Papal Dialogue with Islam: A Long Way to Abu Dhabi, a Long Way to Peace

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The Abu Dhabi declaration's title "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together", signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, sparked public and political interest beyond the Catholic and Muslim faithful. When the leader of the Roman Catholic Church and the head of the most prestigious university for Muslim scholarship in Cairo come together on the soil of the Arabian Peninsula to declare peace, it is worth a second look and a political analysis. While for some the pope and the Grand Imam might represent self-reflexive religious voices worth listing to in a "post-secular political order" (Barbato and Kratochwil 2009) and others might see them as rather dark relicts of a pre-modern state of human development, everyone knows that Catholics and Muslims constitute a big and still growing part of the world population (currently three billion people). Dominating some regions, spreading almost everywhere, and clashing on some fault-lines, they have an impact on global politics, publics, and economy.

Celebrating Mass on Sacred Ground

The Arabian Peninsula, with its religious centers Mecca and Medina, is sacred ground for Islam (Hassner 2009). Some even think the land of the Prophet should be safe from infidel feet and their "idolatry". When in 1990, in the build-up of Desert Storm, American troops were deployed to the sacred ground of Saudi-Arabia, Osama Bin Laden took it as the trigger to break with the Saudi dynasty and their Wahabi clerics to declare war on Crusaders and traitors. While the United Arab Emirates have an established tolerant tradition of allowing Christians to worship, the Papal Mass, following the day after the declaration on the 4th of February 2019, was nevertheless a historical moment.

Almost thirty years after the Gulf War, almost twenty years after 9/11, and in the wake of the final fall of the self-declared Islamic caliphate, celebrating not only pope and peace, but a Christian liturgical ceremony in the public of a sport stadium is a strong indication that toleration is not only cheap talk but is put into practice. Instead of witnessing the black flag of the al-Baghdadi "Caliphate" being raised in St. Peter's Square, as the 4th issue Islamic State's Dabiq Magazine had on its cover in 2014, the world watched the pope invited to Arabia for a joyful celebration of peace.

Looking at the celebrating crowd, there is however an additional aspect to the story. It is the South and South East Asian workforce, constituting the vast majority of the population of the Arabian Peninsula, that is to a large portion Christian. Petro dollar and globalization triggered migration is not only hitting the Western home but also the Eastern. Tellingly, the declaration speaks not only of the coming together of East and West but conceptualizes the signing partners as "Muslims of the East and West" and the "Catholics of the East and West." The claimed outreach of the declaration is not limited to the Middle East region but addresses a global public.

A Helsinki Moment for the 21st century?

Certainly, one Papal Mass does not establish religious freedom and a society based on human rights. But accepting, among others, individual freedom, equal citizenship, and declaring that "efforts must be made to free women from historical and social conditioning [… and …] to modify those laws that prevent women from fully enjoying their rights" is not nothing.

Those who framed some decades ago the ongoing transformations and their turmoil as a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1993) or a “New Cold War” (Juergensmeyer 1993) might consider a Helsinki moment. During the old Cold War between the Free West and the Communist East, both blocs, and some non-aligned actors, including the Holy See, came together in 1975 in the Finish capital Helsinki to sign a final accord of principles guiding their relations, which included also a so-called “basket” of human rights, to which the subjects of communist rule could refer to in their transformation back into citizens. The revolution of 1989 rooted also in such a bare declaration like the one of Abu Dhabi, and arguably also in some papal visits behind the Iron Curtain.

However, among others things, comparing Abu Dhabi with Helsinki shows that the framing of a “New Cold War” and “Clash of Civilizations” were rather misleading. The current fault-line of East and West never constituted blocs. Religious leaders never managed to represent whole civilizations, let alone structuring East and West according to their doctrines and capabilities. Nevertheless, there is the chance that people within the cultural realms of the engaging religions and deprived from their human rights can refer to the points of the declaration. Constructing a discourse is not cheap talk. The discursive aim of the declaration restricts itself, however, not to the Middle East or the Muslim world. The pope is also not the agent or ally of the West who acts behind the frontline. The signing partners have their own story to tell.

Pope Francis Continues to Seize the Middle Ground

The signing parties present the trust in and the will of the Almighty as the center of their declaration. Attached to that discursive center are all the issues of social justice, human rights, environmental protection, solidarity with migrations, and all the good things that should come together. But that stands not alone. Within the ongoing confrontations of the cultural wars waged by liberalism against traditional world views on family and life, the signing partners are very outspoken about their own position:

the family as the fundamental nucleus of society and humanity is essential in bringing children into the world, raising them, educating them, and providing them with solid moral formation and domestic security. To attack the institution of the family, to regard it with contempt or to doubt its important role, is one of the most threatening evils of our era.

It is not primarily the case that two conflicting partners come to settle and make peace. Bridging an alleged clash between two religious world views is here not the dominant issue. The declaration is rather framed as a further step in the ongoing exercise of seizing a middle ground in the global public discourse. The fundamental assumption is that this common ground is not secular but interreligious, not individualistic but based on the values of family and tradition. On that basis the modern crisis should be matched and liberal and solidarist aims should be reached. Religious extremism legitimizing violence in the name of God is strongly and persuasively condemned. But this kind of extremism is not the only one which is rejected. The exercise of seizing a middle ground needs also an adversary on the other side of the spectrum. That role is in the declaration ascribed to individualism and materialism, as the declaration explains

that among the most important causes of the crises of the modern world are a desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values and a prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies that deify the human person and introduce worldly and material values in place of supreme and transcendental principles.

Coming together on that common ground does not end the struggle of liberalism and traditional world views but allows two religious communities to relativize their conflicts in the perspective of more dangerous enemies: religious terrorism and materialist individualism.

The declaration is an offer but also a challenge to the global public. The signing partners address their declaration to “intellectuals, philosophers, religious figures, artists, media professionals and men and women of culture in every part of the world”. They promise that they will bring in the principles of their declaration to all high-level dialogues with other partners – and, indeed, Pope Francis and the Grand Iman do much travelling and dialoguing.

Pope Benedict XVI’s Regensburg Lecture and Pope Saint John Paul II’s Legacy

Seeking to seize a middle ground is an established praxis of the Holy See. The papal dialogue with Islam is a particular fruitful field of this endeavor. It roots deeply in the struggle of the papacy with liberal modernity and the effort to establish a sustainable position of its own. The alliance with Islam started in the pre-1989 struggle with communism but targeted also from early on balancing liberal materialism. Pope Saint John Paul II addressed particularly young Muslims in the Mohammed V Stadium in Casablanca in 1985, established the format of interreligious meetings in Assisi 1986, fought hard to avoid any siding with America's war in the Middle East after 1990, and was able to form a Catholic-Muslim coalition at the UN Conference on Population 1994 in Cairo in order to fight any inclusion of abortion into the definition of reproductive health –that was the last time that this previously regular format – every ten years – has been held.

Remembered for the reaction to an Islam-critical quote of a bygone Byzantine emperor, Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg Speech seems to stand for the clash between civilizations. Surprisingly, the structure of Regensburg Speech is, indeed, the ideal type of sizing that kind of middle ground on which the interreligious dialogue with Islam is based. In that address, Benedict XVI challenged Islam by critically pointing to the violence of religious extremism whilst he also targeted, with the same criticism, his favored enemy relativism. Reason and faith can come together to form a common ground if both form of extremisms – liberal relativism and religious voluntarism – are avoided.

Pope Francis' 2017 Address in Cairo at the Al-Azhar Conference Centre, the crucial step before the joint Abu Dhabi declaration, sets another tone. However, the basic structure of establishing an interreligious common ground that rejects violence in the name of God but places God in the center of the global public encounter reflects the same structure. The misleading Byzantine emperor's quote out of a Muslim-Christian dialogue is replaced by the dialogue of St. Francis of Assisi meeting Sultan Malik al Kamil in Egypt. Replacing the Byzantine Emperor with St. Francis as the role model for interreligious dialogue is certainly a wise move that has worked particularly well in 2019 when this encounter between the Saint and the Sultan had its 800th anniversary.

A Long Way to Jerusalem

Certainly, it has been a long way to Abu Dhabi. The constant signaling of the Holy See towards the Muslim community that there is and will not be any papal crusade finally bears fruit. Wider branches of Muslim elites seem to trust that the popes will not exploit the turmoil of the region following the adaptations and transformation Islam is going through due to the challenges of modernity. Apparently, they rather see a chance that Catholics and Muslim balance together the risks of a rootless cosmopolitanism and religious terrorism in a globalized world otherwise driven by technologies and markets. It is not clear to what extent the exercise of seizing a middle ground of self-reflexive religious communities in the global village will impact on those extremists who need the Holy See as a strawman to whom they can project their fantasies of a crusader in order to legitimize their violence. The established elites who embrace Pope Francis in their struggle for legitimacy take a risk that might backfire. Taking that risk shows, however, that they are willing to separate themselves from extremism and trust that images with Pope Francis might rather help to win than risk to lose public legitimacy. In that sense, Abu Dhabi marks a milestone on the way to peace.

Shortly, after the Abu Dhabi visit, Pope Francis was back in the Muslim world meeting the King of Morocco and issuing another important appeal. The Pope and the King, who claims to be a descendant of the prophet, declared that Jerusalem should be an open city for the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This latter declaration has been issued also in the context of the US-American acceptance of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, which has caused protest by the Holy See. Interreligious dialogue, while aiming at peace between all Abrahamic religions, might thus at times look like a realpolitik coalition of two partners against an odd one out. To balance matters, it would be good to also produce strong pictures of Catholic-Jewish relations. Nonetheless, it is a particularly long way to peace if one were to imagine peace in the sense of Isaiah's vision of the nations' wayfaring to Mount Zion where the lion and the lamb stand together and the child plays near the snake hole. Papal dialogue with Islam will not solve all problems but the way to Abu Dhabi has had an impact on the public and political constellation of world politics: it is a reference point to mitigate Christian-Muslim tensions and it is an offer of religious perspectives to the global public.

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