



Centro de Estudios de Oriente Medio
Fundación Promoción Social de la Cultura

Draft for the Conference
***Religion: The missing dimension of the Diplomacy
and Politics in Middle East***

Instituto de Empresa
Sala semicircular
27, María de Molina St. (Madrid)
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Introduction:

The three great monotheistic religions have influenced politics, cultural identities and concepts of life over the course of centuries and will continue to do so for many years to come. This is especially true of the politics of the nations in the Middle East where, quite unlike in other parts of the world, the influence of religion upon society is increasing, rather than decreasing as it is, for example, in the West. In the Middle East, religion is, for Jews, Christians and Moslems, not an entirely private matter of conscience, isolated from other public matters, as it is in many other countries. In the Middle East, the cradle of monotheism and the Abrahamic faiths, religion has a profound impact on the politics and culture of its peoples and demonstrates enormous dynamism. Religion has, for the most part, been seen by political leaders, policy makers and diplomats around the world strictly in theological terms. Therefore they have often misread the importance of religion as a factor in international relations. There are misconceptions which distort the role of religion, considering it a marginal and a diminishing force in society. While the negative results of the intervention and influence of religious people in conflicts are widely recognized, their positive contributions to resolving conflicts and crises are less well known. Political leaders must explore the positive potential of religious influence on conflict resolution.

Many conflicts are rooted in clashes based upon deeply-rooted religious enmity and diplomacy is therefore not always suited to deal with their resolution. As it is evident to most that religions should encourage peace and harmony, diplomats should not neglect the important role of religious leaders who are loyal to the true spirit of their faith. These leaders guide the faithful in a positive way, transmitting the true message of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which is a message of peace.

We live in an era in which weapons of mass destruction are in the hands of a growing number of countries, including several unstable dictatorships. While there is no global threat that can compare to that which existed during the Cold War, today a whole host of local conflicts threaten the stability of entire regions and countries. We live in a time in which terrorism, especially when motivated by those who instrumentalize religion, has been elevated to the top of the international agenda. This is because the threat of accessibility to non-conventional weapons, whether chemical, biological or nuclear, is no longer the subject of science-fiction novels alone. The tragic consequence of violent action by certain fundamentalist groups is that walls of intolerance have been erected and the acts of terrorism demand increased attention. It is this violent action which represents today one of the greatest risks to international society and will likely continue to do so until well into the 21st century.

The religious components of some conflicts in the Middle East and the resurgence of movements which cause unspeakable misery in the name of God and religion can only be addressed by a permanent and profound dialogue amongst religions. Those efforts must strive toward overcoming misunderstandings and the deep-seated intolerance and bigotry that exists in so many quarters.

Inter-religious dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims is therefore of critical importance, not as a goal in itself, but rather as a means to find the way to coexistence and cooperation. Cooperation amongst believers in different religions is both necessary and possible if our common objective is a world in which peaceful coexistence will reign and if we believe that no war or violent action can be promoted in the name of religion. Politicians, diplomats and religious leaders should have as their joint objective the taking of every possible step to make a society more open to reconciliation, justice and, at the end of the day, peace.

The introduction of religious motives into a conflict generally means introducing elements that virtually preclude any reconciliation between the sides. A conflict based on nationalist rivalry is almost always open to a solution and eventually to compromise. The cynical exploitation of believers' faith has not been adequately addressed by the authentic spiritual leaders who teach the true values of their religions. They have not yet succeeded in becoming catalysts for genuine reconciliation in a context of peace.

Politicians, diplomats and religious leaders should cooperate in the transmission of a message of tolerance and appreciation -one that emphasizes that which unites people and respects what divides them. And also to prevent religion from being monopolized by unscrupulous extremists looking to utilize it for their own benefit and populists who propose easy and cheap solutions that are based, nearly always, on misery. As peoples of religious cultures, we should teach better communication, creating a new lexicon for dialogue and for sharing the treasures of our respective spiritual legacies.

Politicians and diplomats should assume a more active role in the promotion of inter-religious dialogue in order to try and overcome cultural and religious antagonism. This should be one of the most important issues on their agenda. We cannot ignore the potential of positive religious influence on people's consciences. Just as religions have been the catalysts for bloody conflicts, today they can help to solve them. Religions should be assigned a significant role in the development of dialogue and coexistence between peoples and communities. There is today a need for politicians and diplomats to try to find ways to resolve conflicts and tensions among religions that go beyond the existing mechanisms dealing with the source of the conflict.

Politicians and diplomats should recognize the constructive role they can play in making peace between religions. For example, they can encourage religious leaders and spiritual leaders in their respective countries, as well as abroad, to engage in efforts to promote peace and cooperation between the religions. If politicians and diplomats are aware of the importance of religions in making peace, they will be able to develop ways, formal and informal, to cooperate with religious leaders.

These ways include:

1. Identifying the root causes of international and local tensions;
2. Recognizing the defining character of spiritual elements in conflicts between peoples and communities;
3. Acting to prevent the ignoring of the importance of religion in the diplomatic system of analysis and in the political establishment;
4. Acting to encourage parliamentarians and government officials to become more involved in inter-religious relations.

Questions to debate:

- 1- Religion and identity of people in Middle East. The impact of religion in the culture and politics of their societies.
- 2- Resource utilization of religious identity.
- 3- War against religious totalitarianism, a battle to fight in schools, mosques, synagogues and churches.
- 4- Diplomacy and the role of religion in peace processes between peoples. Why do religious leaders are set apart from peace processes? Involvement of diplomacy.

Structure and disposition during the conference:

The conference will be divided into five sessions. Each session will tackle the questions described above, each one of the session will count with three speakers presenting their works and will be followed by a debate. Each session would last for 90 minutes. Last session will wrap up.

Each session will have a moderator-rapporteur, he/she will be an expert responsible for the content of the presentations and the final conclusions.

Duration, date and place:

The Seminar will be held in Madrid at the *Instituto de Empresa* (27, María de Molina St.) on the 1st and 2nd of April 2008.

Participants in the seminar:

It has been considered that the most appropriate number of participants would be 50 representatives from: the political world, the mass media, the academic world, the business world, the development agents and civil society agents.

The countries and organizations that will take part in the Seminar will be from Spain, United Kingdom, Italy, France, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Israel, United States and the European Union.

Visibility:

Brochures, posters and publication of minutes will clearly show the identity of the seminar's fund-raisers.

Technical structure of the seminar:

Language:

The seminar's organizers will provide a simultaneous-interpreting service for English and Spanish.

Organization of the panels:

Presentations will be fifteen minutes in duration. Please send your paper before the 28th of February to the seminar's technical office for subsequent publication.

Please attach a half-page CV.

Travel, accommodation and board expenses in Spain:

The seminar's technical office will take care of flight and rail bookings and payments from point of origin to Madrid, plus accommodation in Madrid throughout the duration of the seminar.

Contact person:

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