dialectic rather than obvious or revealed certainties.

I conclude by drawing attention to a New Testament parable that is difficult and challenging, but which perhaps expresses the ambiguity of the relationship between religion and state for the early church. It is also a parable that I regularly wrestled with in those days with my St George’s College course as we travelled between Jericho and Jerusalem. It is Luke’s version of the parable of the talents (Lk 19:11–27), although actually in Luke what is offered to the servants is described in the NRSV translation as “pounds” rather than “talents.” The parable features also in Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 25:14–30) and on the whole it is the Matthean version which is better known. My understanding of the literary relationship between the two versions of the parable is obviously affected by my view of the literary relationship between Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels as a whole. I happen to believe that the original version of the parable is likely to be that found in Matthew, and that Luke used (and creatively edited) Matthew’s Gospel in producing his own version.

The parable as it appears in Luke is set while Jesus and his disciples were passing through Jericho, on their way to Jerusalem. It was told by Jesus, Luke’s Gospel says to us, “because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately” (Lk 19:11). So the potential political aspect of the parable is hinted at even in its opening verse. But then, as the parable continues, the straightforward recounting of the story of the “talents” that we are familiar with from Mat-

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew F. Walls, “The Translation Principle,” in Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (New York: Orbis/Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 26–42, here 27.

thew, is interspersed with a narrative that sits rather strangely alongside it into which the basic tale of the sharing out of the money is interspersed:

A nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return (19:12)

But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, “We do not want this man to rule over us.” When he returned, having received royal power (19:14-15)

But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence (19:27).

It is almost certainly an allusion to the tale of Archelaus, one of the three sons of Herod the Great, who after Herod’s death (ca. 4 BCE), was given by the Roman Emperor Augustus part of his father’s kingdom, namely Judaea and Samaria. Two of his brothers (Herod Antipas and Herod Philip) received the other parts of their father’s kingdom. Archelaus’ reputation for extreme brutality was infamous—even by the standards of the Herodian dynasty. A delegation of Pharisees therefore was sent to Rome to plead before Augustus that Archelaus should not be appointed. They were unsuccessful and on his return with “royal power” and the title of ethnarch Archelaus lost no time in taking brutal revenge on them. However that was not the end of the story. Within ten years Archelaus’s extreme misrule had led Pharisees and Saducees jointly to send a further delegation to Rome to ask for his removal. The two groups rarely agreed on anything—so this joint delegation was exceptional and a mark of the discontent that Archelaus had caused. This time they were successful and Archelaus was exiled to Gaul, where he spent the rest of his life (he was still alive during Jesus’ ministry). Augustus then imposed on Judaea and Samaria direct rule via Roman procurators—of which the fifth, and most infamous, was Pontius Pilate.

What used to fascinate me as I stood recounting this story to my St George’s College students in Jericho (the setting for the parable in Luke’s Gospel) was that we were hearing it as we stood close to the ruins of a magnificent palace on the outskirts of Jericho. First built by Herod the Great and later extended and developed by Archelaus during his ten year rule, it was a “parable” in stone of Herodian extravagance and decadence. It was easy to imagine Jesus pointing to it as a visual symbol of one model of political power, of what it meant to be a king, “because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately” (Lk 19:11). For all its magnificence Jesus’ listeners would have known that its original builder was now dead, and his son who

had extended it was himself living in exile. It was truly a reminder of the transitory nature of earthly political power, “the state.” Yet, in one sense, Jesus seems to be commending the actions of this despotic king in relation to the resources he has entrusted to his servants. So is Jesus commending—or challenging—the actions of the king’s servants in relation to the resources entrusted to them? The ambiguity which this parable leaves me with is perhaps also a “parable” of the ambiguity with which the biblical tradition engages with politics and power.



# HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE QUR'AN AS A KEY FOR TODAY'S INTERPRETATIONS OF THE QUR'AN

*Dina El Omari*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Religion in the public sphere is a topic that comes up time and again, be it in society, politics or academia. It is not only questions regarding the importance of religions in their respective contexts that are raised but also regarding the way in which they are implemented. Problems arise when holy scriptures contain passages that cannot easily be reconciled with a contemporary social context. A particularly delicate subject for example is the position of women, something the Qur'an portrays in an ambivalent manner. The historical contextualization of certain verses plays a key role in finding solutions to issues such as this. However, this does not suffice; what is needed is a methodical approach that allows us to use the Qur'anic message productively in our contemporary context and lets us develop it further. The following essay is an attempt to outline such a methodical approach in order to contribute to a humanistic approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics. The first section will focus on historical contextualization. Based on a number of selected verses on the topic of women and using theological criteria, the next section will open up a new approach to a topical and humanistic interpretation.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION**

Placing Qur'anic verses in a context is by no means an innovation among Islamic scholars. On the contrary, this discipline has always been known

to the Islamic tradition. It is referred to as “occasions” or “circumstances of revelation” or “*asbāb an-nuzūl*.” These are accounts of specific occasions or circumstances that gave rise to some revelations. However, only the types of revelation are concerned that represent a reaction/answer to specific historical and social developments. The material was handed down by the Prophet’s companions who were either personally connected to the event or witnessed the occasions first hand.<sup>1</sup> The occasions of revelation can represent an important tool for decoding/interpreting the meaning of some Qur’anic verses. However, traditional exegetical works only list them without including them into the exegetical process; i. e., historical context and interpretation are connected. Even if we do not consider all handed down material as authentic and take into consideration that some verses are linked to more than one occasion of revelation or that occasions may include contradictions and therefore cannot be accepted without question, they nonetheless represent an important means of accessing historical contextualization and thus the Qur’anic text itself—in addition to other historical sources. This is why, as far as possible, they should definitely be taken into consideration in the context of interpretation.

Speaking about historical contextualization, a more modern hermeneutical approach to Islamic theology appears imperative. This can be found in the so-called “three-step approach” of the Pakistani philosopher Fazlur Rahman, who developed his method for legal passages in the Qur’an. He bases his approach on the assumption that every legal verse contains an Islamic ethical principle. In order to “filter” these principles out of the individual verses and passages he suggests a double movement: “The process of interpretation proposed here consists of a double movement, from the present situation to Qur’ānic times, then back to the present.”<sup>2</sup> The concrete steps are as follows: as a first step, the interpreter must go back to the time of revelation in order to understand the Qur’anic passage within its historical context, i.e., the original meaning of the Qur’anic verse must be made accessible. In a subsequent, second step, the specific instructions are to be put on an abstract level, in a way that allows for the deduction of moral legal grounds. In a third step, the interpreter can then transfer the resulting general principles to a contemporary sociohistorical context.<sup>3</sup>

Fazlur Rahman’s approach can indeed prove very productive; however it also contains some weaknesses and is not yet fully perfected. The main

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jalaluddin Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi Ulum al-Qur’an*, English translation by Muneer Fareed, at <https://ia700802.us.archive.org/35/items/AlItqanFiUlumAlQuran/AlItqanFiUlumAlQuran-SuyutiEnglish.pdf>, 30ff.

<sup>2</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7.

problem lies in the fact that the methodology can only be used for verses which deal with legal issues. Yet, this type of verse is represented on a very marginal scale only in relationship to the total volume of the Qur'an. What are we to do with the rest of the verses? How should we handle verses that are of a theological and timeless nature? An approach must be developed that can serve as a benchmark for the interpretation of all Qur'anic verses using theological criteria. The following section will outline the main features of such an approach, using a number of verses that deal with the topic of women since this corpus of verses includes both legal regulations and theological verses that refer to the relationship between God and humanity. There is some tension between some of these verses but also in terms of their position regarding social order and everyday life, in particular in Western societies. Yet, if the Qur'an is to represent a revelation for all times, if religion is meant to represent an asset for public life, then we must resolve these tensions.

### **VERSES DEPENDENT ON CONTEXT VS VERSES INDEPENDENT OF CONTEXT—THE TOPIC OF WOMEN**

The Qur'an includes a number of verses that touch on the subject of women. Critics of Islam like to refer to some of these verses in order to illustrate the discrimination against women in Islam. One of the most frequently quoted verses in this context is 4:34:

Husbands are the protectors and maintainers of their wives because Allah has given the one more strength than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in the husband's absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and misconduct, admonish them first, next, refuse to share their beds, and last spank them; But if they return to obedience, seek not against them means of annoyance: For Allah is Most High, Great above you all.

On the other hand, the Qur'an includes some passages which explicitly underline equality between women and men. This is best illustrated by 33:35:

For Muslim men and women—for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise—for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward.

This raises the question of how we are to deal with verses such as the above without appearing selective or apologetic? How can we conceive of a concept which resolves contradictions and lives up to the Qur'an's claim to offer guidance for all times? It is important to develop a methodical approach which can be applied to all verses and is in no way selective. In order to achieve this, verses must be distinguished by certain criteria. One such possible distinction would be between verses "dependent on context" and "independent of context."<sup>4</sup> Such a distinction can be based on the Prophet's own understanding of Himself, as at times He appears as God's messenger and at times He acts as head of state. In His role as God's messenger it was His duty to proclaim God's message.<sup>5</sup> However, in Medina, He also acted as head of state and was committed to laying the foundations for a state based on the rule of law. He Himself distinguishes between the two functions:

When the Prophet came to Medina, he noticed how people crossed different species of date palm trees. "He asked: 'What are you doing?' They answered: 'We have always done it that way.' So he told them: 'Maybe it would be better for you to stop doing that.' So they stopped doing it. However, when it was time to harvest, the harvest was bad. The farmers went to the Prophet and told him about it. And he told them: 'I am only human. If I command you to do something concerning your religion, follow my command. But if I command you to do something based on my opinion, then I am only human. You know better about earthly matters than I do.'" This passage illustrates the clear distinction the Prophet makes between what he proclaimed in His capacity as God's prophet and His opinion as a human being.<sup>6</sup>

If we use this principle for the Qur'an, we come to the following conclusion: verses independent of context and theological verses do not relate to aspects which are subject to social change, i.e., they do not refer to social order but relate a message about the relationship between God and humanity, about the image of humanity, about people's status within creation as well as about general principles, such as justice and equality, without commenting on specific regulations and historical events. It follows that they can be considered universal propositions, independent of historical context; they are not linked to specific circumstances. However, verses which do depend on context refer to things and events that are subject to social change. However, considering these verses dependent on context does not mean that they become unusable. For example, if we look at verse 8 of surah 16:

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mouhanad Khorchide, *Islam ist Barmherzigkeit* (Freiburg: Herder, 2012), 135f.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>6</sup> According to Muslim, Hadith no. 2361-2363.

And (He has created) horses, mules, and donkeys, for you to ride and use for show;  
And He has created (other) things of which ye have no knowledge.

In this verse, God describes the creation of means of transportation which, at the same time, serve as status symbols. It is obvious that in our modern social context riding a donkey in the streets would no longer be “for show.” So how can this verse be understood without losing its content? What is relevant for this verse is that God has given humanity means of transportation. The verse’s theological aspect assures its eternal value and saves it from becoming obsolete in spite of historical contextualization. However, the means of transportation used is subject to change and therefore depends on the specific historical and social contexts.

Let us return to the topic of women and the above quoted verse 4:34. Here, He relates something about the relationship between men and women within the social context of the time in a descriptive manner; at the same time, He refers to their interactions as married couples. This verse has been interpreted and discussed in manifold ways. In particular feminist movements used historical contextualization, for example Fatima Mernessi<sup>7</sup> and Amina Waddud-Muhsin.<sup>8</sup> However, neither of the two offers a solution that allows completely to resolve tensions between this verse and other theological verses. The following interpretation, which leaves the text as it is but allows us to understand it in a much more flexible manner, shows that this is possible. This first part of the verse relates to responsibility in a marriage; this could be understood as the theological aspect of the verse. What characterizes this responsibility within the context of the allocation of the partners’ different roles depends on the specific social structure. In a patriarchal structure, common on the Arabian Peninsula at the time, it was customary that men were responsible for women. Of course, this is something that can still be found in a contemporary context if the couple decide to live in such a constellation. However, it is often the case that women also have to and want to work not only in order to provide for the family but also because they want to find fulfillment in their careers. This shift in responsibilities should also be considered within the context of inheritance; however, based on 4:11, women often only receive half the inheritance a man is due:

Allah (thus) directs you as regards your children’s inheritance: to the male, a portion equal to that of two females.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Fatima Mernessi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Amina Waddud, *Quran and Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

An interpretation that does not include a distinction dependent on context views this as a clear legal regulation with ahistorical validity. A topical approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics on the other hand considers the social connection between the context at the time of revelation and the reader's social context in order to determine the theological content of the verse. In his commentary on this Qur'anic verse, Ibn Kathir suggests that to begin with many believers were outraged when they heard the Prophet Muhammad's idea that women should be entitled to a part of the inheritance; they said,

Women and small children are supposed to inherit something, although they cannot go to war and take treasures as spoils of war?! Keep this idea of Muhammad a secret, maybe he will forget what he said, or we can convince him to drop this rule again.

He goes on to say,

So they went to the Prophet and complained [...] because in the times before Islam women inherited nothing, only those who had gone to war were entitled to a share of the inheritance. The shares were divided up according to age [older family members received more than younger ones].<sup>9</sup>

This gave rise to the revelation of the verse. The reason why women were excluded from inheritance in pre-Islamic times lies in the social order of the time. The tribes were often at war with each other and were fighting over economic resources. In most cases, the spoils of war resulting from these confrontations represented the main source of income for these tribes. As a consequence, men, who were responsible for the spoils of war, had a privileged position within the tribes, which inevitably also translated into inheritance regulations.<sup>10</sup> Within this system, women represented a danger as, first of all, they could end up as spoils of war—a clear violation of a tribe's honor; secondly, women were also married off to men from other tribes for political reasons. In order to avoid losing parts of their possessions to other tribes, women were excluded from inheritance. The Prophet wanted to put an end to these tribal structures and set to work in small steps. It was important to Him successively to establish equality between men and women, i.e., women were to be respected as equal members of society. With this revolutionary ambition, which at the same time represents the verse's theological content, God supported the Prophet by revealing this verse after the Prophet had already suggested a new inheritance regula-

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<sup>9</sup> Ismā'īl Ibn Kaṭīr, *Tafsīr al-qur'ān*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1996), 404–405.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Werner Caskel: "Zur Beduninisierung Arabiens," in *ZDMG* 103 (1953), 28f; cf. Walter Dostal, "Die Araber in vorislamischer Zeit," in *Der Islam* 74 (1997), 3.

tion which His followers were going to ignore. But how can we determine whether the Prophet really aimed at equal rights for women? In order to illustrate this more clearly we need to look at theological propositions in the Qur'an that define women's position before God, such as the above mentioned verse in surah 33 that makes no theological distinction between men and women. Therefore, if the principle behind the inheritance verse is the recognition of and equal rights for women, then God's recommendation, the mere wording, is to be considered dependent on the historical and social contexts; i.e., depending on the context it needs to be decided to what extent the recommendation applies. Looking at a working woman who is responsible for providing for her family, it is no longer a question of her part of the inheritance being covered by her husband's income. The Qur'an's theological propositions, such as the above quoted surah 33, show beyond doubt that men and women are equal before God. This must have consequences in the here and now in our society, i.e., it is Muslims' duty to follow up on the notion of equal rights as outlined in 4:11.

Let us return to verse 34 of surah 4 and its second part that deals with the way in which marital conflict should be handled. Again, the context must be considered and the question raised what God wanted to tell society at the time. Looking at the occasion of revelation we find out the following in one of the two versions:

Yunus ibn al-Hasan who reported that a man slapped his wife and she complained about him to the Prophet, Allah bless him and give him peace. Her family who went with her said: "O Messenger of Allah! So-and-so has slapped our girl." The Prophet, Allah bless him and give him peace, kept saying: "Retaliation! Retaliation! And there is no other judgement to be held." But then this verse (Men are in charge of women...) was revealed and the Prophet, Allah bless him and give him peace, said: "We wanted something and Allah wanted something else."<sup>11</sup>

His progressive ambitions made the Prophet give very drastic orders: the woman was to seek retribution. However, at the time the ummah lived under very instable conditions, and such a revolutionary act could have let the negative mood escalate. God's solution to the problem was step-by-step to introduce a new way of dealing with each other for married couples, at a time when it was customary for women to suffer severe marital abuse. It follows that the proposition here is: do not abuse your wives but talk to them, avoid intimacies and only resort to hitting when none of the other steps have been successful. We can conclude that this Qur'anic proposition

<sup>11</sup> Ali ibn Ahmad al-Wāhidī, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, transl. Mokrane Guezzou (Amman: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought 2008), 51.

does not represent a universal justification for violence against women; on the contrary, violence is seen as a less potent means of solving conflicts as it is listed after these other means and peaceful means of mediation are prioritized. We are dealing with a restriction here, by no means with a general permission.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, God's actions indicate that violence should not be met with counter violence, as the Prophet first ordered, but that other means of resolving marital conflicts exist. On the other, He takes into consideration the male psychological feelings at the time; we must not forget that this was a patriarchal society. This explains why God introduces His measures step by step and also why He addresses men instead of women; however the underlying message is one of instruction. If we now consider the underlying principle of this verse and therefore its theological content, the answer must be: in cases of marital conflict, people are to find the most suitable rational way of mediation other than violence. If we transfer this scenario into our present times, this would mean that in case of serious marital difficulties, we should seek a means of mediation that is appropriate to the contemporary context. Violence is no longer an option since—contrary to the times when listing violence as the last option represented a step forward—it would nowadays represent a step backwards. In the modern context, the last step before divorce would surely be seeking marital and psychological counseling.

God by no means wants to legitimize marital violence which becomes clear if we look at a theological-anthropological message, which is ahistorical and according to which both sexes are devoted to each other in love and mercy:

And of His signs is that He created for you, from yourselves, spouses to settle down with and He established friendship and mercy between you. There are in all that signs for a people who reflect.<sup>13</sup>

The approach to interpreting the Qur'an which has been illustrated in this article is an attempt to develop the Qur'anic message further in our modern context. By doing this, we can live up to the Qur'an's claim to be a guidance for the world for all times.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Waddud, *op. cit.* (note 8), 106.

<sup>13</sup> Qur'an 30:21.



# HISTORICAL INSIGHTS



# SPACES FOR CONVERSATION: OCCASIONS AND CONDITIONS FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE IN PRE-MODERN TIMES

*Mark Swanson*

## INTRODUCTION

About thirty years ago I first became interested in the medieval apologetic literature written by Arabic-speaking Christians.<sup>1</sup> I had originally hoped to find, in this Arabic Christian literature and its Islamic counterpart, records of Christian-Muslim conversation that might be of significance for Christian-Muslim dialogue in the present day. However, I gradually came to the conclusion that, for the most part in these literatures, Christians wrote for Christians, even when the texts claimed to be directed to Muslims; and Muslims wrote for Muslims, even when the texts claimed to be directed to Christians. When the texts claimed to present samples of dialogue, these were often fictitious—or at least heavily edited.<sup>2</sup>

But, surely, conversations between Christians and Muslims did take place; the texts bear witness to such conversations, if only indirectly. Some Christian authors were capable not only of quoting the Qur'an but of subtly

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<sup>1</sup> The best general introduction to this literature is Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 2–20.

<sup>2</sup> See Mark N. Swanson, "What Dialogue? In Search of Arabic-language Christian-Muslim Conversation in the Early Islamic Centuries," in David D. Grafton, Joseph Duggan, and Jason Craige Harris (eds), *Christian-Muslim Relations in the Anglican and Lutheran Communion: Historical Encounters and Contemporary Projects* (London and New York: Palgrave Pivot, 2013).

echoing and alluding to it while making an argument; others had quite a profound knowledge of the Ḥadīth literature.<sup>3</sup> These authors learned these capacities somewhere, most probably through flesh-and-blood encounters with Muslims. But the actual Christian–Muslim encounters and conversations are usually somewhat hidden behind the texts that were their fruit.

And so, I am less interested today in the question, Where do we find samples of medieval conversations between Christians and Muslims? than in the question, Where did conversations between Christians and Muslims take place, in the medieval *Dār al-Islām*? Or, to put the question in terms more salient to the present collection, What kinds of spaces were created, where Christians and Muslims (and others) may have met and spoken about serious matters of common concern? Where and under what circumstances did these spaces open up, and what was involved in maintaining them?

In what follows, I will describe four kinds of space that are suggested by the literature I have read: the emir’s *majlis*; the literary-philosophical circle; holy ground; and the street. These four are by no means comprehensive, but I believe that they are instructive.

### “THE MONK IN THE EMIR’S MAJLIS”

Among the most popular medieval Arabic Christian apologetic genres was the one that Fr. Sidney Griffith has labeled “the monk in the emir’s *majlis*.”<sup>4</sup> The genre bears witness to the reality of religious and specifically inter-religious debate in the séances or *majālis* of Muslim rulers throughout the medieval period, with special flourishing at particular times and places: the brilliant court of the Abbasid caliph al-Maʿmūn early in the ninth century immediately comes to mind. Rulers sponsored religious and philosophical debates about a variety of issues, often out of genuine interest but also seeking (and seeking to provide) entertainment. Participants in the debates not only honed their debating skills but also developed a kind of code of etiquette and fairness in debate.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Mark N. Swanson, “Beyond Proof-texting: Approaches to the Qur’an in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies,” in *The Muslim World* 88 (1998), 297–319; Krisztina Szilágyi, “Christian Learning about Islam in the Early ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate: The Muslim Sources of the Disputation of the Monk Abraham of Tiberias,” in Jens Scheiner and Damien Janos (eds), *The Place to Go To: Contexts of Learning in Baghdad from the Eighth to Tenth Centuries* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, “The Monk in the Emir’s Majlis: Reflections on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologetics in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period,” in Hava Lazarus-Yafeh et al (eds), *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), 13–65.

The most popular of the Christian texts (the disputation of the monk Abraham of Tiberias in the *majlis* of the emir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Hāshimī in Jerusalem, in 820 CE; or that of bishop Theodore Abū Qurrah in the *majlis* of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mūn in Ḥarrān in 829 CE; or that of the monk Jirjī of the Monastery of St Simeon in the presence of the emir al-Malik al-Mushammar in Aleppo, early in the thirteenth century)<sup>5</sup> have a basic pattern: a Muslim ruler takes advantage of a passing Christian monk in order to convene a conversation. The monk engages in religious debate with a series of Muslim scholars and (as expected in these Christian texts) defeats them all. A trial by fire or poison may add to the monk’s triumph. Finally, the ruler dismisses the monk in safety and honor: Abraham of Tiberias was briefly imprisoned but then released unharmed; Theodore Abū Qurrah was loaded with rich gifts; and the monk Jirjī tried to refuse gifts, but eventually accepted a mule with a load of fish for his monastery.

Scholarly opinion on the reliability of these texts as witnesses to historical realities ranges fairly widely. I tend to see the texts just mentioned as largely invented and therefore indirect rather than direct witnesses to Christian-Muslim conversation. We do possess other texts, less entertaining but perhaps closer to historical events, which report on a Christian’s presentation in the *majlis* setting; while these texts have no doubt been “cleaned up” and idealized for their circulation among Christians, they may bring us closer to actual conversation.<sup>6</sup>

But whether simply polished for publication or invented out of whole cloth, the texts about “the monk in the emir’s *majlis*” point us to one place where, thanks to the interest of a ruler and a particular set of rules for debate, space for Christian-Muslim conversation might open up. And one condition for this opening of space is brought out very prominently in the texts: not only does a powerful Muslim official call for and actively follow the conversation, but also guarantees that the debate will be free and fair and that the space opened up for conversation would be a safe space. When the monk Abraham of Tiberias tried to excuse himself from debate, for example, the emir told him: “I give you the word in this situation, I permit you to speak, I command you to respond, and I grant you security

<sup>5</sup> For orientation to these texts, see Griffith, *ibid.*, or briefly, Griffith, *op. cit.* (note 1), 77–81. For up-to-date bibliographies concerning these texts (and others mentioned in this essay), see the appropriate entries in David Thomas et al, *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009–).

<sup>6</sup> One example might be the Christological discourse of a Melkite priest and physician at a *Majlis* in Baghdad, in the presence of the emir ‘Aḍud al-Dawlah, around the year 980 CE. Samir Khalil Samir, “Un traité du cheikh Abū ‘Alī Nazīf ibn Yumn, sur l’accord des chrétiens entre eux malgré leur disaccord dans l’expression,” in *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph* 51 (1990), 329–43.

(*amān*).<sup>7</sup> The emir al-Malik al-Mushammar gave the monk Jirjī his signet ring as a sign of that security.<sup>8</sup> And when Bishop Theodore Abū Qurrah is summoned to the *majlis* of the caliph al-Ma'mūn, it is al-Ma'mūn who set the ground-rules:

This is a *majlis* characterized by justice and fairness. No one will commit excesses in it. So present your argument and answer without dread. There is nothing here “except by that which is better.”<sup>9</sup>

These last words, of course, are a reference to the Qur'anic injunction, “Do not argue with the People of the Book except by that which is better” (Q. 29:46; cf. Q. 16:125)—which is repeatedly cited throughout the debate as al-Ma'mūn continues to reassure Bishop Theodore that he may speak freely. And, according to the text, al-Ma'mūn enforced his rules. When one of the bishop's interlocutors, called Sallām ibn Mu'awiyah al-Hamdānī, launched into a personal attack on Bishop Theodore, the caliph is reported to have intervened, saying: “Shut up, and may God put you to shame! You have spoken in a way that is stupid, foolish, and ignorant.” He then expelled Sallām from the *majlis*.<sup>10</sup>

Debates on religious topics were not always so rigorously policed. As Sarah Stroumsa has pointed out,<sup>11</sup> while good manners in debate were an ideal (enshrined in handbooks on *adab al-jadal* or debate etiquette), bad manners—sometimes including the abuse of religious minorities—were a frequent reality, which perhaps explains the need for the handbooks. The tenth-century Karaite legal scholar al-Qirqisānī warned against theological discussion in what he called *majālis al-khawf*, “séances of fear,” and warned against “*majālis* whose participants exercise no equity in their treatment, and do not grant you and your opponent equal sympathy and opportunity to be heard.”<sup>12</sup> It is striking, then, that the Christian debate texts at our disposal stress the role of the convening emir in enforcing good manners and guaranteeing the Christian participant's safety and honor. Only if fairness and safety were guaranteed could space in fact open up for honest conversation.

<sup>7</sup> Giacinto Bulus Marcuzzo (ed. and trans.), *Le dialogue d'Abraham de Tibériade avec Abd al-Raḥmān al-Hāshimī à Jérusalem vers 820* (Rome 1986), 278–81 (verset 28).

<sup>8</sup> Griffith, op. cit. (note 4), 55–56.

<sup>9</sup> Mark N. Swanson, “The Christian al-Ma'mūn Tradition,” in David Thomas (ed.), *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in Abbasid Iraq* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 64–66, here 65.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Stroumsa, “Ibn al-Rāwandī's *sū' adab al-mujādala*: The Role of Bad Manners in Medieval Disputations,” in Lazarus-Yafeh et al, op. cit. (note 4), 66–83.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

## THE LITERARY-PHILOSOPHICAL CIRCLE

A second kind of “space for conversation” to which Arabic Christian literature bears witness may overlap with “the emir’s *majlis*,” but is broader in nature: the gatherings of highly educated and cultured individuals with common intellectual concerns that we may call “the literary-philosophical circle.” While examples range from the court of al-Ma’mūn early in the ninth century CE to the present day, especially good (and well-documented) examples are provided by the “schools, circles and societies” that flourished in Baghdad in the late tenth century CE under the Būyids, that Joel Kraemer has described in his book *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*.<sup>13</sup> Participants in these “schools, circles, and societies” were to a great extent united by their formation by and loyalty to the Greek scientific and philosophic legacy, which was still in a process of translation and refinement, from Greek to Syriac and to Arabic. This legacy, with Aristotle at its heart, had gripped the imaginations of many intellectuals from very diverse backgrounds. For example, a figure at the center of the philosophical life of late tenth-century Baghdad was the Jacobite *Christian* Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adī, who counted both Christians and Muslims among his teachers and students. As Kraemer put it,

In the circles of Yaḥyā b. ‘Adī and of his pupil Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī, and in the general intellectual ambience of the time, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Ṣābians, and Mazdaeans communed in the study of the ancients—united by what Werner Jaeger once called “the ecumenical power of antiquity.”<sup>14</sup>

This is not to suggest that the participants in these schools, circles and societies gave up their particular religious convictions. Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adī was a founder of a particular philosophical style of Christian apologetic that was emulated throughout the Arabic-speaking Christian world.<sup>15</sup> What someone like Yaḥyā did do was to give priority to philosophical arguments: arguments had to be made on the basis of reason, and not of scriptural recitation or received dogmatics.

The flourishing of intellectual conversation in late tenth-century Baghdad is a startling phenomenon that requires several levels of explanation. The external conditions for it include a certain degree of affluence, social mobility, cosmopolitanism and tolerant rulers. At its heart, it depended

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<sup>13</sup> Joel Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Buyid Age*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed. (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Griffith, *op. cit.* (note 1), 122–25.

on a common curriculum composed of the translations of philosophical and scientific works of antiquity. A variety of different but overlapping projects were pursued: Yaḥyā's school emphasized the study of texts (how to read them, copy them, collate and edit them, translate them, and so on), while others engaged more explicitly in philosophical speculation. But participants in these conversations shared the sense that philosophy could form individuals and contribute to human unity and happiness. This is important: these people were not merely "interested" in philosophy; they were convinced that they were doing important work to bring about a better future for society.<sup>16</sup>

Late tenth-century Baghdad may represent a very special case, but it does point to the way that common formation and common aspirations, centered on the life of the mind and on universal human concerns, has had the power, given the right external conditions, to open up space where Christians, Muslims and others could gather, have fruitful conversation and create bonds of friendship.

There is a fragility to such spaces. The external conditions that allow for them—resources and patronage, a cosmopolitan outlook, a general tolerance in society—could come to a sudden end. Even in late tenth-century Baghdad, there were people who were scandalized by the promiscuous mixing of people of different religions, or by the exclusion of specifically scriptural considerations in favor of arguments from reason.<sup>17</sup> There are stories to tell of particular individuals who would press dogmatic considerations in such a way as to highlight power disparities and to put minorities, or the heterodox, at risk.<sup>18</sup> Appropriate responses could require skillful and tactful evasion, or very careful maneuvering.

## HOLY GROUND

A third place where space for Christian–Muslim conversation sometimes opens up in the medieval texts is what we may call "holy ground": churches,

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., passim, e.g., vii–viii, 4–10, 59–60, 103–4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 59, where we hear of the shocked reaction of a pious visitor from al-Andalus.

<sup>18</sup> One example from the Abbasid court in the ninth century might be the Muslim courtier Ibn al-Munajjim's demand from the Christian intellectual Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq for a response to his attempt demonstratively to prove the prophethood of Muḥammad; see Mark N. Swanson, "A Curious and Delicate Correspondence: the *Burhān* of Ibn al-Munajjim and the *Jawāb* of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq," in *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 22 (2011), 173–83.



for example, where Muslim intellectuals could seek out well-educated Christian priests; or, in particular, the monasteries.

In fact, there is a special genre of Islamic literature dedicated to Christian monasteries: the *diyārāt* literature, books “of the monasteries.”<sup>19</sup> These books contain a variety of material, including descriptive and historical information but also much poetry occasioned by visits to the monasteries. From this material we learn that, whether in Abbasid Baghdad or Fatimid Cairo, trips to monasteries were popular excursions. The monasteries were places of hospitality where one could enjoy an outing in a beautiful natural environment. They were also known as places where one could drink wine, or places where the sexes might mix with impunity. Especially in Fatimid Egypt, caliphs and highly-placed individuals often adopted particular monasteries almost as their personal retreat centers; the poems in the *diyārāt* literature record the delights of wine drinking, refined conversation and, occasionally, even amorous encounters.

The *diyārāt* literature presents monasteries as places somehow outside the normal order of things, places where the normal rules of life did not necessarily apply. And perhaps this contributed to the monasteries becoming places for possibly significant Christian-Muslim encounter.

For example, the history of the Egyptian church that we know as *The History of the Patriarchs* tells the story of one particularly important encounter that took place around the year 1020 at the Shahrān Monastery, to the south of Old Cairo.<sup>20</sup> The previous decade had been a terrible one for Egyptian Christians, as the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh had unleashed a persecution against the Copts, beginning with a variety of discriminatory measures and leading on to the closing or destruction of churches and, for a time, the imprisonment of Patriarch Zacharias (64<sup>th</sup> patriarch, 1004–1032). The persecution reached its climax around 1012, but by the end of the decade its intensity had slackened; some civil servants asked for and received permission to return to Christian allegiance after having converted, under pressure, to Islam. It was while the caliph al-Ḥākim was “on retreat,” so to speak, at the Shahrān Monastery, that a

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<sup>19</sup> Gérard Troupeau, “Les couvents chrétiens dans la littérature arabe,” in *La Nouvelle Revue du Caire* 1 (1975), 265–79; Hilary Kilpatrick, “Monasteries through Muslim Eyes: The *diyārāt* Books,” in Thomas, op. cit. (note 9), 19–37.

<sup>20</sup> See Aziz Suryal Atiya, Yassa Abd al-Masih, and O. H. E. Burmester (eds), *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, Vol. II, Part II, *Khaël III-Shenouti II* (AD 880–1066) (Cairo: Société d'Archéologie Copte, 1948), 135–36 (Arabic text), 204–7 (English trans.). The story is summarized in Mark N. Swanson, *The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt (641–1517)* (Cairo and New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 53–56.

monk of that monastery named Poemen engineered a meeting between the caliph and Patriarch Zacharias, along with a contingent of his bishops.

We are told that the caliph marveled when he saw the patriarch—ironically, because he was short, ugly and wispy-bearded in contrast to his stately, full-bearded bishops, and yet had great authority.

[Al-Ḥākīm] said: “Truly, in all the world there is no established religion like the religion of the Christians. Here are we: we spill blood and expend wealth and send out armies, and we are not obeyed! But this old man, insignificant in appearance, ugly of constitution—the people of all these lands obey him at a word, and nothing other.”

Then [al-Ḥākīm] said to the patriarch and to the bishops: “Remain here until I carry out for you your requirements.” He left them, and they were happy at what they had heard from him.<sup>21</sup>

If the Islamic literature about Christian monasteries describes them as places outside the normal run of things, where the usual rules did not necessarily apply, Christian literature about monasteries (and their inhabitants) describes them as places of holiness, sometimes of a kind that would attract Muslims who were seeking healing, counsel or refuge. An example may be given from the same Shahrān Monastery, where, in the opening years of the fourteenth century, the great saint Barsūm “the Naked” took up residence and then, for sixteen years, interacted with crowds of people who came for his teaching, blessing, counsel, healing and other kinds of interventions in their lives.<sup>22</sup> The collection of miracles that accompanies Barsūm’s biography informs us that the supplicants who came to visit the saint included high-ranking Mamluk officials; and, on one occasion, the sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir himself came to seek the saint’s blessing before setting out to war in Syria. According to the text, the saint promised the sultan his prayers—but asked, in return, that churches closed during the disturbances of the year 1301 CE be allowed to be reopened.<sup>23</sup> Once again, the winding down of a persecution is credited to an encounter at a monastery.

Thus monasteries could be places where normal rules did not apply; liminal places, between this world and the next; holy places, where divine

<sup>21</sup> Atiya et al, *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, 2.2, 136 (Arabic text; author’s own translation).

<sup>22</sup> See W.E. Crum, “Barṣaumâ the Naked,” in *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 29 (1907), 135–49, 187–207; Brigitte Voile, “Barsūm le Nu: Un saint copte au Caire à l’époque mamelouke,” in Denise Aigle (ed.), *Saints orientaux* (Paris: De Boccard, 1995), 151–68.

<sup>23</sup> Crum, *ibid.*, 206.

power seemed on the loose. In such places, space could open up for encounters and conversations that might not have been possible elsewhere.

### **AN INTERLUDE: THE HISTORICAL RECORD AND “CREATING PUBLIC SPACE” TODAY**

I would like to pause at this point and comment on the possible contribution of this essay to a volume on “Creating Public Space.” Elsewhere in this volume we learn that “public space” is a complex concept, encompassing various configurations of physical and/or virtual spaces; various contributors seek to understand how these might afford minority and disadvantaged groups the opportunity for visibility and audibility in the larger society. We learn that such spaces need to be claimed or created, and that they are intrinsically places of struggle; even societies that claim to provide and even guarantee freedom of religion, expression, assembly, etc. are not free from tendencies to privilege certain forms of speech and, especially, certain sorts of visibility.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, “creating public space” is not a simple matter, in which (say) enlightened people get together and legislate into existence the conditions and regulations for perfectly free and fair discourse. Rather, “creating public space” is something that proceeds stepwise, often in fits and starts. Those who seek such space create and/or claim it as its possibility arises, wherever its possibility arises.

And thus the present (medieval historical) paper is perhaps not entirely irrelevant to the theme of the present volume. The cities of the medieval *Dār al-Islām* were full of the symbols of ascendant Islam, while symbols of Christianity and Judaism were pushed to the margins or kept deliberately modest. And yet, we have seen how certain spaces for conversation might open up where, at least for a time, Christians and Muslims could meet and the Christians express themselves freely about religion, or the way to human thriving, or pressing issues of the day. The spaces mentioned so far (the emir’s *majlis*, the literary-philosophical circle, the monastery) are ones that we today might consider private or only quasi-public: at least in the first two cases, one had to have the right invitation or the right qualifications to enter into them. But this perhaps only underlines the complexity and contingency of the processes by which “public space” is created and

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<sup>24</sup> Examples may be found throughout this volume, and include the case of the Christian “cultural heritage” in Quebec, the debate about minarets in Switzerland, or about church building in Malaysia.

claimed: the community that seeks visibility and audibility takes advantage of whatever space presents itself.

## THE STREET

There are other and more properly public locations for encounter and conversation that could be discussed in this essay. One that could be developed is the law court. The documents of the Cairo Genizah have allowed scholars some glimpses into how members of the Jewish community appealed for justice to the Fatimid courts;<sup>25</sup> presumably, similar procedures for raising petitions to Muslim legal authorities would have pertained to Christians.

Here, however, I would like to consider the place of festivals. If monasteries could sometimes provide places where the normal rules did not necessarily apply, festivals could provide times when, similarly, normal rules did not apply and Muslims and Christians could share with one another in ancient rituals, revelry and sometimes even parodies of existing authority. In the medieval period in Egypt, some of the most popular festivals were those that were generally considered to be Coptic, even if their roots were pre-Christian: they had to do with the cycle of the rise and fall of the river Nile and the agricultural calendar.<sup>26</sup> The *ʿīd al-ghītās* was the Christian Feast of the Epiphany, but also marked the Nile's low point; it would be marked by candlelight processions and (mixed-gender) swimming in the river. *Wafāʾ al-Nīl*, in late summer, marked the rise of the Nile to a critical point, which would be marked with much pomp and celebration. *Nawrūz* or New Year marked the Nile flood—and was a kind of feast of fools that featured the election of a “Prince” who could engage in a kind of mocking mimicry of the governing authorities. And the *ʿīd al-shahīd* or Feast of the Martyr featured Coptic priests taking the relic of the finger of the martyr John of Sanhūt from its place at its church in Shubra, to the north of Cairo, and lowering it into the river in order to guarantee the river's rise—and the uninterrupted continuation of agricultural life in Egypt. These festi-

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<sup>25</sup> One entry point into this work is Marina Rustow, “The Genizah and Jewish Communal History,” in Ben Outhwaite and Siam Bhayro (eds), *From a Sacred Source: Genizah Studies in Honour of Prof. Stefan C. Reif* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 289–317, and the rich bibliography found there (where several titles refer to petitions to Fatimid caliphs or appeals to Muslim authorities).

<sup>26</sup> On these festivals and for the following paragraph, see Huda Lutfi, “Coptic Festivals of the Nile: Aberrations of the Past?” in Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann (eds), *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society* (Cambridge: 1998), 254–82; and especially Tamer el-Leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1293–1524 A.D.,” Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 2005, 116–26.

vals attracted Muslims and Christians alike. They could all devolve into behavior that scandalized the more puritanical. And, in the course of the fourteenth century, the Mamluk authorities suppressed the festivals, one by one: scandalous behavior had to be controlled; mockery was not to be tolerated; and, most importantly, the indiscriminate mixing of Muslims and Christians had to come to an end. Perhaps the most dramatic of the suppressions came in the year 1354, when the finger of the martyr was confiscated, burned and its ashes thrown into the Nile.

About twenty-five years later, a wave of voluntary martyrdoms began in Egypt: people considered to be Muslims (often converts or the children of converts) publicly and insistently proclaimed their Christian faith until they were put to death for apostasy, while life-long Christians were put to death for publicly preaching against Islam. Coptic Orthodox tradition has preserved a list of “Forty-Nine Martyrs of the Time of Patriarch Matthew,” from the 1380s and 90s.<sup>27</sup> Tamer El-Leithy has suggested that the martyrdoms were one way for Copts dramatically to reclaim public space that had been lost both through the dwindling in their numbers through conversion, but also through the suppression of the Coptic Nile festivals.<sup>28</sup> The exclusion of Copts from public space had led to a creative reaction—although one that did not bear long-term fruit. Indeed, what followed the period of the martyrdoms were about three centuries of great weakness for the Coptic community.

## CONCLUSION

Where does all this leave us? I have been asking about the creation of space for Christian-Muslim encounter and conversation, especially as witnessed to in medieval Arabic Christian literature. What is it that opens up this space and lends it some stability for a time? This brief survey suggests that such space may be opened up by figures of authority and stabilized by rules of fairness which are consistently enforced; or it may be the result of shared formation, commitments, projects and hopes that, in Joel Kraemer’s words, surmount “particular religious ties in favor of a shared human enterprise,”<sup>29</sup> or it may come about in “liminal” or “holy” spaces not subject to normal convention. And I concluded with a brief account that reminds us that attempts to drive diversity out of public space are not just a modern phenomenon. But the story of the “Forty-Nine Martyrs” also

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<sup>27</sup> For a brief account, see Swanson, *op. cit.* (note 20), 115–17, 133–34.

<sup>28</sup> El-Leithy, *op. cit.* (note 26), 125.

<sup>29</sup> Kraemer, *op. cit.* (note 13), 60.

reminds us that, when people are denied spaces for encountering others and driven out of public space, they will find means of resistance—means that may combine creativity and desperation.

# CONTEXTUAL INSIGHTS





# CREATING PUBLIC SPACE: OBSERVATIONS FROM THE PALESTINIAN CONTEXT

*Mitri Raheb*

In Palestine, the issue of public space is crucial in social, political and theological terms. In the following article I shall first describe the context in which Palestinian Christians live, before giving some examples of how faith is being presented in the public space today. I shall conclude with two examples of public theology that were developed in the last five years in Palestine.

## **THE CONTEXT**

### **CHRISTIANS ARE INDIGENOUS IN PALESTINE**

Many people believe Christianity to be a Western phenomenon. This is a misconception. Christianity is a West Asian “Palestinian” phenomenon. Jesus Christ was born in Palestine, and it is here that he taught, suffered, was crucified and resurrected. The first Christian communities originated in Palestine. Palestinian Christians thus see themselves as the descendants of these first Jewish and “Gentile” Christians, who were able to survive a turbulent two-thousand-year history. Christianity was not imported into Palestine. Indeed, Christians were living in Palestine before Muslims arrived on the scene. In the year 2000, Palestinian Christians celebrated two thousand years of uninterrupted history and presence in Palestine (from Pentecost until today). Christians, therefore, understandably see themselves “at home” in Palestine. Here lie their historical roots; here is where they belong.

## CHRISTIANS IN THE HOLY LAND

Palestine is part and parcel of the Holy Land. The land is not only holy for Christians, but also for Jews and Muslims, and Palestine is not only important for its inhabitants but has universal significance. Every year, millions of pilgrims from all over the world flock to the holy sites. While, over the centuries, Christianity has disappeared from many Palestinian cities and almost all Palestinian villages it has survived at the holy sites. An examination of where Christians live today in the Holy Land reveals that they mainly live around these holy sites. In the West Bank,<sup>1</sup> they are mainly clustered in and around Bethlehem and Jerusalem, whereas in Israel, they are to be found mainly in Nazareth and the Galilee. Christians have always felt responsible for protecting and defending these churches and sites, but have also felt safe there in times of persecution and oppression, even if most of the keys to the holy sites are not in the hands of Palestinian Christians but are kept by expatriate Christians, Western religious orders or are in the hands of Muslim key keepers.

## A MOSAIC OF MANY DENOMINATIONS

The existence of various denominations and churches is typical of Christianity in Palestine.<sup>2</sup> From a Eurocentric perspective, the first schism in the church occurred with the Reformation. However, the history of Eastern Christianity reveals already in the first century that pluralism was one of the main features of the Christian community. This was so for the simple reason that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was contrary to faiths based on laws and always eager to relate to indigenous cultures and contexts. A number of so-called “national churches” were established in the first five centuries: the Greek Orthodox Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church, the Armenian Orthodox (Gregorian) Church, the Apostolic Church of the East (Nestorian) and others.<sup>3</sup> As a result of contacts with the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, a variety of these “united churches” were also established in Palestine.<sup>4</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup> Rania Al Qass Collings, Rifat Odeh Kassis and Mitri Raheb, *Palestinian Christians in the West Bank. Facts, Figures and Trends* (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Geris S. Khoury, *Guide to the Church in the Holy Land* (Nazareth: Al-Liqa Center, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Friedhelm Winkelmann, *Die östlichen Kirchen in der Epoche der christologischen Auseinandersetzungen*, Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen I/6 (Leipzig: EVA, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Donald Attwater, *The Christian Church of the East*, vol. 1: *Churches in Communion with Rome* (Whitefish: LLC, 2012).

churches maintained their Eastern rites in tradition and liturgy while at the same time recognizing the primacy of the Pope. During the nineteenth century, missionary efforts, mainly among the Oriental churches, resulted in the establishment of new churches: the Roman Catholic (Latin) Church,<sup>5</sup> the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land<sup>6</sup> and the Anglican Church. Today, there are almost thirty-nine different Christian denominations in Jerusalem. This diversity of denominations is unique. It is simultaneously a blessing and a curse, for therein lies the strength but also the weakness of the Palestinian Christian community, a sign of multifaceted richness while, at the same time, a source of conflict and adversity.

### A RELIGIOUS MINORITY

For several centuries, Christians constituted the overwhelming majority of the population in Palestine. The shift from majority to minority was one of the results of the Crusades. Not only were the crusaders hostile to local “Palestinian” Christians but, after their defeat, the Muslims who followed were no longer as tolerant toward Christians as they had been previously. As a result of the Crusades, the percentage of Palestinian Christians has decreased steadily. At the beginning of the twentieth century, thousands of Palestinian Christians from the larger Bethlehem area fled to Latin America, refusing to be drafted into the Turkish army in preparation for World War I.<sup>7</sup> Another major reason for the decline in the Palestinian Christian population was the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, when thirty-five percent of the Christian community in Palestine lost its land and homes. Many sought refuge in the neighboring Arab countries or in the West and, in that epochal year, the percentage of Palestinian Christians dropped from 8 to 2.8 percent within a few months.<sup>8</sup> Many of those who survived the displacement decided to emigrate because of ongoing political and economic instability in the country. Unfortunately, it was largely those who were educated, capable or financially well-off who left.

Today, Christians in Israel and Palestine account for less than two percent of the total population. There are around 120,000 Palestinian Christians in

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Etteldorf, *The Catholic Church in the Middle East* (New York: Macmillan, 1959).

<sup>6</sup> Mitri Raheb, *Das reformatorische Erbe unter den Palästinensern. Zur Entstehung der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche in Jordanien* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Viola Raheb (ed.), *Latin American with Palestinian Roots* (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Johnny Mansour, *Arab Christians in Israel. Facts, Figures and Trends* (Bethlehem: Diyar 2012).

Israel (as well as approximately 3,000 Messianic Jews) and 50,000 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In the diaspora, some 500,000 Palestinian Christians are scattered all over the globe. In all, there are about 700,000 Palestinian Christians, who comprise seven to ten percent of the total Palestinian population. Due to emigration the majority of Palestinian Christians live in the diaspora. Socioeconomic factors and the political situation continue to be the main reasons contributing to this population drain. The collapse of the “peace process,” the intifadas, as well as the reintroduction of Israeli military rule in the West Bank and Gaza are forcing ever greater numbers of Christians to emigrate in order to seek a better future for their children.

### **AN ENGAGED ENTITY**

Christians in Palestine are a religious minority. In the West Bank and the Gaza Strip they constitute less than two percent of the population versus ninety-eight percent Muslims, while in Israel they also constitute two percent of the population that comprises eighty percent Jews and eighteen percent Muslims. Living as a minority is not always easy. In some Christians it engenders a fear of the majority. Others assume a superiority complex; a feeling of being culturally above Muslims. Still others assume an inferiority complex which is often expressed by a strong sense of nationalism. These Christians feel they have to prove their loyalty to the “cause” thus becoming more royal than the king. Palestinian Christians have seldom been marginalized; they have remained an engaged minority and their contribution to the fields of social, diaconal and educational work should not be underestimated.<sup>9</sup> Of the over 2,200 schools in the West Bank and Gaza, sixty-two are Christian schools, mainly Catholic and Lutheran. They belong to an advanced group of schools in Palestine and are open for Christians and Muslims alike. Of twenty-four hospitals, nine are Christian serving a Muslim majority. Christians today operate major social institutions, rehabilitation centers, old-age homes and orphanages. Forty-five percent of the non-governmental sector (NGOs) is funded by churches, church related organizations and the Western countries. Palestinian Christians were and still are extremely vocal when it comes to advocating for justice, developing non-violent resistance<sup>10</sup> and promoting reconciliation. In the last ten years, most of these Christian service centers have been renovated and/or enlarged and several new centers have been opened.

In addition, Christians have played a leading role in the secular Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) that was established in 1964. George

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<sup>9</sup> Collings et al, op. cit. (note 1), 16–31.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Sennott, *The Body and the Blood. The Holy Land's Christians at the Turn of a New Millennium. A Reporter's Journey* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001).

Habash, former chairperson of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (P.F.L.P) and Naef Hawatmeh, chairperson of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (D.F.L.P) are both Christians. Within the Palestinian Authority itself, Christians hold key positions. The mayors of Ramallah, Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala are Christians, as are the mayors of smaller villages like Taybeh, Zababdeh, Bir Zeit, Rafiddiyye and others. President Arafat was married to a Christian. He also had Christians among his top aides, including Ramzi Khoury (director of the president's office), Nabil Abu Rudeineh (media advisor and spokesperson), Jirius Attrash (general director, Bethlehem office) and Sami Mussalam (general director, Jericho office). Christians hold key governmental posts too and there are usually two Christian cabinet ministers at any one time. The PLO executive committee includes several Christians. Of the eighty-two seats of the Palestinian National Council (parliament), six are, by law, reserved for Christians.

### ARAB CHRISTIANS

Although Christians in Palestine are a minority, they are not an ethnic but a religious minority. They understand themselves to be part and parcel of Arab civilization and culture. This should not be taken for granted. In neighboring countries, Christians often do not understand themselves to be Arabs. Lebanese Maronite Christians for instance like to think of themselves as Phoenicians, Coptic Christians as descendants of the Pharaohs, Iraqi Christians as "Assyrians," etc. The fact that Palestinian Christians today understand themselves to be Arabs does not mean that historically speaking they have always been Arabs. In the West, the term "Arab" is equated with "Muslim." This is a misconception of both Middle Eastern history and Christianity, since Arab Christians are neither a new invention nor a Western product. In Acts 2:11 the evangelist Luke reports that Arabic was one of the languages heard at the first feast of Pentecost. The apostle Paul retired to Arabia immediately after his conversion (Gal 1:17). Arab Christianity<sup>11</sup> is consequently older than Islam. Christians in Palestine were originally Aramaic-speaking Christians (like Jesus), who were forced to become "Orthodox" in the post-Constantinian era and Arabized in the course of history, especially after the Muslim conquest of Palestine in 637 CE. The first Arabic Summa Theologica was developed as early as the ninth century at the Mar Saba Monastery, close to Bethlehem.<sup>12</sup> During the nineteenth century, Arab

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian. A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine*. Collected Studies, CS380 (Aldershot & Brookfield, VT: Variorum, 1992).

Christians played a pivotal role in shaking the Arab world out of its deep medieval sleep, promoting the renaissance of Arab culture and language and introducing modern ideas and values to the Arab world.<sup>13</sup>

### CHRISTIANS LIVING UNDER ISRAELI OCCUPATION

In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Christians, like Muslims, are suffering under Israeli occupation. They cannot travel and move freely, thousands spend months and years in Israeli prisons for their political convictions, some are deported and many thousands have been displaced from their ancestral homes and villages. For the Israelis, Christians in the Palestinian territories are primarily Palestinians and they are treated as such.<sup>14</sup> In Israel, Palestinian Christians are second-class citizens, since they are viewed primarily as Arabs,<sup>15</sup> and as such they are discriminated against. As non-Jews they are prohibited by law from leasing or buying land from the Jewish National Fund and they receive only two percent of the budget of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, despite the fact that Muslims, Christians and Druze constitute over twenty percent of the population. Moreover, under the 1967 Protection of Holy Sites Law, the Israeli government recognizes only Jewish holy places, thereby denying government funding for the preservation of Christian or Muslim religious sites. Additionally, the Law of Return guarantees immediate and automatic citizenship to Jewish immigrants, regardless of nationality, but forbids native Christians and Muslims, who were forced to flee during the 1948 and 1967 wars, from returning. In the Palestinian autonomous areas, Christians enjoy the protection of the Palestinian Authority but, at the same time, they are concerned because of the weakness of the democratic structures and laws, where the minority accepts the rule of the majority, where the majority protects the rights of the minority and where conflicts are solved by adhering to one law. In Israel, Palestinian Arab Christians are recognized as a community but Messianic Jews,<sup>16</sup> as such, are not. The State of Israel does not recognize Jews who believe in Christ as their Messiah as Jews. They have to choose between being Jewish or Christian. It is important to note that both the reform and conservative Jewish movements, the two major American Jewish movements, are also not recognized in Israel, since the Orthodox Rabbinate

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<sup>13</sup> Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1789-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Said Aburish, *The Forgotten Faithful: The Christians of the Holy Land* (London: Quartet Books, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, *Legal Violations of Arab Minority Rights in Israel* (Shefa'amr: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Kai Kjaer-Hansen and Ole Kvarme, *Messianische Juden. Judenchristen in Israel* (Erlangen: Verlag der Evang.-Luth. Mission, 1983 [Danish original: 1979]).

has a monopoly over deciding of who is a Jew and it alone sets the criteria and performs all legal Jewish rites (marriages, burials etc.).

### **VIGNETTES ON RELIGION AND THE PUBLIC SPACE IN THE PALESTINIAN CONTEXT OF THE WEST BANK**

Against this background, I would like to give few examples of how religion and the public space are interrelated. In the following, I shall concentrate on the situation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The situation in Israel and the Gaza Strip is different.

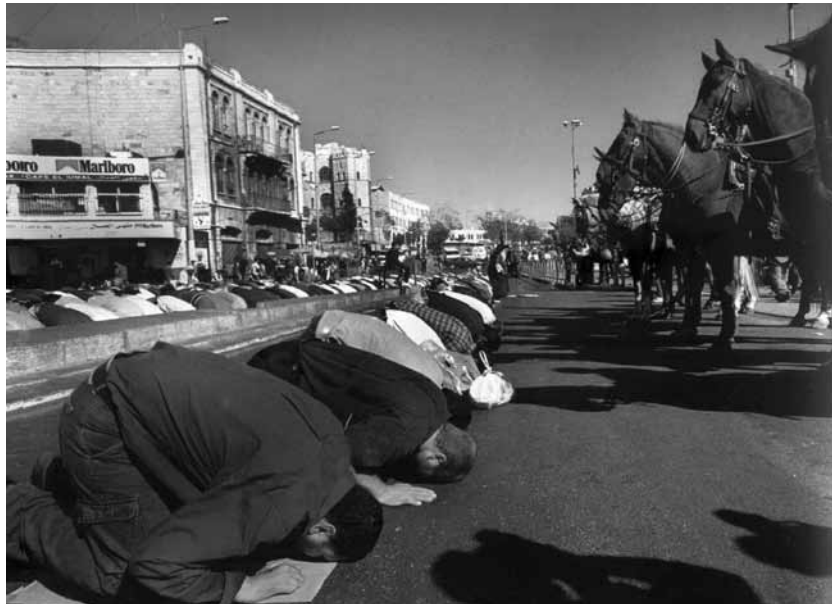
#### **PUBLIC SPACE AS HOLY SPACE**



Palestine is part and parcel of the Holy Land. Tourism, religious tourism in particular, is a major branch of the national economy. Several million pilgrims visit the Holy Land every year. The major attraction is not the sea, nor the sun, but the holy sites. This fact creates a unique setting for religion in the public space. Every Friday one sees tens of pilgrim groups carrying a six-foot wooden cross on their shoulders, marching up the Via Delarosa in the old city of Jerusalem, walking in the footsteps of Jesus and remembering the passion of Christ. On Palm Sunday, thousands of Christians carry palm branches and walk in a procession from Bethany to the old City of Jerusalem,

while chanting “Hosanna.” These scenes are not perceived as something odd, but as an important feature of the “Holy Land.” For people in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, this is not only a public religious act, but an important source of income. It is as if the public space were holy, and the holy were public.

### **PUBLIC SPACE AS OCCUPIED SPACE**



East Jerusalem is part of the Palestinian Occupied Territory. Christians and Muslims are often prevented from reaching the holy sites in the holy city. Israeli military checkpoints are frequently erected so as to prevent especially young people from reaching the Al-Aqsa mosque or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In these cases, one will see how young people use every available public space, such as a street, a square, or a piazza, as their place of worship. The same phenomena can be observed in areas where Israeli military prevent people from reaching their farmland or confiscate a particular area. Palestinians pray in the open fields, streets or at checkpoints where the public space is used as a place of worship as an act of resistance.

### **PUBLIC SPACE AS THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS SPACE**

In 1995, the Palestinian Authority declared Christmas a national holiday. Christmas is connected to Bethlehem as the city of incarnation. On Christmas Eve the Patriarch comes to town, preceded by hundreds of



scout troops, and the entire city closes down for this religious procession. The procession is a religious act, but with a special Palestinian national flavor. The Palestinian president and his entourage always participate in the Christmas Eve mass.



### **PUBLIC SPACE AND IDENTITY**



Until today, visitors to the old city of Bethlehem can see the many old holes marked by the cross at the threshold of the door. The cross is usually carved in a local lime stone. It is hand made, using stone from the quarries in the Bethlehem region. The cross is a kind of public testimony. The owner of the house makes a public statement about their religion. Each cross is unique; each cross is made with much love and care and has its own peculiar identity. The cross, set in stone, is humble: it has the right size (around 20 cm) and fits well into the façade of the door. Muslims would put a carving of the dome of the rock or a calligraphy in Arabic saying something like “This is a gift from the Lord” there.

### **PUBLIC SPACE IN THE AGE OF MARKETING**

In the age of marketing, a new phenomenon of displaying religious identity in the public space is emerging that is foreign to the traditional one described above. On the roofs of some houses one can see three-meter-high, neon crosses. They are lit up and one cannot miss them. One suspects that they are meant to make a bold statement, to prove one’s identity and, perhaps, even to provoke people of other faiths. They represent a different, foreign culture and have little to do with the crosses carved in stone at the threshold of old homes. They are almost like an advertisement in the age of marketing. Bill boards used by the Bible Society display biblical messages or verses in strategic places. In an age of marketing and visual

communication, bill boards become tools for mission in the public space. One has to ask whether this is anything more than the mere commercialization of mission.



**PUBLIC SPACE AND THE RULE OF LAW**



An important question is who controls the public space. Who gives whom authority to do what? When is public space misused by religion? Which rules and laws apply to the use of public space by religious groups or others? Historically, the call for prayer from the mosques blending with the ringing of the bells from the churches in Palestine was a sign of a multi-religious society. Each would last less than three minutes and be done five times a day. Palestinians in general were never bothered with these religious “demonstrations” in the public space. However, in recent years the call to prayer has been preceded by a recitation from the Qur’an that lasts for twenty minutes or so. The call to prayer is chanted, very slowly and very loudly, so loudly in fact that people cannot sleep at night. This is one of the ways in which political and fundamentalist Islam manifests itself. Like the neon crosses, there is something provocative. One is left no choice but to be exposed to it and the invitation to prayer becomes mission by force. It occupies the air and pollutes the environment with noise and there is no escape. The question then becomes who gave these religious

groups the right to extend the call to prayer for so long? In such contexts, the importance of the rule of law is crucial.

In all of these examples one can see how the use of public space is very much connected to the sociopolitical and economic development of a country rather than theological discourse. All the more important then that the use of public space is regulated by clear and transparent laws that do not discriminate against one or the other religion. A culture of tolerance is a prerequisite for such public space.

## **THE EMERGENCE OF PUBLIC THEOLOGY IN PALESTINE AND THE MIDDLE EAST**

In the last five years, two important documents of public theology have emerged in Palestine and the Middle East that deserve some attention.

### **THE KAIROS PALESTINE DOCUMENT<sup>17</sup>**

An important document entitled “A Moment of Truth,” written by a Palestinian Christian group of theologians and lay leaders from different denominations, was published in 2009. The document challenges the churches in the West “to revisit theologies that justify crimes perpetrated against our (Palestinian) people and the dispossession of the land.” In this historic document, Palestinian Christian writers declare “that the military occupation of our land is a sin against God and humanity, and that any theology that legitimizes the occupation is far from Christian teachings.” This document, a theological response to the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, is without any doubt nothing but an expression of public theology. The authors feel that twenty years of negotiations between Israel and the PLO have not led anywhere, nor did military resistance move the Palestinians closer to their goal. In such a context, the authors want to introduce a third alternative based on public theology and creative resistance. Faith, hope and love are important vehicles in the process.

### **“THE CALL OF CREED AND CITIZENSHIP”**

In 2014, a group of Christian academics and theologians published a regional document entitled “From the Nile to the Euphrates: The Call of Creed and

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<sup>17</sup> Kairos Palestine, “A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope, and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering” (Bethlehem: Kairos Palestine, 2009), at [www.kairospalestine.ps](http://www.kairospalestine.ps)

Citizenship.”<sup>18</sup> Diyar Consortium in Bethlehem initiated and led the process that culminated in the production of this document. The authors identified ten issues that need attention to ensure a future where all citizens enjoy freedom, equality, justice, a higher quality of life and full human dignity. The ten issues are: The relationship between religion and state; democratic constitutions and the rule of law; human security; the right management of human and natural resources; gender, youth education and employment; human dignity; spirituality based on human values; critical thinking; and a uniting vision. The document ends with a kind of creed that links the Christian faith to issues of citizenship. Such a “reformulated creed” is the first of its kind in the Middle East and is the first document of a Middle Eastern theological vision for the public space.

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<sup>18</sup> “From the Nile to the Euphrates: The Call of Creed and Citizenship” (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2015). For more information, see [www.cafcaw.org](http://www.cafcaw.org)

# CITIZENSHIP AND PUBLIC THEOLOGY: A LUTHERAN APPROACH FROM BRAZIL

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## INTRODUCTION

What is the role of religions in the public space in contemporary societies? What are its contribution and task in today's global, plural societies? The answers to these questions will depend profoundly on the context from and to which we speak and the religious, cultural and political perspectives we bring. As such the discussion on the role, task and possible contribution of religion will always have political and social implications. What are the realities and the situations to which religions can or must respond? What are the realities or situations in which theology and religion should not get involved? While it is not always easy to identify these limits, it is necessary to reflect on this when we speak about the role of religions in the public space.

My contribution to this discourse is to provide a perspective from the southern hemisphere. I do so not simply because I have been reflecting on the role of religion in Brazil and South Africa, but mainly because I agree with the Portuguese sociologist, Boaventura de Souza Santos, that it is necessary to develop southern epistemologies.<sup>1</sup> It is important because we live in a global society, with all its advantages and disadvantages that are experienced at the local level. The negative aspects of globalization differ from context to context but are mainly experienced in the southern hemisphere. Therefore, in order to develop my glocal perspective, as Boaventura

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<sup>1</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Maria Paula Meneses (eds), *Epistemologias do Sul* (São Paulo: Cortez Editora, 2010).

says,<sup>2</sup> I must consider the specific aspects of my reality, experienced in my body and in my personal relations.

In this essay I shall first point to some historical aspects of the role of religion in the Brazilian public space and, in the second part, examine the Lutheran contribution to this reflection. I shall review the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brazil's (IELCB) position during the military dictatorship to show the important change that the struggle for liberation brought about in Lutheran social ethics. Finally, I shall point to some contributions that a Lutheran approach from the global South brings to the reflection on the public role of religion.

## A SOUTHERN APPROACH

It is not just the hot weather or scenic beaches, nor the multicultural experience or how people face their hard lives with a smile on their faces that recall similarities between Brazil and South Africa. Brazil and South Africa share a similar history with regard to the development of the Western, Christian, modern, capitalist society. Both countries were colonized and became part of the growing commercial capitalism and, later, industrial capitalism. Both countries were sources of cheap and abundant natural resources, exploited for the development of others. The native populations of both countries were subdued, serving as slaves or a cheap workforce for the development of other peoples. More than six million black slaves were brought to Brazil from different African countries,<sup>3</sup> while South Africa experienced the slaughter of many of its people.<sup>4</sup> Brazil and South Africa observed the emergence of a white and European aristocracy that demanded that slaves and native people learn its language, its religion, its culture, its knowledge and criminalized the knowledge, the religion, the language and the culture of its native peoples and slaves. This white and European aristocracy implemented racist and segregationist regulations, which in South Africa became a legal and social system called apartheid,<sup>5</sup> and in Brazil led to the development of a divided society with one of the largest gaps between the black and white populations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Legal Common Sense: Law, Globalization, and Emancipation* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Enrique Peregalli, *Escravidão no Brasil* (São Paulo: Global, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa. The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (Johannesburg/Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa 1652-2002* (Scottsville: University of Natal Press/KMM Review Publishing, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Alexandre de Freitas Barbosa (ed.), *The Real Brazil: The Inequality behind the Statistics* (São Paulo/SP: CEBRAP/Christian Aid, 2012).



As a result, Brazil and South Africa progressively became the most unequal societies in the world. It is important to understand this, not in order to regret any aspect of our histories, but to be aware and not to neglect that we are societies constantly struggling to develop social cohesion, to value and rediscover our cultures and stories, our heroes, the color of our skin, the languages we speak, the rules of our ancient social systems, our religions and to give these experiences the space to flourish once again. Brazil and South Africa must continuously go through a process of decolonization—a cultural, religious, political, economic and epistemological decolonization,<sup>7</sup> not only for the sake of their own societies, but because there are signs of an imminent collapse of the economic and social systems. Brazil and South Africa are rich countries. In Latin America, decolonization has been described as the process of deconstructing colonial relations that are still present in epistemological and cultural terms and in global political and economic relations. It seeks to foster native processes of reflection, an epistemological, philosophical and theological inflexion, constructing the knowledge from the regional experiences of the Latin American peoples. We need to develop our own solutions, our southern perspective from our narratives, our epistemologies and our contextual religious and social experiences.

The first and most prominent religious tradition that responded to these demands were the various liberation theologies. While the liberation theologies had different theological backgrounds they shared the same orientation, namely that the work of God in Jesus Christ showed a preferential option for the poor, that is, for the suffering people in this world. It became part of liberation theology methodology to use social analysis that points to the reasons for inequality and injustice. Liberation theologies became critical, prophetic and contextual theologies, fighting for liberation and for the dignity of the suffering people, not just in economic, but also in cultural, social, sexual and ethnic terms.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION IN THE BRAZILIAN PUBLIC SPACE: SOME ASPECTS**

In contrast to the other Latin American countries that were colonized by the Spanish, Brazil was colonized by the Portuguese. At the beginning of

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<sup>7</sup> For a conceptual discussion, see Eduardo Restrepo and Axel Rojas, *Inflexión Decolonial: fuentes, conceptos y cuestionamientos* (Colección Políticas de la alteridad. Universidad del Cauca: Colombia, 2010). Also Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel (eds), *El Giro decolonial: reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global* (Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre Editores; Universidad Central, Instituto de Estudios Sociales Contemporáneos y Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Instituto Pensar, 2007).

the colonial era in the sixteenth century, church and state were one. The colonizer had the Bible in one hand and the sword in the other. The so-called patronage system worked with the king as the head of the church in Brazil. Many say that it was Catholicism without priests. Popular Catholicism in Brazil developed quickly, mixing elements of two other important, officially prohibited religions: indigenous and African religions. Brazilian popular religion has, then, three main matrices: the Catholic faith; indigenous traditional religions; and African religions, brought by the slaves.<sup>8</sup> In the early nineteenth century, the Roman church became concerned about the “free” and state-dominated Catholicism in Brazil and sent priests and bishops to “Romanize” the Brazilian church. As a popular religion, it was used by poor people to keep their original religions secret, changing the names of their divine entities to those of Catholic saints. This popular religion was the way in which people were able to understand their harsh reality and to deal with their daily suffering.

It is only in the nineteenth century that different institutional churches had access to Brazil. In 1824, the first German immigrants arrived in Brazil, as did other Europeans, including Italians and Poles. They were escaping from a crisis-ridden Europe and had been invited to Brazil in order to make “Brazilian skin whiter,” to occupy lands in the south and southeast, to plant and produce and, not least, to fight against the indigenous people, progressively taking their lands and defending imperial troops against regular attacks.

The Catholic Church enjoyed a close relationship to the state and the Brazilian religious and cultural landscape is deeply influenced by the Catholic perception of how the public space should be organized. The type of ethics resulting from an Iberian Catholicism, which arrived in Brazil in the spirit of the Counter-Reformation, did not foster a public commitment to work toward the transformation of society. It was the Catholic Church, related directly to the state through its ecclesial hierarchy, which defended the public’s demands.

Initially, the Protestant religions were merely tolerated and could only be exercised in private spaces. Until 1889, Catholicism remained the official religion, leaving the Protestant churches only little room to influence the public. The Catholic Church’s close relations to the state meant that it could practically define public moral patterns, held privileges and occupied public spaces. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, we can observe a rapid growth of Pentecostal churches in Brazil and since the 1980s the Neo-Pentecostal churches have strongly influenced the Brazilian religious context.

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<sup>8</sup> Adilson Schultz, “Estrutura Teológica do Imaginário Religioso Brasileiro,” in Oneide Bobsin et al (eds), *Uma Religião Chamada Brasil* (São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST/Oikos Editora, 2008), 27–60.

The military regime (1964–1985) is a decisive period during which to observe the way in which religion interacted with public issues. It is especially interesting to note the shift in religious discourse toward a progressive liberation theology and increasing participation in the public space. At the beginning, the Catholic Church held a positive position toward the military dictatorship, offering no form of resistance. After 1968, when the military regime became increasingly harsh, some bishops started to take a political stance against the violation of human and political rights.<sup>9</sup>

[B]y the mid-1970s the Brazilian Church had become the most theologically progressive and institutionally innovative Catholic Church in the world. With the initial support of the Vatican, it also became in Brazil the most legitimate, most nation-wide, and most useful organizational resource for the opposition forces of civil society.<sup>10</sup>

The Catholic Church at the time was strongly influenced by the Second Vatican Council (1959–1962) and the Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla (CELAM–1968). The so-called “preferential option for the poor” brought about a structural change in the church, which started seriously to consider the social and economic conditions of the people. Through the work of its many ministries, students, workers and Christian Base Communities in the 1970s and 1980s, the Catholic Church gave strong support to resistance movements in their struggle against the Brazilian dictatorship.<sup>11</sup>

The participation of Brazilian Protestants in the struggle was relatively ambiguous. Despite an unmistakable tendency to stick to more conservative stances, the influence of Protestant theologians on the development of liberation theology was very important. Notably, in the 1950s and 1960s, Presbyterian theologians, Richard Shaull and Rubem Alves, started to formulate a liberation theology from a Protestant perspective,<sup>12</sup> as did Walter Altmann on the Lutheran side,<sup>13</sup> demonstrating that while liberation

<sup>9</sup> Scott Mainwaring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil, 1916–1985* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Stepan (ed.), *Democratizing Brazil: Problems of Transition and Consolidation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), xii.

<sup>11</sup> On the role of religion in Brazil, see Rudolf von Sinner, *The Churches and Democracy in Brazil. Towards a Public Theology Focused on Citizenship* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Eduardo Galasso Faria, *Fé e Compromisso. Richard Shaull e a Teologia no Brasil* (São Paulo: ASTE, 2002). See also Antônio Gouvêa Mendonça, “O Protestantismo no Brasil e suas Encruzilhadas,” in *REVISTA USP*, n.67 (São Paulo, setembro/novembro, 2005), 48–67.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Altmann, *Lutero e Libertação. Releitura de Lutero em Perspectiva Latino-Americana* (São Leopoldo/São Paulo: Sinodal/Ática, 1994).

theology is mainly represented through the Catholic Church it is nonetheless an ecumenical theology. Theologians from different confessions, and sometimes from different religions, gather around an urgent question, namely, socioeconomic injustices.

However, the majority of Brazilian Protestants, especially the so-called evangelicals related to the Pentecostal churches, supported the military dictatorship. As we shall see, the main theological reason is a false understanding of Luther and the abuse of some biblical texts, such as Romans 13. According to this interpretation we owe obedience to the state, whatever it does.

Liberation theology was crucial for the political transition toward democracy. The political trajectories of many leaders related to this theological tradition and, as a result, theology to a certain extent helped to forge democracy and the concept of citizenship, outlined in the new constitution of 1988. Known as the “citizens’ constitution,” the Brazilian constitution defines the concept of democracy as being based on citizens’ participation, at least theoretically, and is the first clear sign of religion’s public influence on shaping the perception of citizenship. It shows that already liberation theologies provided a blueprint for public participation in society and that the public role of theology and religion has always been part of the contribution of liberation theologies to society.

In the democratic Brazil the role of religion in the public space started to change. Since the beginning of the 1990s there has been considerable growth of Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism with their prosperity theologies. According to the 2010 census, sixty-eight percent of the population are Catholic, and eighteen percent Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal. Approximately four percent of the population belong to the other Protestant churches. There is a battle over public influence between Catholics and *evangélicos* (mainly Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals) and strategies vary from the use of media (TV channels, radio, newspapers) to political representation. The evangelical block in the deputies’ chamber is one of the most powerful. It has slowly conquered strategic positions in the commission for human rights of that chamber and is imposing a conservative agenda. Since 2003, Brazil has had a left-wing government, one of whose main showpieces is the implementation of human rights measures.<sup>14</sup>

While the Catholic Church expresses public opinions through its National Conference of Bishops (CNBB), mostly in support of social initiatives, in the moral field, Catholics and evangelicals gather forces against progressive initiatives, especially on sexual issues such as the decriminalization of

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<sup>14</sup> Saulo Baptista, *Pentecostais e Neopentecostais na Política Brasileira: Um estudo sobre cultura política, Estado e atores coletivos religiosos no Brasil* (São Paulo: Instituto Metodista Izabela Hendrix/Anna Blume, 2009).

abortion, same-sex marriage and educational action challenging homophobia. This necessitates the reflection on the public role of churches and religions or public theology or, at least, a systematic reflection on the public participation of the churches. While the historic Protestant churches remain silent on these topics, evangelicals strategically use the public space to drive a conservative agenda. Public theology in Brazil must urgently reflect on the public responsibility of churches and religions but, most important of all, it must reflect on the limits of its participation.

Indigenous people as well as the traditional communities of black people, the *quilombolas*, who fought against slavery and are self-managed groups, are progressively losing the right to their land guaranteed under the constitution. The constitution of the country foresees the right of these different groups to keep their social organization, culture, religion and land. Today, these communities suffer the action of a capitalist and conservative society fighting against their rights, sometimes even violently. So, while theological reflection made in public spaces concerns only moral standards, we see poor people increasingly losing their rights. For these and other reasons we see Brazilians taking to the streets, fighting against the setbacks in terms of human rights. I believe that, in Brazil, theological reflection on public issues should focus on citizens' participation in the struggle for human rights, instead of being concerned with moral patterns of individual and private behavior.

## A LUTHERAN APPROACH

In Brazil as well as South Africa the involvement of the Lutheran church in political issues, especially in the context of political struggles for liberation, is related to the social position of Lutherans in both societies. Furthermore, I will argue that there is a widespread theological understanding in Lutheranism which justifies this absence of involvement in political issues. As Helmar Junghans, among many, has pointed out, it is only recently that some researchers have started to bring about a change of opinion about the social ethics in Luther's thought.<sup>15</sup> According to Klaus Nürnberger, a Lutheran theologian from Namibia, living in South Africa

Many Christians feel that it is quite possible to be a good Christian in one's private life, but that this is not possible in public life, in the world of business, politics

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<sup>15</sup> Helmar Junghans, "Sozialethisches Denken und Handeln bei Martin Luther," in *Standpunkt: Evangelische Monatsschrift*, 17/3 (1989), 67–71. Translated into Portuguese in Helmar Junghans, *Temas da Teologia de Lutero* (São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2001), 45–60.

and societal relationships. [...] Many Christians, among them leading Lutheran theologians, believe that Luther, in his famous (or notorious) 'doctrine of the two kingdoms', advocated an ethic of self-denial and loving kindness for our private lives, and an ethic of harshness and law in public life.<sup>16</sup>

While this was a clear and shared theological assumption in Lutheran churches, an ethics of work and respect for the law and public authorities in public life were already enough to be a good Christian. Spirituality and devotional life were something private, a perception that underlies modern society and the process of secularization that mainly influenced Europe. The Protestant community in Brazil was the place to live the Christian life and to preserve the German ethnic roots, the language, the culture and the social relations. This is related to the fact that Lutherans are a minority: less than one percent of the Brazilian population. Historically, the majority of Lutherans were small farmers, living on the land and, when living in the large cities, Lutherans were mainly involved in industrial and commercial activities. This means that the social vulnerability experienced by the majority of Brazilians was not an urgent issue in the Brazilian Lutheran churches, for example.

It was only in the 1970s that the IECLB took a stance against the violation of human rights. Rolf Schünemann, a Brazilian Lutheran theologian, notes that the *Curitiba Manifesto*, written on the occasion of the national assembly of the IECLB in 1970, was a seminal document reflecting a shift in the IECLB's political position from a conservative standpoint in relation to the military dictatorship to a more critical one, especially in relation to the defense of human rights.<sup>17</sup> He refers to an appearance of a socio-political awareness in the Lutheran church. For him, Lutherans came out of the ghetto to participate in political life in Brazil. The fact that led to this development was the refusal of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) to hold its Fifth Assembly in Porto Alegre in 1970, transferring it to Evian, in France. The LWF did not support the military regime, arguing that the Assembly would not be free to express itself in a context of repression. This political action pushed the Brazilian church to take a firm stance on the Brazilian political reality.

We can observe the LWF's role in pushing the IECLB to take a position on the socio-political situation, since it had been comfortable for the church in that situation to maintain a *status quo*. This turning point for the Lutheran churches demanded that Lutheran theologians reflected theologi-

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<sup>16</sup> Klaus Nürnberger, *Martin Luther's Message for us Today. A Perspective from the South* (Cluster Publications: Pietermaritzburg, 2005), 251.

<sup>17</sup> Rolf Schünemann, *Do gueto à participação: o surgimento da consciência sócio-política na IECLB entre 1960 e 1975* (São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 1992).

cally to what extent Lutheran theology could contribute to the struggles for liberation. It thus became crucial to develop a Lutheran liberation theology.

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF LUTHERAN THEOLOGY TO THE PUBLIC ROLE OF RELIGION

This southern approach to Lutheran theology, namely trying to find Lutheran contributions to liberation struggles, substantially changed the perception of Luther's social and political ethics. As Junghans pointed out, the Latin American methodology of doing theology, starting from the concrete situation, was quite different from the European approach, in which theology starts from abstract principles and is finally applied to real life. This specific contribution helped to identify that it was even an important feature of Luther's theology. As Nürnberger claims,

Luther was not a systematic theologian but a biblical scholar. [...] That Luther was not a systematic theologian presents us with some difficulties: 1. Among the multitude of his writings, there is no authoritative source of his theology to which we could refer. [...] 2. There was a restlessness in Luther that made him react spontaneously to each and every problem and debate that presented itself. Alertness and vibrancy are the strengths of his theology, but not all these spontaneous reactions are consistent with each other.<sup>18</sup>

This means that Luther's theology is contextual. Luther developed a set of principles that should be followed in all situations, but did not formulate a moral guide that tells Christians what to do in different situations. When we think about the contribution of Lutheran theology to the reflection on the role of religion in the public space, we have to take into account that theology must always respond to and be constructed in dialogue with the burning issues, which differ from context to context. There is no recipe. We have to "but test everything; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess 5:21).

The main theological foundation underlying Luther's theology is his notion of freedom,<sup>19</sup> which he outlines in his "On the Freedom of a

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<sup>18</sup> Nürnberger, *op. cit.* (note 16), 10–11.

<sup>19</sup> Hans-Peter Grosshans has a profound reflection on the concept of freedom in Luther's thought. Hans-Peter Grosshans, "The Freedom of a Christian According to Evangelical Lutheran Theology," in Simone Sinn and Martin Sinaga (eds), *Freedom and Responsibility: Christian and Muslim Explorations*, LWF Studies 01/2010 (Minneapolis/Geneva: Lutheran University Press/Lutheran World Federation, 2010), 61–80.

Christian, 1520.” The freedom of a Christian is based on Luther’s famous paradoxical sentence: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”<sup>20</sup> Freed by God’s grace expressed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and servants by love, acting as Christ for others. For this reason, “Christians do not live according to a fixed code of laws and regulations, or a revealed set of commandments. Instead, they receive a new motivation characterized by freedom and responsibility.”<sup>21</sup>

The concept of freedom was the basis for identifying similarities between Latin American liberation theology and Lutheran theology. Altmann helps us to understand how the concept of freedom in Luther is not only related to internal freedom, God’s kingdom or our private life; we are free to serve God in our daily lives. This internal freedom flows from the internal kingdom to the external kingdom, the secular society, as Nürnberger summarizes:

This means that we start to do for others what Christ has done for us: (a) we accept other people without setting conditions, tolerate their shortcomings and suffer under their unacceptability; (b) we become a channel through which the power and the love of Christ flow to them; (c) as a result, the Spirit begins to change them into what God meant them to be; (d) all this takes place in the community of believers. But because Christians are citizens, who serve Christ in their secular professions, it also flows from the church into the world.<sup>22</sup>

I would like to propose this aspect as the contribution of religious people as active citizens in the public space: according to Luther, freedom can be the basis for Christian citizenship, not regulated by any moral guide, nor prescribing a Christian pattern of behavior, but always considering contextually what Christ would do for the suffering people, for those who are in need of solidarity. We are freed by God’s grace, not obliged to do anything to conquer God’s love. But because of the love of Christ, we freely become slaves of others “being a little Christ to others,” especially in the public space.

This concept of freedom on the basis of Lutheran theology leads us to a third and last aspect, namely, the concept of calling (*Beruf*). Luther criticized the medieval logic of different realms, in which Christians, called by God to fulfill their calling, needed to be separated from the world. According to the monastic logic of the Middle Ages, Christians who were not called to exercise their ministry in the church did not have the same expectancy of

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian, 1520,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 344.

<sup>21</sup> Nürnberger, *op. cit.* (note 16), 250.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*



sanctification in life. Luther did away with this differentiation, emphasizing that we are called to live according to the gospel of Jesus in our daily lives. All Christians are called to exercise “royal priesthood” in their daily lives. As Max Weber has shown, the concept of *Beruf* or calling was at the heart of the Protestant ethics which made Protestant behavior more suitable to the developing industrial capitalism.

However, when interpreted in other contexts, in societies such as Brazil and South Africa, which are discussing how the church can contribute to transforming society, this perception of calling on Luther can be very useful. I would like to refer to one aspect in which I think that the concept of “calling” to serve God in daily life could be useful, specifically in Brazilian society. This concept of calling points to the fact that, as sons and daughters of God, we can exercise our holy ministries in many different places in society: as lawyers, teachers, social activists, politicians, medics, architects, public officers, police, among many other places in which Christian or religious people can be active. I suggest that we can understand the good works done by people, living out their Christian freedom to love others unconditionally in public spaces, as God’s action in the world, rather than, sometimes, the misleading and politically instrumentalized action of churches and religions in public spaces. It means that the secular calling, used by God to transform and to work on God’s creation, can be a powerful theological argument to make church representatives step back from their misleading positions in society.

Churches and religions obviously have their crucial roles in society: to preach the Word of God; speak out critically against abuses and injustices; and to suggest ways to make this world a better place. Church and religion cannot, for the sake of their own mission in this world, sit on the throne. For this task, God uses God’s own wisdom to call God’s people to be better prepared to live out their secular callings. Informed citizens, specialists in certain areas, are better prepared to develop certain policies and the concept of calling gives us a powerful theological justification to recognize these secular ministries as God given. The notion of public responsibility based on Christian freedom, according to Lutheran concepts, can be a powerful tool to help us to understand how God can operate in social, economic and public issues, without necessarily the involvement of religions.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have seen that since the beginning of colonial times religion has been present in Brazilian public spaces. It was mostly related to the imperial practice of the colonizers and cannot be separated from the history that

made Latin America what it is, in both negative and positive terms. The type of public theology made in Brazil has only recently allied itself with the interests of the most vulnerable population. This allows us to affirm that the type of liberation theology practiced in Latin America is also a public theology.

This article suggests a theological approach from a Lutheran southern perspective, identifying three main issues that became important in the struggle that was led by Lutherans in Brazil after the sociopolitical turning point experienced during the military dictatorship.

First, the emphasis on the contextuality of Luther's thought. This is important as we construct decolonized reflections according to which theology must flourish from our southern existential, social, cultural and academic experience. It reinforces the need for southern contributions to the reflection on Luther's theology, also internationally, as a contribution to a broader dialogue.

Second, the comparison to the concept of freedom, something done extensively by Lutheran theologians in Latin America. I have pointed to the relevance of this concept for actual challenges, especially regarding the role of religion in the public space in Brazil. It is through the flow of God's Spirit, from our internal experience of liberation with God to the external word, as free people, that we can make positive contributions to transform the world.

Third, is the notion of calling, according to which all Christians are called to live out their vocation in their daily lives. The emphasis is on daily life rather than the secular world because this last concept is too closely related to a certain historic experience in modern Europe, which does not correspond to the historic experience in Latin America. On this side of the ocean, God was always present in daily life and public theology must think about the limits of religious talk in politics. The affirmation that God acts in the world in all aspects of our daily experience and not only through religious institutionalized influence—as was always the case in Brazil—allows people to recognize that God can be working through other political perspectives, which sometimes clash with the conservative political agenda of some religious institutions.

These points could eventually contribute for a positive participation of religion in the Brazilian public space.

# RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SPACE: A NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

*Lesmore Gibson Ezekiel*

## INTRODUCTION

In both local and global contexts, the discourse on religion in the public space is essential since religion permeates all facets of human existence. Nigeria is no exception. Religion has intricately and intrinsically remained a part of our being a nation state. Seemingly, religion rather than nationality defines our identity. Corroborating the foregoing, Gwamna asserts, “religion has become a major defining factor of identity, particularly related to political identity in Nigeria.”<sup>1</sup> Kukah added an interesting twist to the discourse arguing that religion and politics rather than ethnicity define the identity of a Nigerian. He affirms, “almost the entire gamut of social, political and economic relations revolves around these two identity formations,”<sup>2</sup> even though this may be debatable from another perspective. Religious affiliation or identity has been projected more strongly than national or ethnic identity. This may well be connected to growing expressions of religious bigotry and extremism demonstrated through intolerance of the other and acts of terrorism. This essay attempts to examine how religion has continued to function in the moral, ethical, cultural, sociopolitical and economic spheres of Nigeria.

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<sup>1</sup> Je’adayibe Dogara Gwamna, *Religion and Politics in Nigeria* (Bukuru, Jos: African Christian Textbooks–ACTS, 2010), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Democracy and Civil Society in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2000), 93.

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The nation state of Nigeria came into being after the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in the year 1914 during British colonial rule.<sup>3</sup> Nigeria became independent on 1 October 1960,<sup>4</sup> and by 2012 its population had reached 170,123,740. The country is the most populous in Africa and is divided into thirty-six federating units identified as states, governed by governors, and 779 local authorities, known as local government councils, governed by elected chairpersons. Nigeria recognizes the existence of two main religions, namely Christianity and Islam. However, section 10 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides that, “the Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion.”<sup>5</sup> This proviso does not negate the fact that Nigeria describes itself as a multireligious state, even though the constitution stipulates that Nigeria is a secular state. This is evident in other sections of the constitution that allow for sponsorship, observance and participation in religious activities, including monetary appropriation for religious pilgrimages. It needs to be mentioned that before the advent of Christianity and Islam, traditional beliefs and worship were the norm. Such practices are gradually fizzling out, because they are increasingly perceived as being demonic. Some Nigerian citizens have remained ardent practitioners of traditional religions but they have little influence on the nation’s affairs. It is important to recognize that traditional religions, as formerly practiced in Nigeria, had exhibited great tolerance of Islam and Christianity, which accounts for the rapid spread of both religions.

Regarding the religious demography of Nigeria, there is no authentic data that provides population figures along religious divides. The 2006 population census made no provision for including religious affiliation.<sup>6</sup> Under the leadership of President Olusegun Obasanjo, the government deliberately decided not to include religion as part of the census. This may not be entirely unconnected to the tension surrounding the issue as to which one of the religions is dominant, which may inflame the somewhat strained relationships in the country’s nascent democracy. Unfortunately, some foreign demographers and religious bigots have partitioned Nigeria’s religious demography into two, namely, the Muslim north and the

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<sup>3</sup> Raph Uwechue, *Reflection on the Nigerian Civil War: Facing the Future* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971), 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Federal Republic of Nigeria, *1999 Constitution as Amended* (Abuja: Government Printing Press, 1999), Section 10.

<sup>6</sup> [www.population.gov.ng/index.php/censuses](http://www.population.gov.ng/index.php/censuses).

Christian south. This is not correct and has contributed tremendously to growing prejudice, intolerance, suspicion and stereotypes in some parts of the country. While there are no official figures regarding the religious affiliations of Nigerians it can be stated that Christianity and Islam are the predominant religions practiced in Nigeria.

## **LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND OBLIGATIONS**

Section 38, subsection 1, of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria stipulates,

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

Subsection 2 provides that,

No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction, ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own, or a religion not approved by his parent or guardian.

Furthermore, subsection 3 states,

No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community nor denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination.<sup>7</sup>

While these provisions guarantee the right and freedom to practice one's religion, whether or not it is guaranteed to the fullest is the puzzle that remains to be solved. They are reinforced by an earlier provision captured in section 15, subsection 2, which states,

Accordingly, national integration shall be actively encouraged, whilst discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Federal Republic of Nigeria, *1999 Constitution As Amended* (Abuja: Government Printing Press, 1999), Section 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, section 15.

Therefore, the constitutional framework compels the Nigerian government and its agencies to ensure that religious rights and freedom are protected and enforced in a manner that is not injurious to other rights and freedom guaranteed under the same constitution.

Similarly, as a member of various international organizations that provide spaces for multilateral and bilateral engagements, Nigeria is a signatory to international covenants and conventions. It is a party to international human rights treaties, compelling it to respect and ensure the human rights of all individuals within its territory. In addition, Nigeria is bound by some international instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.

Therefore, the constitutional provision referred to above seems to suggest that religion has less influence on the Nigerian public space and spheres. While this is contrary to the reality it nonetheless raises the issue of the functionality and/or practicality of the constitution as it relates to religion and religious influence in Nigeria. It also brings to the fore the question regarding the adoption of the sharia legal system by some of the states. Constitutional stipulations are subject to interpretation and appropriation as deemed expedient by a court of competent jurisdiction. Interestingly, the section on the supremacy of the constitution categorically states,

the Constitution is binding on all authorities and persons in Nigeria. In accordance with this provision, further states that any law that is inconsistent with the 1999 Constitution shall be void to the extent of the inconsistency.<sup>9</sup>

How this is interpreted and sanctioned in order to safeguard religion and religious practices remains subject to debate.

### **RELIGION'S MORAL FUNCTION AS AN ASPECT OF RELIGION'S PUBLIC ROLE**

For the average Nigerian Christian, religion is the source of morality. It is the moral fiber of human behavior and conduct. Religion constructs the so-called moral system. Religion, therefore, is expected to serve as the framework within which human behavior and conduct are judged or examined. For the average Nigerian Christian, the Bible is the basis for moral formation. The same applies to the Qur'an for Muslims. The Bible must not be overtly interrogated but should be engaged literally. This is

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., section 1 (1 & 3).

especially the case among Pentecostals and other charismatic movements and might also be the case with extremist interpretations of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet. There is no examination of the historical antecedents of the texts. In most cases, scriptural verses are read and interpreted independently of one another and may sometimes be used to reinforce a specific notion advanced by the interpreter or preacher.

Similarly, religion is used as a platform for ethical discourse. Issues related to the ethics of life are often viewed through the lens of religion. They include: human sexuality; abortion; divorce; punishment; reward; marriage; money and other forms of human behavior and conduct. In the Nigerian Christian context, there is often a tension between morals and ethics. It is uncontested that religion's moral values have primacy over its ethical ones. The average Nigerian Christian believes that ethical stances must be guided by the moral teaching of the Bible.

According to a common Nigerian adage "religion is the conscience and moral rectitude of society." In light of this, postmodern ideology is not popular among the average Christian or Muslim since it contradicts the absolute instructions or norms embedded in the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, if religion ceases to function as such, society will be plagued by high moral decadence/deviation and ethical wrongness resulting in social misdemeanor and crisis. Such social crises will include: increase in gambling; alcoholism; substance abuse; rape cases; violent conflicts and disorderliness. Obviously, among average Nigerian Christians, religion remains integral in the formation of morals and a guide in ethical discourse.

## **THE INTERFACE BETWEEN RELIGION AND CULTURE IN THE PUBLIC SPACE**

In terms of ethnicity and culture, Nigeria is very diverse. The country is home to 529 distinct ethnic groups, even though seven of the ethnic languages are extinct and forty-seven are endangered. Christianity and Islam were received differently in different cultural settings. Some argue that the encounter between the two current dominant religions and the various cultures in Nigeria has continued to bring about transformation in areas such as the educational system; healthcare services; political engagement/involvement and other social developments. Some cultures may not view the encounter as positive since it has destroyed some of their cherished cultural values and imposed Christian and Arab cultures as enshrined in the biblical and Islamic texts. It may be argued that there are ongoing cultural clashes between Christian and Muslim cultures and traditional or indigenous cultures. This undoubtedly manifests itself in the public space and spheres of Nigeria.

For instance, most foreign Christian missions used formal education as one of the ways to approach some of the cultures in Nigeria, even though some of the cultures were resistant to the missionaries, seeing them as strange beings and as having nothing good to offer. The missionaries saw it as their vocation to emancipate the so-called people in the dark. The Christian missions established several schools and teachers' colleges and most of the political élite and bureaucrats in the country have been educated in schools established by foreign Christian missions. Another strategy used by the Christian missionaries was the provision of comprehensive healthcare services. In quite a number of communities, the missionaries established hospitals, clinics and dispensaries to meet people's medical needs. This strategy worked as it facilitated the rapid reception of the foreign religion (Christianity). In terms of social development, the Christian mission agencies were involved in the development of infrastructure, including the construction of rural roads and sanitary wells as well as the drilling of boreholes in rural communities. All of these services motivated the people to give up their traditional cultures and religious beliefs to embrace Christianity. The interface between Christianity and the receiving cultures in Nigeria has been translated into a mixed culture as is evident for instance in marriage contracts, where the church ensures that certain cultural demands are satisfied before the marriage contract is finalized.

## **RELIGION AND THE SOCIOPOLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SPACE**

Religion and politics have dominated national and international discourse. Nigeria, where religion is viewed as one of the strong determinants of political decisions, is no exception. This was not the case in the early years after independence but has become so following the civil war. Some scholars have argued that the civil war was a struggle to keep independent Nigeria one country. However, religion was introduced into the civil war discourse, simply because it was perceived that most of the casualties during the war were Christians from both sides of the divide. It is further argued that religion played an active role in overthrowing General Yakubu Gowon, a Christian head of State during and after the civil war. After the government's confiscation or taking over of Christian mission schools he acknowledged that religion and the religious agenda were at play in virtually all policy negotiations in Nigeria.<sup>10</sup>

Another event that brought religion into the fore on the Nigerian political scene was the proposal to introduce sharia law during the 1977 constituent

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<sup>10</sup> Gwamna, *op. cit.* (note 1).



assembly.<sup>11</sup> Northern delegates, who were mostly Muslim, strongly advocated for the adoption of sharia law into the national legal framework and for the establishment of a Federal Shari'ah Court of Appeal. Christian delegates at the constituent assembly vehemently resisted the notion. This issue remains on the agenda and continues to surface in all national dialogues or forums.<sup>12</sup>

Outraged Christians organized protests when Nigeria was enrolled in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) during General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida's regime. The protest action resulted in the deputy head of state, who was a Christian and had joined the protest, losing his job. Christians perceived this as a grand plan to Islamize Nigeria, regardless of the huge Christian population in the country. Similarly, General Abacha, who was the head of state and a Muslim, unilaterally registered Nigeria as a member of the D-8 countries that include Egypt; Turkey; Iran; Malaysia; Bangladesh; Indonesia; and Pakistan, all countries with a Muslim majority. These actions are seen as efforts to drag religion into the public space and spheres of Nigeria.

Another action that brought religion into the political limelight was the adoption of sharia law by some states. During electoral campaigning at the dawn of the fourth republic, some overly zealous politicians promised that once voted into office they would introduce and adopt religious laws as the state's legal norm. Fulfilling their campaign promises they openly declared the adoption of religious laws as the state's legal framework, an action that triggered violent reactions across some states in northern Nigeria. This has no doubt increased religious intolerance and created suspicions among citizens belonging to different religions. Boko Haram activities have also contributed immensely to religio-political tensions and fears.

Radical evangelicals understand Proverbs 29:2 "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when the wicked rule, the people groan" to mean that the political leadership must be in the hands of Christians only. For radical evangelicals, non-Christians are "the wicked" who must not be allowed to occupy any political posts. Christian pietists or conservatives claim that a true Christian should not be involved in partisan politics, as they consider politics as evil or satanic. They hold strongly to the notion that Christians are merely sojourners or pilgrims and should not contaminate themselves with the mundane affairs of the "evil world." Then there are the liberals who advocate for the active involvement in political affairs or activities of the state. They believe this to be the only way in which the world can be transformed since functionaries employ religious values to guide their decision-making processes. Liberals consider this to

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

be the way in which the Lord's Prayer, as taught by Jesus Christ, can be realized. The foregoing nuances are the realities of Christians' perceptions and participation in active politics in Nigeria. As is evidenced in political arrangements and machineries, religion remains an indispensable force in defining political identity and patronage.

Christianity and Islam have motivated their adherents to question such areas as election processes; budget generation, appropriation/allocation and performances; infrastructure developments; banking policies (the introduction of the Islamic banking system generated a heated debate and met with stiff opposition from non-Muslims) and other economic policies that include the impact of foreign direct investment (FDI) on the gross domestic product (GDP). Engaging these issues from a religious perspective has been sporadic. Most religious leaders seem to opt for silence rather than to speak out on some of the ills associated with bad governance and negative politics, simply because no one wants to be seen as antagonistic or skeptical of the powers that be. As a result of their silence the suffering of ordinary citizens has increased.

## CONCLUSION

Religion remains an active part of public space in Nigeria, unlike in some parts of Europe and North America. Our main challenge as a nation remains finding a better way of using religion as a tool for genuine nation building and societal transformation, rather than it being used as a tool of oppression and division between people of one nation. Our inability to take religion as an asset for building national cohesion accounts for the politicization of religion and the religionization of politics in Nigeria. It is against this background that religion has been manipulated by political actors for their personal gains and at the detriment to the population at large. I look forward to a sincere and transparent collaboration between Christian and Muslim leaders to challenge unjust social and political structures that have continued to inflict suffering on the majority of the population. It is appropriate to acknowledge that there are government initiatives to bring religious leaders to dialogue on issues that have the potential to trigger civil unrest and violence. Such initiatives include the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council and the States Inter-Religious Councils. Unfortunately, these initiatives are only convened when the local and federal government make funds available. Because of the reliance on government to provide needed funds, the activities of these councils are slowed down and sometimes hijacked to suit the funders to the detriment of the masses. Therefore, the need for an initiative exclusively set up by religious leaders to engage with sociopolitical and economic issues becomes imperative.

# SECULARITY REVISITED



# SHOULD PUBLIC SPACE BE SECULAR?

*Marian Burchardt*

## INTRODUCTION

In most Western multicultural societies, concerns over the secularity of public space have moved center stage in political debates, judicial politics and the everyday lives of many people. School boards need to decide whether they should, or are obliged, to cater to the special food needs of religious minorities and provide halal or kosher food for teachers and students in their canteens. University administrations are faced with demands to allow—or disallow—gender segregation in the meetings of Salafist-oriented Muslim student associations. Simultaneously, the question of whether religious dress should be banned for state employees looms large in virtually all societies with a significant degree of migration-driven religious diversity.

The rise of discourses on secularism is thus intimately associated with the need to manage religious diversity in many different institutional arenas and to adapt inherited relationships between religion and the state in ways compatible with liberal democratic values, human rights and diverse cultural sensibilities.<sup>1</sup> At the very core, however, it is also the outcome of the replacing of ethnicity by religion as the primary category on which to base migrants' collective claims for recognition and social and political inclusion in the post-Cold War world. As neoliberal capitalism goes from one rebirth to the next and the great divisions of the bipolar world between capitalism and Communism have ultimately been reduced to a species of, more or less ephemeral, social movement politics, religion has turned into

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Bramadat and Matthias Koenig (eds), *International Migration and the Governance of Religious Diversity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

the prime category of globalized identity politics.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the constant reaffirmations of the renewed significance of religion in today's world are a direct corollary of the concomitant rise of neoliberal capitalism and of identity politics, which views people first and foremost as cultured beings; especially as beings that have a religion and must be included in society on the basis of that religion.<sup>3</sup> In the case of religions of salvation, such as Islam and Christianity, on the surface this usually implies that people are seen as constituted through their chosen membership in a cultural community. It is often ignored that state and supra-state policies directed towards social inclusion through the promotion of religious diversity are principally inspired not by concerns over the rights of minorities per se. Their main goal is to make possible the circulation of labor for the greatest benefit of capital, while recognizing that this labor sometimes comes with religious characteristics and needs that must be catered for in order to be incorporated. The political and legal promotion of religious diversity is thus also a by-product of capitalist mobility regimes and the transnationalization of labor markets.

Contestations over the secularity of public space, while typically being driven by neoliberal capitalist logics, assume different shapes in different contexts. They are historically, culturally and geographically specific and there is a need to explain how precisely these specificities play out in particular societies. In many Western societies, particular histories of religious traditions and secular modernization bear on contemporary contestations, among other things, through the ways in which they are collectively memorized. Collective and cultural memories are (re-)activated whenever reference to the past is brought to bear for purposes such as the definition of collective identities and the drawing of symbolic boundaries; or for addressing past injustices and claiming rights. In some places, collective memories contain hegemonic accounts of history, which give a distinctive place to certain religious communities or even grant supremacy to particular religious traditions, thus limiting the scope and legitimacy of religious pluralism. In other places, increasing religious diversity and secularization have forged a context in which some, often rapidly growing, social groups mobilize secularist memories and posture as proponents of modern rationality or liberal democracy and conceptualize such notions as "culture."<sup>4</sup> In the following, I shall explore how secularity has become

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<sup>2</sup> Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Lori G. Beaman, "The Will to Religion: Obligatory Religious Citizenship," in *Critical Research on Religion* 1(2) (2013), 141–57.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Willem Duyvendak, *The Politics of Home. Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

meaningful for the construction and understanding of public space and show how the concept of multiple secularities is helpful in this regard. In order to do so, I begin by disentangling the meanings in the usage of the terms “public” as in “public space,” “public sphere,” and “publics” as actors in society in the way they relate to religion and secularity.

## RELIGION AND THE PUBLIC SPACE: THE MEANINGS OF PUBLIC

In the sociology of religion but also sociology more broadly, debates about the “public” draw on a number of different meanings that have emerged from two distinct literatures: first, the literature on the public sphere, chiefly inspired by liberal political philosophy and critical theory, and, second, the literature on public space, which emerged in the wake of the spatial turn in the social sciences and counts geographers, urbanists and anthropologists as its main contributors.

In most sociological studies on the “new religious pluralism” and religion in the public sphere, “public sphere” is taken to mean the spheres of the state or, more precisely, the spheres in which states interact with citizens organized as “publics.” There are now elaborate studies on the role of religion in state institutions such as prisons,<sup>5</sup> hospitals, the police force<sup>6</sup> and the military.<sup>7</sup> These studies explore changes in the regulation and actual practice of religion in terms of de-monopolization, pluralization as well as the uses of religion for administrative and political purposes. To refer to these institutions as public institutions implies the demand that all citizens must be treated equally, which is in fact usually one of the main normative premises of sociological research in this field. From the point of view of access, of course, such institutions are not public at all as they are those with the most restrictive rules of entry.

It is important to remember though that, in his classical study on the emergence of the public sphere, Habermas insisted that the public sphere is a particular expression of civil society, which does not remain contained

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<sup>5</sup> Irene Becci, *Imprisoned Religion. Transformations of Religion During and After Imprisonment in Eastern Germany* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); James A. Beckford and Sophie Gilliat, *Religion in Prison: ‘Equal Rites’ in a Multi-Faith Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Prison Religion. Faith-Based Reform and the Constitution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Theriault, *The Cop and the Sociologist. Investigating Diversity in German Police Forces* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> See the volume by John R. Bowen et al (eds), *European States and their Muslim Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), which discusses a variety of institutional settings.

within it but rather emerged between civil society and the state.<sup>8</sup> It is with the emergence of representative democracy, the rule of law and the liberal state that the concern with the public sphere became central to normative political thought and the organization of political life. The central normative point of reference is justice. In the tradition of American liberalism, Rawls famously addressed the public sphere in terms of the assumption of an overlapping background consensus.<sup>9</sup> Merging liberal thought with critical theory, Warner explored the creation of publics and counter-publics as political actors and emphasized the modern co-constitution of the public and the political.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, there has been a proliferation of studies on public space in terms of concrete and physical spaces. In the sociological tradition, such studies can be linked to Goffman's work, the interactionist tradition and especially the Chicago School of urban ethnography. Broadly situated in this line of investigation, anthropologists Smith and Low wrote in an edited volume on *The Politics of Public Space*,

By "public space" we mean the range of social locations offered by the street, the park, the media, the Internet, the shopping mall, the United Nations, national governments, and local neighborhoods. "Public space," envelops a palpable tension between place, experienced at all scales in daily life, and the seeming spacelessness of the Internet, popular opinion, and global institutions and economy.

Importantly, they note that in this rendition public space is usually

differentiated from private space in terms of the rules of access, the source and nature of control over entry to a space, individual and collective behavior sanctioned in specific space, and the rules of use.<sup>11</sup>

While there are some overlaps with the literature on the public sphere here, more important are the differences. While the public sphere is typically construed as discursive, disembodied and abstract, research on public space is chiefly interested in the materiality of spaces and embodied forms of uses and embodied practices that constitute and validate spaces as public.

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<sup>8</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Setha Low and Neil Smith (eds), *The Politics of Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 4.

<sup>9</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," in *Public Culture*, Winter 2002, 14 (1), 49–90.

<sup>11</sup> Low and Smith, op. cit. (note 8), 3.



The literature on public space views space as a product of concrete social relations and forms of power. To a very significant extent these relations are also economic relations as many places that are somehow publicly used, are in fact privately owned, managed and regulated.

In research on religion, especially in sociology and anthropology, we find important repercussions of these broader theoretical divisions. The first line of thought, that on the public sphere, is most famously represented by José Casanova's work on public religion. In his book, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Casanova argues that religion is deprivatized and that this deprivatization is empirically observable and, to the extent religious traditions accept the key values of modern democracy, normatively warranted. Methodologically and stylistically, his analysis is placed at the interface between historical sociology and critical theory.<sup>12</sup> His notion of the public sphere, however, remains largely abstract, disembodied and negligent of the material dimensions of publicness.<sup>13</sup>

These material dimensions are more directly addressed in literature originating in the geography and anthropology of religion and some of the above-mentioned sociological research on religious pluralism in public institutions.<sup>14</sup> These highlight how people inhabit public space through religious festivals and processions and how issues of materiality and embodiment are entangled in collective religious practices. Very recently, researchers began to reflect on the relationship between religion and public space in terms of public visibility.<sup>15</sup> Here, the public visibility of religious traditions is conceptualized in terms of the power to become part of a pluralist public space. Contestations over public visibility play out in conflicts over places of worship such as mosques and religious symbols and dress.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> We bring both dimensions together in Irene Becci, Marian Burchardt and José Casanova, *Topographies of Faith: Religion in Urban Spaces* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Olson, Peter Hopkins and Lily Kong, "Introduction—Religion and Place: Landscape, Politics and Piety," in Elizabeth Olson, Peter Hopkins and Lily Kong (eds), *Religion and Place: Landscape, Politics and Piety* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013), 1-20.

<sup>15</sup> Nilüfer Göle, "La visibilité disruptive de l'Islam dans l'espace public européen: enjeux politiques, questions théoriques," in *Cahiers Sens public* 1 (2013), 165-184; Nilüfer Göle, "Islam in Public. New Visibilities and New Imaginaries," in *Public Culture* 14 (1) (2002), 173-90.

<sup>16</sup> Jörg Hüttermann, *Das Minarett: zur politischen Kultur des Konflikts um islamische Symbole* (Beltz: Juventa, 2006); Avi Astor, "Memory, Community, and Opposition to Mosques: The Case of Badalona," in *Theory and Society* 41(4) (2012), 325-49.

**MULTIPLE SECULARITIES AND THE PUBLIC SPACE**

Importantly, contestations around religious diversity are framed by some historically shaped understandings of secularity. By secularity I mean the forms of distinction between religious and other social domains (which are thereby marked as non-religious). Recognizing the diversity of contextual conditions and historical experience, we have developed the idea of “multiple secularities” that assumes that these secularities document a specific social history of conflict.<sup>17</sup> Moving beyond the critique of positivist secularization theories, I agree with Casanova that the concepts of secularization and secularity make sense “as an analytical framework for a comparative research agenda that aims to examine the historical transformations of all world religions under conditions of modern structural differentiation.”<sup>18</sup> As a concept, secularity is more inclusive than secularism and also encompasses the latent, taken-for-granted forms of the distinction between the religious and the non-religious as they operate in the material space of law, education, science, business, etc. In many societies, understandings of the secular are framed through guiding ideas, as was also the case with the guiding ideas of modernity and progress or with the “social projections” that went along with the introduction of new technologies, such as letterpress printing.<sup>19</sup>

From this perspective, it also seems evident that the rejection of such concepts as secularization and secularism in large parts of the Islamic world is not necessarily bound up with the absence of differentiations between the religious and the secular, hence with the omnipresence of religion.<sup>20</sup> My assumption is rather that there are no readily accessible guiding ideas of secularity with which such distinctions could be legitimized. In addition, Islam is also widely employed in terms of a cultural identity, especially in the Arab world with its history of belated nation-state formations. This blurring of the boundaries of religion and culture renders a positive articulation

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<sup>17</sup> Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt, “Multiple Secularities: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities,” in *Comparative Sociology* 11 (6) (2012), 875–909.

<sup>18</sup> José Casanova, “Secularization Revisited. A Reply to Talal Asad,” in David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (eds), *Powers of the Secular Modern. Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2006), 12–30, here 19.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Giesecke, *Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit. Eine historische Fallstudie über die Durchsetzung neuer Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2006 [1991]), 156

<sup>20</sup> Reinhard Schulze, “Die Dritte Unterscheidung. Islam, Religion und Säkularität,” in Wolfgang Lienemann and Walter Dietrich (eds), *Religionen–Wahrheitsansprüche–Konflikte. Theologische Perspektiven* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2010), 147–205.

of secularity extremely difficult. Correspondingly, the most intransigent resistance to (Western) secularism is also articulated by Muslim groups active in the transnational arena. By contrast, secularity was part, though only at times, of the self-image of the more “robust” nation-states, such as Syria or Iraq under the Baath regime.

The history of the resonance between the Western and the non-Western world is, in this sense, primarily reflected in the negative relation to a form of secularity perceived as ideological secularism that is associated with hostility to religion and atheism. This does not preclude de facto differentiations in the areas of education, science, business, law, as well as politics while these are often subordinated to references to Islam or the sharia. Therefore, I argue against a reading of Islamic societies which sees their path to secularization (in particular to functional differentiation) as being primarily obstructed by the intrinsic features of Islam.<sup>21</sup> More relevant, it seems to me, is the interplay between religious-cultural particularity and histories of resonance, whereby the possibilities of explicitly adopting secular ideas are undermined.

The analytical distinction between ideologies of separation and practices of differentiation also opens our eyes to pre-modern practices that provide intellectual resources, and thereby pave the way for modern forms of secularity, without themselves already being associated with secular guiding ideas. Pre-modern regimes of toleration are an example of this.<sup>22</sup>

I assume further that the “multiple secularities” that are taking shape in different countries and regions “respond” to specific societal problems (as their reference problems) and offer solutions to them. Obviously, these problems arise at some point and in some form in many societies, but they come up with different degrees of urgency at different points in time. In the research project “Multiple Secularities” we identified four such reference problems: (1) the problem of individual freedom vis-à-vis dominant social units, be they groups or the state; (2) the problem of religious heterogeneity and the resulting potential or actual conflictuality; (3) the problem of social or national integration and development; and (4) the problem of the independent development of institutional domains. It is clear that most of these problems are closely associated with the formation of modern societies and states and the ideas on which they are founded, whereas at least the

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<sup>21</sup> Dan Diner, *Lost in the Sacred. Why the Muslim World Stood Still* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Rajeev Bhargava, “The ‘Secular Ideal’ before Secularism: A Preliminary Sketch,” in Linell E. Cady and Elizabeth S. Hurd (eds), *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 159–80.

second also arises in pre-modern societies. It is no accident that reflections on pre-modern sources of modern secularity generally begin here.

It is clear that understandings and interpretations of such problems and solutions are often contested and, as a consequence, are collectively shared to varying degrees. What is considered a problem, for instance with regard to nation building and religious diversity, and a viable solution in terms of secularity, is therefore subject to processes whereby interpretations of problems and solutions are negotiated and authorized. These processes of authorization, in which the dominant social meanings of religion and secularity impinge on one another, are thus invariably embedded in power relations defining the deep strata of historical experience in a given society and its religious and political tradition.

Processes of definition and framing involve a variety of social and political actors and social movements, often with antagonistic agendas. Typically, however, the reference problems and the guiding ideas epitomizing them can be used as reference points for a variety of groups, even if these groups pursue competing goals in other respects. Therefore, the reference problems and solutions mentioned above, together with their associated guiding ideas, may develop a binding social thrust, at least for certain historical periods, and thereby become points of crystallization for collective identities. As a consequence, we can see the emergence of more or less entrenched “cultures of secularity,” which are shared across otherwise existing lines of difference.

The four central problems outlined above provide motives for institutionalizing distinctions between the religious and other social spheres. As latent motives and social practices, they can certainly coexist, as overt motifs, they may compete with each other. Our assumption is, however, that, given certain preconditions, one of them will become dominant at least for a certain period by being aligned with guiding ideas that set the basic terms for distinguishing religious and secular spaces in a given society, and thereby push the other motives, at least at times, to the background. There is no doubt, however, that these motives are often highly contested.

Accordingly, our claim is not that such a basic tenor of secularity can be identified in every society or that just one of the motives matters. The following constellations may restrict such development:

- Practices of differentiation may remain below the threshold at which guiding ideas are formulated. An example of this would be (parts of) the Islamic world.
- Different concepts of secularity may coexist and be supported by equally strong groups. This is likely to be the case in situations where the

urge to find solutions to specific societal problems is not very strong. It may also be the case in situations where the need to form coalitions is stronger than anything else. Times in which constitutions are drawn up could be an example of that.

- Different concepts of secularity and guiding ideas may compete with each other. This situation seems to exist in a whole range of countries. It is especially visible in postcolonial countries, for example in South Africa, or in Western societies during phases of transition.<sup>23</sup>
- The guiding idea can be the ideology of élites that diverges from the dominant social practices of differentiation, as with the secularist reforms of Kemal Atatürk, which today are patently in conflict with the Islamic self-image of large parts of the Turkish population.
- Finally, it is also possible that the problems in question are not “resolved” in the direction of secularity but through the imposition of religious authority, so that secularity remains in the background as a latent option.

Even if the distinction between four basic types of secularity is an ideal-typical construction that is not “identical” with reality, we assume that a basic cultural understanding of secularity can be identified in a whole range of societies, at least in certain periods. During “settled periods” this will remain latent but it will become manifest in periods of conflict.<sup>24</sup> Such conflicts may be the expression of “critical junctures” in Kuru’s sense and trigger shifts in historical orientations.<sup>25</sup> We have used the formula “secu-

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<sup>23</sup> We have discussed this in Cora Schuh, Marian Burchardt and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, “Contested Secularities. Religious Minorities and Secular Progressivism in the Netherlands,” in *Journal of Religion in Europe* 5 (2012), 349–83, with regard to the Netherlands, where we see a shift from secularity centered on the accommodation of groups to a model that centers on national development and societal integration. In Susanne Schenk, Marian Burchardt and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, “Religious Diversity in the Neoliberal Welfare State: Secularity and the Ethos of Egalitarianism in Sweden,” in *International Sociology* 30 (1), 3–20, we show how claims towards expressing religious diversity in public schools run up against shared understandings of secular public spaces as symbols of egalitarianism.

<sup>24</sup> Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” in *American Sociological Review* 51 (2) (1986), 273–86, here 278.

<sup>25</sup> Kuru defined critical junctures as periods or moments in which both agency and structural conditions are available for systematic change: Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies Toward Religion. The United States, France, and Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

larity for the sake of [...]” to designate these basic patterns and distinguish between the following forms: (1) secularity for the sake of individual rights and liberties; (2) secularity for the sake of balancing/pacifying religious diversity; (3) secularity for the sake of societal or national integration and development; and (4) secularity for the sake of the independent development of functional domains of society.

These four basic forms of secularity are associated with different guiding ideas: in the first type (1) it is the idea of freedom and individuality; in the second (2) that of toleration, respect and non-interference; whereas the third type involves (3) the ideas of progress, enlightenment, and modernity.<sup>26</sup> The fourth type, finally, involves (4) the guiding ideas of rationality, efficiency, and autonomy.

This leads us to the following four-field matrix:

		<i>Implicit Focus</i>	
		centralized	de-centralized
<i>Definitions of the Social</i>	life-world-related	secularity for the sake of individual liberties guiding ideas: freedom, individuality	secularity for the sake of balancing/accommodating diversity guiding ideas: toleration, respect, non-interference
	system-related	secularity for the sake of social integration/national development guiding ideas: progress, enlightenment, modernity	secularity for the sake of the independent development of institutional domains guiding ideas: rationality, efficiency, autonomy

We assume that the dominance of one reference problem tends to create tensions vis-à-vis the others, not only in theoretical terms but in the real world. For example, prioritizing the balance between religious groups is likely to create tensions with regard to individual liberties, to the pursuit of national interests, as well as to guaranteeing the autonomy of functional domains.

<sup>26</sup> Of course, the notion of freedom can also become the guiding idea of national development and the symbol of social progress and the preservation of social sovereignty. Examples of this can be found in the French Revolution, though also in the right-wing populist “freedom parties,” as, for example, in the Netherlands.

## CONCLUSION

Contestations over secularity are often contestations over public spaces that are understood or claimed to be secular by some social groups. What secular means in particular instances is often unclear. Today, the secular is invoked for a huge diversity of cultural and political projects and called forth for a variety of ends. We have analyzed these ends in terms of the cultural and historical meanings secularity acquires in public discourse and condensed these in a typology. This typological grid allows us to understand how struggles over secularity and religious diversity articulate the discursive and material aspects of “the public.” Religious uses of public space are anchored in discursive regimes just as, from the sociological point of view, questions regarding the discursively mediated presence of religions in the public sphere acquire their traction through the ways in which this presence plays out in concrete material public space. Exploring these articulations ethnographically is one of the major challenges of the sociology of public space today.





# INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS, SECULARITY AND THE “IMMANENT FRAME”

*Oddbjørn Leirvik*

The topic dealt with in this essay is interreligious relations and secularity. Can we imagine religious people creating secular space? Can interreligious dialogue contribute in this respect?

The following reflections will use my personal experiences of interreligious dialogue in Norway as a frame of reference and will relate to the more general discussion on the translation between religious and secular languages.

## **THE SECULAR: A TEMPORAL OR SPATIAL NOTION?**

In order to define secularity, we need to take a brief look at the conceptual history of “the secular.”<sup>1</sup> All constructs containing a reference to the secular go back to the Latin *saeculum* which, in Augustin and other church fathers, is a temporal rather than a spatial notion. It refers to “this age” in contrast to the hereafter or eternal life.

Subsequently, the secular increasingly became a spatial notion referring to the distinction between the religious and worldly spheres. For instance, monks became secularized when leaving monastic life; church property was secularized in the sense of being taken over by the state during the Reformation.

In the wake of Western Enlightenment, one can witness a conceptual and, gradually, also a political distinction between the private and the public sphere and between religion and the state. It is this development that leads to

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<sup>1</sup> Philip S. Gorski and Ates Altınordu, “After Secularization?,” in *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008), 55–85.

secularism in the modern sense, as a decidedly spatial notion demarcating the fault lines between the private and the public, the religious and the political.

## **SECULARISM, SECULARIZATION, SECULARITY**

Although the notions of secularism, secularization and secularity are often used interchangeably, I believe there is conceptual clarity to be gained from a finer distinction.

I understand secularism as political programs aiming at reducing the influence of religion in public institutions and possibly also in the entire public space.

Secularization, in contrast, normally does not refer to political programs but to social processes characterized by features such as religious privatization and a social differentiation that reduces religion to one among other sectors in society.

What about the notion of secularity? In my understanding, secularity refers to a cultural condition that in late modernity is characterized by the growing recognition that all religions and worldviews are subject to individual choice and will have to compete on non-hegemonic terms with other claimants to truth and meaning.

In this sense, secularity recuperates Augustin's temporal aspect of the secular, referring to the coexistence of different religions "in this age," that is in our common world. What is new compared to traditional forms of plurality are the elements of individual choice and the non-hegemonic terms of coexistence that characterize modern pluralism and, hence, according to my understanding, secularity.

As for the element of personal choice, I refer to Charles Taylor's third meaning of secularity as "conditions of belief" that imply that one's own religion is seen as but one option among others:

The shift to secularity [...] consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others [...].<sup>2</sup>

Taylor's secular condition of belief also implies a way of reasoning about religion that is characterized by what he refers to as the "the immanent frame":

And so we come to understand our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order [...] where rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

[...] this frame constitutes a “natural” order, to be contrasted to a “supernatural” one, an “immanent” world, over against a possible “transcendent” one.<sup>3</sup>

Thus Taylor’s understanding of conditions of belief within the immanent frame brings us back to the temporal understanding of *saeculum* in antiquity.

One might also ponder whether the general shift from religion to spirituality, as observed by many sociologists of religion,<sup>4</sup> can be seen as an expression of the formatting power of the immanent frame. One could, of course, question whether new spiritualities constitute an immanent form of religiosity, or whether they are reopening transcendence by re-enchanting a world of miracles.

Summing up, secularity in my understanding is characterized by personal choice and non-hegemonic conditions of belief; it provides an immanent frame for conversation about religion and spirituality; and it calls for a shared language in search for the common good in this world.

## RELIGION AS A COMMON GOOD

Within the immanent frame, religions are not only expected to contribute to the common good. In recent Norwegian policy documents at least, values associated with religion are, in themselves, seen as a common good.

The reasoning behind the generous system of financial support for faith and life stance communities in Norway illustrates the logic of the immanent frame: faith communities are worthy of support because (or as long as) they contribute to public welfare as carriers of values that are important both for the individual and for society.<sup>5</sup> Norway’s practice, since 1969, of giving financial support to all registered faith and life stance communities, which in 2012 was inscribed as a constitutional principle, seems to be premised on the view of religion as a welfare good.

Faith, religion and worldviews are positive values for the individual and for society. They may provide cohesion and create community in a pluralist society. Although faith, religion and worldviews may be sources of conflict, they also create belonging and have social importance as transmitters of values and carriers

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 542–43.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution. Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Oddbjørn Leirvik, “Aktivt støttende religionspolitikk— på kva vilkår, til fordel for kven?,” in *Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift* 2 (2009), 66–88.

of tradition. It is important to provide good practical solutions that attend to the citizens' varying needs, not least in crucial phases of life.<sup>6</sup>

The question that arises is what happens to a faith community or religious tradition if—on the premises of the immanent frame— it is no more seen as contributing to the common good. While religion may have something to gain from being transposed to community values, it is also challenged by a value-driven translation that may equally be taken as a condition for public support.

### **FROM RELIGION TO HERITAGE AND VALUES— HEGEMONY ON CHANGED TERMS?**

According to Taylor, in late modern contexts, religion develops on pluralist conditions of belief and unfolds in the immanent frame. If religion is supported by the state, then it is seen as part of the common good. However, what is supported publicly is not religion in the comprehensive sense of embodied rituals and believed doctrines. It is rather religion translated or reduced to “heritage” and “values.”<sup>7</sup>

With regard to interreligious relations, the fundamental question that arises is whether the recognition of pluralist conditions of belief and the perception of religion as a common good necessarily entail a giving up of hegemonic ambitions. Or, is traditional hegemony on the part of the religious majority only translated into a more secular language?

A salient example of the secular transposition of hegemonic religion can be found in the 2012 constitutional changes in Norway, by virtue of which Lutheranism is no longer referred to as the state religion. Instead, unspecified Christianity—on a par with humanism—is spoken of as the national heritage and referred to as the Norwegian state's value basis: “Our values will remain our Christian and humanist heritage.”<sup>8</sup>

A similar formulation can be found in the objective clause for schools and kindergartens that was revised in 2008, the same year the political parties unanimously decided to change the constitution. Whereas the school's former objective clause stated that the school was supposed to assist the parents in the Christian and moral upbringing of their children,

<sup>6</sup> Kultur- og kirkedepartementet, *Staten og Den norske kirke*. St.meld. (Parliament Paper) nr. 17 (2007–2008) (Oslo: Kultur- og kirkedepartementet: 2008), 18 (author's own translation).

<sup>7</sup> Oddbjørn Leirvik, “Frå religion til verdier?” in *Kirke og Kultur* 2 (2014), 93f.

<sup>8</sup> Article 2 of the *Norwegian Constitution*, English translation cited from <https://www.stortinget.no/Global/pdf/Constitutionenglish.pdf?epslanguage=no>

the revised article of the Education Act—as echoed in the constitutional amendments—proclaims that “education and training shall be based on fundamental values in Christian and humanist heritage and traditions,” values that also, the article admits, can “appear in different religions and beliefs and are rooted in human rights.”<sup>9</sup>

The amendments to the constitution and the education act demonstrate that notions of hegemony are in fact retained, not exactly in the name of religion but of communal values and national heritage. But a more specifically religious hegemony is also upheld. Not only is “our Christian and humanist heritage” referred to as “the value basis” of state and society but, in addition, article 4 requires (as before) that “[t]he King shall at all times profess the Evangelical-Lutheran religion” and article 16 states that “[t]he Church of Norway, an Evangelical-Lutheran church, will remain the established Church of Norway and will as such be supported by the state.”<sup>10</sup>

Although article 16 also states that all other religious and life stance communities “should be supported on equal terms,”<sup>11</sup> the cited articles of the revised Norwegian constitution collide with my understanding of secularity as a non-hegemonic condition of belief. Non-hegemonic secularity means that the faith communities, irrespective of the historical roles that certain religious cultures have played in national or regional history, give up their hegemonic ambitions, seeking rather a language for the common good. As the philosopher Tore Lindholm has argued,<sup>12</sup> the revised articles in the Norwegian constitution instead demonstrate the tenacity of a hegemonic type of identity politics, characterized by him as a “pseudo-Lutheran semi-hegemony.”

In contrast, after a protracted discussion, the European Union’s Charter of Fundamental Rights omitted any concrete reference to Christianity or God. It speaks instead of Europe’s “spiritual and moral heritages,” while referring to its basic values as “universal.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Section 1-1 on objectives of education in the *Norwegian Education Act*, English translation cited from [www.kpf.no/index.cfm?id=234509](http://www.kpf.no/index.cfm?id=234509)

<sup>10</sup> Articles 4 and 16, *Norwegian Constitution*, op. cit. (note 8). “The Established Church of Norway” is a rather inaccurate translation of “den norske folkekyrkja,” literally “the Church of the Norwegian people” or “the Norwegian folk church.”

<sup>11</sup> Article 16, *Norwegian Constitution*, op. cit. (note 8).

<sup>12</sup> Tore Lindholm, “The Tenacity of Identity Politics in Norway: From Unabashed Lutheran Monopoly to Pseudo-Lutheran Semi-Hegemony?” in Lisbeth Christoffersen, Kjell Åke Modéer, Svend Andersen and Niels Valdemar Vinding (eds), *Law & Religion in the 21st Century—Nordic Perspectives* (Copenhagen: Jurist- og Økonomforbundets Forlag, 2010), 203–37.

<sup>13</sup> “Conscious of its spiritual and moral heritage, the Union is founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law. It places the individual at the heart of its activities, by establishing the citizenship of the Union and by

In line with the EU's Charter, the general rule in modern European constitutions is not to mention any specific religious tradition as the value basis of society. However, exceptions and similar developments to the Norwegian amendments can be seen in other European countries. For instance, recent constitutional amendments in Hungary link Christianity not to God, but to the secular notion of the nation, "We recognize the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood."<sup>14</sup> On a more inclusive note, the cited preamble to Hungary's constitution (much like Norway's Education Act) adds that "[we] value the various religious traditions of our country."<sup>15</sup>

In constitutions such as the revised Norwegian and Hungarian ones, Christianity retains its symbolic hegemony on the premise of the immanent frame. Numerous cases of hegemonic language could of course be cited from constitutions in the Muslim world. For instance, in Egypt the constitution (various versions were discussed after the Arab Spring) in more "religious" language refers to Islam as the religion of the state and the principles of sharia as the main source of legislation. From a global perspective, the question of hegemonic language in the name of religion, heritage and values is thus a shared challenge for Christians and Muslims.

### **SECULARITY AS A COMMON LANGUAGE IN THE PROTECTION OF VULNERABLE MINORITIES**

What then would be the characteristics of a non-hegemonic language, as distinct from the cited attempts to retain half-secularized religious hegemony in the name of Christian or Muslim nationhood and values? What happens when Christians and Muslims, within the framework of more or less hegemonic constitutions, engage each other in interfaith dialogues focused on the common good? Whose interests are privileged if not those of the majority group(s)? Faith communities supporting each other's religious freedom on pluralist terms? Minority groups in need of protection? Or even vulnerable individuals whose freedom may sometimes be threatened by their faith communities? And what kind of language is applied: are common concerns framed in religious or secular language?

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creating an area of freedom, security and justice." Preamble to the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (2000/C 364/01) at [www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf). The Charter was proclaimed in 2000 and finally entered into force through the Lisbon Treaty in 2009.

<sup>14</sup> For an English translation of the *Hungarian Constitution*, see [www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/hu00000\\_.html](http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/hu00000_.html)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

As an empirical test case of non-hegemonic discourses, I will examine three joint statements by Christians and Muslims in Norway—on conversion (2007), violence in close relationships (2009) and religious extremism (2011). In my view, these statements may be read as examples of the non-hegemonic language of the common good—focused on the plight and rights of vulnerable groups and individuals.<sup>16</sup>

The national Contact Group for the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council Norway was established in 1993 and is the country’s longest existing interfaith forum. It is often cited as an example of a trust-building, representative and well-established forum for Christian-Muslim conversation and interaction. When established in 1992–1993, it was expected by some to rally around traditional values, in a common front against secular society. Instead, what has developed in the Contact Group is a non-hegemonic discourse where human rights principles and the ethics of vulnerability—at least in one phase of the group’s work—demonstrably become the focal points.

In the declarations quoted below, one can identify a manner of speaking which is distinctively self-critical on the part of the religions. The religions’ readiness for self-critique could in fact be cited as another defining characteristic of secularity—along with individualized conditions of belief and the formatting power of the immanent frame.

Although the work of the Contact Group has increasingly been focused on the situation of vulnerable individuals, the group has also defended Muslim and Christian communities against attacks. In accordance with the group’s solidarity profile, church leaders from a broad ecumenical spectrum have on numerous occasions defended the Muslim minority in Norway against mounting Islamophobia and confrontational forms of identity politics in the name of “the Christian cultural heritage” (as expressed by the populist Progress Party and some other nationalist politicians).<sup>17</sup>

In response to the Christian defense of vilified Muslims, Norwegian Muslims have spoken out against attacks on Christians in Muslim majority societies. A shared concern for vulnerable religious groups is expressed in joint declarations addressing instances of Muslim and Christian aggression respectively, such as “Stop the Violence against Christians in Pakistan”

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<sup>16</sup> For the following, cf. the chapter on “Interreligious Dialogue and Secularity,” in Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies. A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 33–52.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance the expression of Christian solidarity in a 2004 statement against perceived defamation of Muslims by the leader of the Progress Party, under the heading “Kristenledere mot islamofobi og muslimhets” [Christian leaders against Islamophobia and defamation of Muslims], in *kirken*. no 24 (September 2004).

(2009)<sup>18</sup> and “Protect the People of the Central African Republic!” (2014).<sup>19</sup> In an interesting coupling of secular and religious language, the signatories of the 2009 declaration “encourage Norwegians to express support and solidarity with the Christians in Pakistan who are exposed to violence, also through prayers in church services and in mosques.”<sup>20</sup>

In some of the group’s work, one can identify a self-critical and in some circles controversial shift of focus from group solidarity towards the protection of vulnerable individuals who, in many cases, may be threatened by representatives of their own religious group. For instance, in the 2007 “Joint Declaration on the Freedom of Religion and the Right to Conversion,” the Contact Group addresses the high risk project of conversion. On this issue, the Islamic Council of Norway and the Church of Norway “jointly declare that everyone is free to adopt the religious faith of their choice.”

We denounce, and are committed to counteracting all violence, discrimination and harassment inflicted in reaction to a person’s conversion, or desire to convert, from one religion to another, be it in Norway or abroad.<sup>21</sup>

The declaration also warns against unethical forms of missionary activities aimed at vulnerable groups.

In terms of language, this particular declaration does not offer any theological argument and notes only that “we interpret our religious traditions such that everyone has the right freely to choose their religious belief and faith community, and to practice their religion publicly as well as privately.”<sup>22</sup>

To a certain extent the declaration has been followed up by joint advocacy and intervention, for instance in asylum centers, where recent converts have been subject to violent attacks perpetrated by other asylum seekers. Meetings have also been held with the immigration authorities on the issue of conversion as a possible reason for the granting of residence permits.

Subsequent developments revealed that not all the member mosques of the Islamic Council have been consolidated in the declaration’s affirmation that the right to convert is a universal human rights principle. For

<sup>18</sup> “Stopp volden mot kristne i Pakistan,” in *kirken*. no 13 (August 2009), at [www.islam.no/page1076342653.aspx](http://www.islam.no/page1076342653.aspx)

<sup>19</sup> “Beskytt menneskene i Den sentralafrikanske republikk!,” in *kirken*. no 4 (April 2014), at [www.gammel.kirken.no/?event=dolink&famId=396285](http://www.gammel.kirken.no/?event=dolink&famId=396285)

<sup>20</sup> Op. cit. (note 18), author’s own translation.

<sup>21</sup> “Joint declaration on the freedom of religion and the right to conversion,” in *kirken*. no 22 (August 2007), English translation at [www.gammel.kirken.no/english/news.cfm?artid=149142](http://www.gammel.kirken.no/english/news.cfm?artid=149142)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



instance, an investigation in 2011 into the political attitudes of Norwegian Muslim leaders revealed that some of the imams that had endorsed the 2007 joint statement on the right to convert did not fully agree on it as a global principle that was also applicable to Muslim societies.<sup>23</sup>

In 2009, the Contact Group issued another declaration that may also be read as protecting the vulnerable individual vis-à-vis their cultural or religious in-group. In the “Joint Statement on Violence in the Family and in Close Relationships” (“Say NO to Violence!”),<sup>24</sup> the language is characterized by a double reference to religious teachings and human rights. Violence against women is referred to as the “brutal breaches of fundamental human rights” and as “criminal deeds that violate both our religious teachings and human rights.” Believing that “both of our religions can provide sources of inspiration and counsel that can lead to a better life filled with love and mutual respect,” the statement also, on a more self-critical note, “strongly condemn[s] any misuse of the teachings of our religions in order to legitimize violence in the family or in close relationships.”<sup>25</sup>

Contributing to a general discussion about violence in close relationships, the statement admonishes religious leaders, politicians and ordinary citizens alike to take the problem seriously. In terms of language, an interesting development can be noted from the more secular declaration on the right to convert two years before. Although religious resources for combating domestic violence are not explicated in the declaration itself, one Christian and one Muslim theological reflection on the problem of violence was attached to the statement when published.

The third declaration to be mentioned is the 2011 “Joint Statement Opposing Religious Extremism,” prepared after a joint trip to Bosnia Herzegovina and finalized after the 22 July terror attacks perpetrated by Anders Behring Breivik (a self-declared “cultural Christian”) in Oslo and on Utøya.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Olav Elgvin, *Secularists, Democratic Islamists and Utopian Dreamers. How Muslim Religious Leaders in Norway Fit Islam into the Norwegian Political System*, Master thesis in Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Oslo (2011), 42f., also published by Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> “Say NO to violence! Joint Statement on Violence in the Family and in Close Relationships,” in *kirken*. no 09 (November 2009), at [www.gammel.kirken.no/english/news.cfm?artid=265872](http://www.gammel.kirken.no/english/news.cfm?artid=265872)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> “Joint Statement Opposing Religious Extremism. By the Islamic Council of Norway and the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations,” in *kirken*. no 22 (November 2011), at [www.gammel.kirken.no/english/news.cfm?artid=363357](http://www.gammel.kirken.no/english/news.cfm?artid=363357) ; cf. the chapter “United against Extremism?,” in Leirvik, op. cit. (note 16), 147–53.

Like the previous declarations it can be read as a contribution to general discussions in society, in this specific case, broad or narrow definitions of extremism. Whereas narrow definitions tend to focus solely on the willingness to use violence to achieve one's aims, broader definitions also address problematic attitudes that in the worst case may lead to violence.

Conventionally, the group's definition starts off with violence and the use of threats: "Extremism involves the use of violence, force or threats to promote the extremists' idea."<sup>27</sup> However, by identifying a long list of dangerous indications of religious extremism, the joint statement turns out to apply a much wider definition of extremism. It describes a sliding scale which begins with the extremists' conviction "that they are alone in interpreting their own religion correctly" and ends with the explicit willingness to use violence in order to enforce extremists' convictions on others who are defined as deadly enemies. On this sliding scale, the refusal to coexist on equal terms with certain groups of people and the language of hate are also cited as typical indications of extremist attitudes.

Interestingly, in light of both Breivik's anti-feminism and rape being used as a weapon of war in the Balkan wars, the Christian-Muslim statement also includes religiously motivated violence against women in its broad definition of extremism: "Extremists use gender-based hierarchies and power structures in which women are denied human rights and human dignity on the same level as men."<sup>28</sup> In the context of Christian-Muslim dialogue, there might not be many other examples of the threat of extremism being so closely associated with gendered violence.

On the basis of this rather broad definition of religious extremism, the joint statement stresses the need "to identify and oppose tendencies to religious extremism as early as possible."<sup>29</sup> It issues a call to Christian and Muslim leaders summoning them to counter any sign of extremist thought and action—in their congregations as well as in the public debate. In consonance with the Contact Group's statement from two years before against violence in close relationships, religious leaders, congregations and assemblies are also urged "to oppose hateful descriptions and harassment of women."

## SECULAR LANGUAGE AND/OR GOD LANGUAGE?

As noted, the declaration against extremism inscribes itself in a secular discussion about how to understand and counteract religious extremism.

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<sup>27</sup> Joint Statement Opposing Religious Extremism, *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

Like the two previous declarations, it may also be said to represent a secular (i.e., not faith-specific) ethics of vulnerability.

Compared to the statements cited above, the statement against extremism more directly mobilizes religious resources. It identifies the inherent danger in forms of religious language that blurs the distinction between human and divine goals, leading to the repression of the vulnerable other:

Religious extremists put themselves in God’s place and believe that they are fighting on God’s behalf against God’s enemies. Religious extremism is therefore contrary to the teachings of our religions, especially with respect to the basic dignity and rights of all human beings.<sup>30</sup>

Although formulated as a (self-)critique of certain forms of religious language, the passage could also be read as a positive reference to faith in God which, as is reflected in the confessional formulas *deus semper major* or *allahu akbar* (God is greater), puts up a mental barrier against the tendency to identify one’s own goals with the will of God. From this perspective, so these Christians and Muslims declare, true faith in God may in fact become a protection of the vulnerable other:

The idea of forcing one’s opinions on others is fundamentally opposed to the responsibility and right which we believe God has given to all human beings, to make their own decisions.<sup>31</sup>

I believe all the above cited statements coming out of the Christian–Muslim dialogue in Norway to express a common language focused on rights and vulnerability. In a certain sense the language is secular in that it sensitively communicates in ways society generally communicates.

The language used in these declarations is clearly not hegemonic in the sense of defending the majority interest. In the context of interreligious dialogue, the Church of Norway, a majority church with seventy-five percent of the Norwegian population as its members, has made no attempt to label the values underlying the statements in question as Christian (or humanist, for that matter). On the other hand, one might of course ask whether the (unbranded) values of human rights, minority protection, individual integrity and feminism are felt by some to represent a secular discourse which mainstream religious leaders are expected to comply with.

As a way of public communication, interreligious dialogue seems to lean toward a common language for life in the *saeculum*. To the extent that reli-

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

gious resources are referred to in interfaith statements, they mainly serve to underpin a common (secular) argument which in the cited Norwegian cases seem to be heavily informed by the strong values in Scandinavian societies.

In comparison, the Muslim-Christian dialogue process known as “A Common Word between Us and You” which, in the aftermath of the Pope’s controversial Regensburg speech, was initiated in 2007 by a letter from Muslim leaders to Christian leaders worldwide, draws much more extensively on the resources of religious language.<sup>32</sup> “A Common Word’s” extensive quotes from the Qur’an and the Bible serve to illustrate various aspects of the double commandment of love, directed towards God and the neighbor respectively. In a couple of instances, the 2007 letter briefly mentions that the double commandment of love may be translated into general principles of religious freedom and social justice. But the nerve of “A Common Word’s” language is religious and the secular translation of the double commandment of love to religious freedom and social justice is made only in passing.

The thrust of the Norwegian declarations seems rather to be “secular” in that the main line of argument inscribes itself in dominant discourses in general society. As Faruk Terzić has argued, it is possible to deduct some implicit theological concerns from the seemingly secular language of the statements.<sup>33</sup> But it is also interesting to see how two of the declarations have added elements of a more explicitly religious discourse as reflected in the theological attachments to the statement on violence in close relationships and the direct mobilization of God-language in the declaration against religious extremism.

In this respect, the declarations touch in an interesting way on the discussion on the translation of religious concerns initiated by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas.

## A QUESTION OF TRANSLATION?

A common defense of vulnerable minorities may be expressed in a traditionally religious language. However, when Christians and Muslims (and other

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<sup>32</sup> Vebjørn Horsfjord, “Reaching for the Reset Button for Muslim Christian Relations: Recent Developments in the Common Word Process,” in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 21(1) (2011), 1–15.

<sup>33</sup> Faruk Terzić, “Theological Principles versus Secular Language: An Analysis of Joint Statements of the Council on Ecumenical and International Relations of the Church of Norway and Islamic Council of Norway,” in *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjonsvitenskap* (4) (2013), 233–47.

religious or secular citizens) arrive at common attitudes on crucial issues, it will often be expressed in a common language which, in accordance with my definitions above, may be termed secular. Focusing on common human values rather than on special religious interests, interreligious declarations often lean more on human rights-inspired language than on specifically religious resources.

Maybe one can go so far as to characterize this as a systemic feature of interreligious dialogue, namely that it reaches out for a common language which, in line with the word *saeculum*'s reference to our common life in this world, may well be characterized as secular.

But in what sense is this a necessary process? With reference to organized Christian–Muslim dialogue in Norway, it can be taken as a simple description of processes that have actually taken place. It might still be that the actors in question have consciously, and on a normative note, chosen to embrace the secular condition and its requirement of a common language.

From a contextual perspective, there may also be something in the Lutheran tradition of the Northern European countries that pull in the same direction. As Roger Jensen points out in his article “Secular Reason vs. Religious Feelings,”<sup>34</sup> the Lutheran tradition is bent on translating religious values into a common language, in tune with Luther’s understanding of the human being’s secular calling.<sup>35</sup> Many forms of religious dialogue seem in fact to lean toward the same direction: dialogue articulates not particularistic, religious discourses but a search for a commonly binding language. And when religious discourses are activated through dialogue, the goal is normally “to work one’s way to common parameters for thinking about humanity and society.”<sup>36</sup>

In this way, I will argue, forms of interreligious dialogue like the ones cited above meet Jürgen Habermas’s translation requirement for communication in the public sphere, in that religions and secular worldviews alike try to translate their concerns into a language in which public conversation can be performed.<sup>37</sup> Even though Habermas’s requirement of translation is primarily directed toward political and legal decision-making processes in society, it can also be seen as a much broader civil ideal, including the entire political communication within society:

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<sup>34</sup> Roger Jensen, “Sekulær fornuft vs. religiøse følelser,” in *Minerva* (2) (2008), 84–93.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Oddbjørn Leirvik, “Luthersk teologi I møte med andre religionar,” in *Magasin om Religionsmøde* 5 (2014), 49–60.

<sup>36</sup> Jensen, *op. cit.* (note 34), 92. Author’s own translation.

<sup>37</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere. Holberg Prize Lecture,” Bergen 2005, at [www.holbergprisen.no/images/materiell/2005\\_symposium\\_habermas.pdf](http://www.holbergprisen.no/images/materiell/2005_symposium_habermas.pdf).

The truth content of religious contributions can enter into the institutionalized practice of deliberation and decision making, only if the necessary translation already occurs in the pre-parliamentarian domain, i.e., in the political public sphere itself.<sup>38</sup>

But is this really a matter of translation, or have human rights language and other tropes associated with common ethics already become an integrated part of many believers' reasoning, at least in the Northern European context? For the Muslims' part, Cora Alexa Døving in an article about Norwegian hijab debates noticed that young Muslim women tend to argue for their right to wear the hijab not with reference to religious demands but to human rights principles and secular matters of individual choice.<sup>39</sup>

My experience from interreligious dialogue is that human rights language not only offers itself as a secondary common language but that human rights thought, by virtue of its orientation toward common humanity, also transforms large sections of the religions. In a process that the social anthropologist Tordis Borchgrevink has tentatively called "globalizing secularity,"<sup>40</sup> the utilization of human rights language by religious minorities in protection of their own minority interests may over time lead to a more principled embrace of human rights principles, applicable also to the situation of other groups and individuals under pressure.

Jürgen Habermas does not speak of a "globalizing secularity" but, rather, of a "post-secular society" in which both "secular" and "religious" citizens are ready to translate their concerns into a commonly understandable language. His translation requirement comes close to the ideal that John Rawls set up when he spoke of public reason and the duty of civility. Even though Rawls has mainly government representatives and the judiciary in mind he, too, underlines that ordinary citizens have a moral and political obligation to explain their beliefs in a language that everyone can understand ("[...] explain to other citizens their reasons for supporting fundamental political positions in terms of the political conception of justice they regard as the most reasonable."<sup>41</sup>)

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>39</sup> Cora Alexa Døving, "Religionens omveier—det sekulære argument i hijabdebattene," in Sindre Bangstad, Oddbjørn Leirvik and Ingvill Thorson Plesner (eds), *Sekularisme—med norske briller* (Oslo: Unipub, 2012), 25–46.

<sup>40</sup> Tordis Borchgrevink, "Globalizing Secularity? Human Rights Between Belief and the Pragmatics of Civility," in Sturla J. Stålsett and Oddbjørn Leirvik (eds), *The Power of Faith in Global Politics* (Oslo: Novus, 2004), 56–69.

<sup>41</sup> John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reasoning Revisited," in *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64 (3) (1997), 765–807, here 769.

In Rawls’s terminology, public reason differs from secular reason. Rawls sees secular reason as an expression of a comprehensive doctrine (i.e., secular humanism) which, just like religious belief, requires explanation and translation to a more general language. It is this common language that I (as distinct from Rawls) would call secular, as it seeks to articulate our common humanity and our obligations in a common life world.

My use of the term secularity also differs from Habermas’s notion of post-secular society. If secularity refers to a common language in a common world, secularity is not something that has to be modified or transcended in order to accommodate religious beliefs in public spaces. Secularity is, on the contrary, the social condition for the common language which inter-religious dialogue almost regularly reaches out for.

## WHO BENEFITS?

The crucial question, however, is to whose benefit a secular language is articulated. As indicated above, there is evidence that the dialogue between Christian and Muslim leaders in Norway has united the parties in a common concern for the difficult situation of religious minorities—whether related to the plights of the Muslim minority in Norway or the worsening situation of Christians in Pakistan (and other Muslim majority societies). In the Norwegian cases cited above, a joint concern for the precarious situation of individuals who may be threatened by their own religious groups is articulated in a language informed by secular human rights discourse as well as by an ethics of vulnerability, which makes sense in both religious and secular frameworks.

But which minorities and individuals under threat may enjoy a joint Christian–Muslim concern? In Christian–Muslim dialogue, a joint concern for sexual minorities is obviously more difficult to achieve than a shared commitment to religious minorities and a recognition of the difficult position of women in traditional religious cultures.

Perhaps, over time, a more general concern for vulnerable minorities will develop, in tune with the hate speech article in the Norwegian penal code (§ 135a), which protects sexual minorities on a par with ethnic and religious ones. From the perspective of secularity,<sup>42</sup> the question might be how far religious people are ready to go in accepting and defending individual choices not only of religion but also of lifestyles.

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Charles Taylor’s “conditions of belief”, *op. cit.* (note 2).





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Religious plurality is a vital element of many societies across the globe. Different visions of life and religious commitment not only shape people's private lives but have an intrinsic public dimension. Societies need to find ways to acknowledge and deal with this diversity in the public space. Religious communities and theologians are challenged to interpret their own traditions in ways that enable the constructive engagement with religious plurality. In this volume, Christian and Muslim scholars from different parts of the world together explore the meaning of public space. In relation to their contexts, they examine how public space can be understood as a shared space and discuss the meaning of secularity in plural societies.

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