

Workshop: “The Use of (Holy) Scripture in Conflict Resolution”

Beirut, Lebanon, March 10, 2006

Report

On the occasion of the annual meeting of its international Board, Globethics.net held a regional workshop on the topic of “the Use of (Holy) Scriptures in Conflict Resolution” at Beirut, Lebanon. This workshop was organised in close cooperation between the Globethics.net secretariat and its Lebanese partner institution, the *Forum for Development, Culture, and Dialogue FDCD* (see www.fccd.org), an NGO specialising and very experienced in conflict resolution and dialogue related matters. FDCD is also the host institution of the Arab Group for Muslim-Christian Dialogue, which plays an important role in current peace and reconciliation processes in the Middle East area. Located very centrally in the city of Beirut, the workshop was held at the conference facilities of the Near East School of Theology (NEST).

In three subsequent sessions, the workshop addressed both the descriptive and the normative aspects of the overall topics, focussing respectively on the Muslim and the Christian perspectives regarding the use of their religious scriptures. A general perspective on the Christian peace ethics aspect was added in a third session by a Globethics.net board member, and a concluding session served for the intense discussion of the issues raised in the various contributions.



Beirut today: Destructions of the civil war period

1. Participants

More than 40 participants attended the workshop. They were invited, on the local level, by the FDCD secretariat. Invitations were sent out to more than 70 potential participants, addressed to individuals active in the academic, the civil society and the religious leadership realm, as well as from International Organisations and NGO's. Nine participants were members of the international Globethics.net board and the secretariat staff. Some participants in the workshop were students from either NEST or from Lebanese universities, adding to a fruitful mixture of persons attending, with a good female/male ratio (more than 35% of the

participants were female). Furthermore, the contribution by the Lebanese minister of culture, Dr. Tarek Mitri, attracted the interest of several media representatives. Articles on the workshop and Dr. Mitri's contribution were published in the March 11 edition of some local newspapers.

2. Content

2.1 Starting Point: The challenge of the use of scriptural and religious arguments for the resolution of conflicts

It is undisputed that the recourse to religious arguments represents a frequent strategy. It is also no matter of discord that this often constitutes a challenge for attempts of successful conflict resolution: On the one hand, the recourse to scriptures tends to harden the positions of the conflict parties and thus makes it impossible for them to accept the claims made by their adversaries. On the other hand, the recourse to scriptural arguments often emphasises passages in the holy scriptures that underline the dividing factors of religion, in which they separate between the fidel and the infidel, the right and the wrong. Yet most holy scriptures also stress positive attitudes to the resolution of conflicts, insofar as they urge conflicting parties to solve their disputes non-violently and highlight the concepts of reconciliation and humanity

The workshop intended to establish, in the first session, a clear picture of whether the Lebanese experience is a case in point for these different uses of scriptures and religious arguments in conflict resolution. To what extent were the conflicts in Lebanon supported by the recourse to scriptures and religious precepts? And to what extent can the recourse to such sources be fruitful in the current initiatives – carried out mostly on the civil society level – of reconciliation and dialogue between former and current conflict parties. As the discussions at the workshop showed, peacebuilding in the Lebanese context is very much linked to the building of mutual trust, necessarily embracing the acceptance of mutually held religious beliefs. As the summary of the addresses in this section – presented below – will demonstrate, the workshop showed an interesting reluctance by many participants to address the Lebanese situation in clear terms, as this was judged to be overwhelmingly complicated and as there exists a certain fatigue among the various actors to constantly address their divergent interpretations of the issues at stake.

However, the main interest of the workshop obviously was with the ethical questions related to the topic. Hence the contributions and discussions not only tackled the issue as to whether scriptures and religious arguments in general can be used and are used in conflict resolution. Much more, they asked whether they should be given more or less consideration, whether – for reasons of the “danger” they may represent for successful peacebuilding – they should be

set aside in mediation and reconciliation processes or whether, on the contrary, no claim to appropriate conflict transformation can be made without letting religious arguments be expressed and integrated in the agreements found. In addition, the workshop also intended to clarify to which extent the recourse to debates is (theologically) permitted within the different religions and denominations. If so, furthermore, the addresses were also intended to give an answer on what role scriptural arguments can legitimately play in a given theological approach.

The workshop confirmed that an important part of doing ethics – especially in the realm of applied ethics – is to identify the ethical questions and to separate them from the mere descriptive and empirical analysis. Hence large parts of the conversations in the workshop were devoted to this very endeavour.



A second session, therefore, aimed at addressing the normative issues in the perspective of both a Muslim (Sunni) scholar and researcher and a Christian theologian and religious scientist, in order to explore the topic with a particular link, again, to the Lebanese situation. A third session, based on the contribution by an

American member of the Globethics.net board, was intended to add a perspective from outside of the Middle Eastern context to the debate by presenting some general thoughts on the relation between the recourse to scriptures and conflict resolution in a current interpretation of Christian theological ethics.

The fourth session finally, a general discussion preceded by a brief comment on the debates presented by a workshop participant, served to summarise the discussions and to turn to open questions, as well as to conclusions with regard to both the actual topic of the workshop and the method of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue on ethical topics the workshop was engaged in.

2.2 Main speeches and comments

SESSION 1



In his welcoming remarks, the executive director of FDCD, *Mr. Samuel Rizk*, briefly pointed to the necessity of more in-depth studies in the realm of the workshop topic, as it is a very current feature, particularly in the present context of Lebanon – but also of the Middle East in a more general sense – that scriptures and religious arguments in fact *are* used in many political debates and that they have their impact on both the ways conflicts are handled and on the emergence of new confrontations. *Prof. Dr. George Sabra*, dean of NEST, wel-

comed the participants on behalf of his institution and explained briefly its interdenominational nature. In a last introductory address, *Prof. Dr. Christoph Stückelberger*, chairperson of Globethics.net, not only summarised the aim and the purpose of the network, but also underlined the need he felt, as the director of an important church-related study institution in a European country such as Switzerland, to focus further on the issue of religious, but also of anti-religious discourse in the public sphere. Ignorance and disdain are sources of fears and slowly lead to a critical role our dealing with religions and religious arguments in the European context start to play.

The opening address was given by *His Eminence Dr. Tarek Mitri*, who is currently the minister of culture of the Republic of Lebanon and who was presented, by some participants, as “the man of the culture of dialogue in Lebanon” today. Dr. Tarek Mitri first mentioned the diversity of origins of conflicts today: Some



are rooted in nationalism, others are motivated by ethnic claims, while others are caused by economic injustice. In this context, religion rarely appears as a source, but rather as an intensifier of conflict. Yet, Dr. Mitri stressed, the perception of conflicts by the people is much influenced by the discourse in the media: The use of religious terminology to describe and analyse conflicts in the media might increase the spiral of violence, favour the escalation of a conflict within a country, or increase the likelihood of its spreading from one country to another. Therefore, Dr. Mitri suggested, religious dialogue should not confine itself to an “exchange of niceties”, or to exegesis. Rather, Christians and Muslims should work together at redefining the real causes and nature of today’s conflicts. More important, when doing so, believers might cross communal divisions and understand that they do not belong to their religious group only, but also to humanity.



Answering to Dr. Mitri’s address, *Rev. Dr. Riad Jarjour*, the president of the FDCD board, recalled that scriptures are, in the present reality of the Middle East, often used to justify violence, but that this happens with an often eclectic or incoherent manner of having recourse to the texts. He therefore answered one of the major questions raised by the workshop by highlighting that the use of scriptures, understood and practised as the precise discussion of the written texts, is necessary to prevent scriptural arguments from being abused for the justification and the exacerbation of conflicts and violence. He stressed the chances of societal and religious pluralism, in particular for the indispensable mutual acceptance of religious identities, an acceptance being at the roots of the reduction of the fear and the ignorance of “the other” (perceived, therefore, often as “the enemy”), which he identified to be an important source feeding several conflicts today. Religious institutions therefore would have the duty to work together and combat such ignorance.



From the perspective of a conflict resolution practitioner and against the backdrop of 15 years of experience in the Lebanese context, *Mr. Ousama Safa*, an important member of the Arab Partnership for Conflict Prevention and Human Security, pointed to the fact that religion is much stronger at feeding conflict, than at resolving it. Being a “peace making practitioner”, Mr. Safa pointed to the double face of the conflict as such: If conflict certainly is a danger, it can also be an opportunity. In order to reach peace in a conflict situation, all parties should first agree on common values, such as forgiveness, empathy, or tolerance. Such a healthy process might be more important than the solution itself. Then, to resolve the conflict itself, one shall fulfil basic human needs: Food, security, but also the need for identity markers such as religion. Otherwise one might return to war.

SESSION 2

All addresses in the second session, which aimed at addressing the normative aspects of the topic in a Lebanese perspective, were given in Arabic. The simultaneous interpretation, provided at the conference facility by two professional interpreters, allowed each participant, however, to follow the presentations without any effort. The chair of the second session, *Prof. Abbas Al-Halabi*, pointed in his introductory remarks to the danger of fanaticism, that the current situation in Lebanon presents and that became apparent in the riots of February 2006, following the publication of the Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohammed. He therefore highlighted – very much along the lines of Dr. Jarjour’s opinion – that mutual understanding represents a prerequisite for the fight against fanaticism and the conflicts to which it can lead, and that mutual understanding requires the willingness to cultivate mutual interest and mutual knowledge. Mutual knowledge, however, always represents knowledge of each other’s religions. The speakers in the second session, Prof. Halabi pointed out, were particularly well placed to serve as facilitators for the improvement of precisely the knowledge required to understand each other.



As a first speaker, *Dr. Wajih Kanso*, Director of the Oriental Centre for Islamic Studies at the National University of Lebanon, presented a challenging address calling for a more differentiated understanding of the Qur’an and a more analytic approach to the text it contains. In particular, Kanso addressed two main points of interest for the topic debated:

(i) In the first place, he pointed out that almost all holy scriptures – regardless of the religion they are related to – tell histories of violence and reconciliation, and that they can, thus, be used both for the exacerbation of conflicts and for the promotion of peace. In the history of Islam, Kanso mentioned, there were first phases where Muslims were – very much like the early Christians – forbidden to fight, and it was only slowly that the necessity to fight infidels, and the whole concept of Jihad, was introduced in the Muslim teaching.

(ii) In the major part of his talk, Kanso analysed the phenomenon that represents, according to him “the beauty and the danger of the Qur’an alike”, namely the fact that it has many facets, and that it comprises several layers. Behind the apparent meaning, it often has an underlying meaning which is open to interpretation. Therefore, he underlined with regard to the passages referring to violence and peace, the reading of the Qur’an always depends a lot on the historical context in which it is practised. Mostly, the Qur’an is read in a way that dates back to the context of the period between the 2nd and the 5th century after the prophet, and it represents, according to Kanso, one of the greatest challenges for contemporary Islamic scholars that they failed so far to break through with a reformist reading competing the classical interpretation. Yet the context in which the scriptures and teachings emanated at that period, Kanso argued, was very different from the contemporary situation.

The ethical challenge arising from Kanso’s analysis – which reaches beyond Islam and the Muslim world to most religions – is that theologically, the urge for a dynamic and context-sensitive reading of the scriptures, which would constitute a necessary prerequisite to give room for the peaceful meanings they entail, would have to be prioritised. However, conservative interpretations remain often more powerful and somehow also more attractive to both the scholars and the believers, as they rely much more on a world-view based on the “either/or” distinction – a reliance that seems to be deeply rooted in human nature.

Following Wajih Kanso, *Dr. Issa Diab*, Lecturer at St. Joseph University and Director of the Arab Studies Centre in Jordan, presented a Lebanese Christian perspective on the issue. He proceeded to a theological explanation of the use people can and should make of their holy texts, pointing out that Christianity can find in the Bible normative precepts, such as the love of the enemy, to resolve conflicts. Those texts in the Old Testament, that tell the violent appropriation of lands, are to be read as reflecting the process of civilisation they refer to. However, the challenge, Diab underlined, is to reach the necessary contextualisation of the interpretations, for which he recommended to adopt, within all Christianity, the scientific methods as established by the history criticism approach.



Reacting to both addresses, *Fr. Dr. George Massouh*, Director of the Bureau of Muslim and Christian Studies at Balamand University, raised the concern that the influence of scriptural

arguments, as well as the actual use made of scriptures in conflicts, should not be idealised. Scriptures, according to him, are used in the course of emerging conflicts and it seems to be clear that particularly the religious people are not innocent in this move. Massouh pointed out that a humanistic approach to scriptural precepts would be necessary if religions would like to become motors of the promotion of peace, as apparently they could be. He therefore called for a common understanding of the necessity to evaluate humanistic influence on religions more positively in order to arrive at a stage in which religions can have a more peaceful and reconciliatory impact on human behaviour.



The animated discussion that followed the presentation referred on the one hand to the apparent difficulty on behalf of the speakers to link their analyses to the precise Lebanese context, and, on the other hand, to the claim for humanistic approaches to the religious realm put forward by Fr. Massouh. With regard to the first, both speakers admitted that a certain tendency to stick to the presentation of more general perspectives had to do with the complexity of the Lebanese situation, in which, however, the presence of religious arguments was judged not to play a decisive role. As Wajih Kanso pointed out, the multiplicity of cultures and religions that characterises Lebanon, and that represents both a chance and a challenge, has made it impossible so far to develop a common identity and a common reading of the more recent historical events and evolutions. As an answer to the second line of questions, Issa Diab defended his own point of view as embracing the humanistic approach, as he explicitly called in his presentation for a “humanisation” in reading the Bible. Fr. Massouh added to his claim, that unlike Europe, the Lebanese situation was also characterised by the fact that there was, so far, precisely no ability to make good use of the humanist lines of thought.

SESSION 3



The third session, placed at the beginning of the afternoon, was chaired by *Prof. Dr. Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar*, a Globethics.net board member. In her introductory remarks, she recapitulated briefly the main points of the debates in the morning by linking them to her context of contemporary India.

In her main address outlining a general Christian perspective on the use of scriptures in conflict resolution, *Prof. Dr. Heidi Hadsell*, Professor of Social Ethics and President of Hartford Seminary, emphasised three main points:

(i) In a first instance, she underlined the importance of refraining from generalising statements on the use of scriptures in conflict resolution – put forward repeatedly in the morning sessions – as each context proves to be different from the others with regard to the precise

role the religious background play. Nevertheless, she stressed, there are examples where the peacemaking teachings of the Bible can clearly be identified as the *motivating principles* for communities of people who had major impacts in the resolution or the transformation of particular conflicts, such as the St. Egidio community in the case of Moçambique. This role of scripture, as the source of motivation for peace-promoting behaviour, was referred to by Hadsell as one of the main positive effects that can be expected from the recourse to religious teachings in the realm of conflict resolution. However, this reading of the fact that the “larger Christian story” can influence the concrete actions also presupposes, as Hadsell acknowledged, an understanding of the religious life and ethics in particular that sees the scriptural basis as just one source of information among others.



(ii) As a second point, she highlighted the fact that the peace-centred teachings that were emphasised in the Christian tradition inspired a move that is often neglected when the issue is debated: The insistence on the promotion of peace, she argued, was such a dominant theme in Christianity, that gradually those who decided to move away from this focus felt to have the onus of justification on their side. Obviously, the emergence of just war reasoning and its re-discovery in the second half of the 20th century are the visible outcome of this move.

(iii) As a third major element, Hadsell recalled that each recourse to the Christian scriptural concepts of peacemaking and conflict resolution was incomplete if the close relationship between peace and justice, their interdependence outlined constantly in the biblical texts, were not sufficiently taken into account. According to the biblical precepts, peacemaking that ignores the demands of justice would not be faithful to the Christian call to acknowledge the richness of genuine peace.



Answering Hadsell's address, *Prof. Dr. George Sabra* raised the concern that the question debated at the workshop was somehow asked wrongly, as it became apparent, according to him, in the contributions of the day: The Lebanese context, Sabra argued, is a case in point for the fact that not only readings of scriptures in different religions, but also different readings of the same scriptures can in fact be a major source of conflict. Ethically, therefore, the call would be not to ask first about whether the same texts can be used for the resolution of conflicts, but to understand “when, how and why” these texts represent such sources of discord and violence. The first imperative, Sabra claimed, would be to create a culture of refusal to make recourse to scriptures for generating conflictive behaviour.

The discussion that followed the two addresses pointed on the one hand to the precise understanding of the intrinsic linkage between peace and justice as outlined by Heidi Hadsell, mainly in situations where the two seem to be mutually exclusive, i.e. where a genuine *just* peace is out of reach. On the other hand, the question was raised how the move away from the recourse to scriptures and religious arguments, as called for by George Sabra, was to be realised, if it is one of the characteristics of religions that they represent binding forces for the believers. In particular, the question was raised whether it would not represent, for many religions, already a certain use of “religion” to urge that scriptural and religious arguments be omitted in public and political discourse.

2.3 Closing discussion

The workshop was closed by a two-hours general discussion on the issues raised, which served to draw some conclusions on the one hand and to formulate the open questions on the other.

One set of conclusive remarks was concerned with the concrete Lebanese situation. The importance of religions and the due recourse to religious arguments was stressed as an important feature of the current process of building national



identities. This process faces the challenge of being confronted to overlapping identities, composed in most cases of an ethnic, a religious, and a national element. The recourse to scriptures and religion as “identity markers” therefore, it was said, represents both a necessity for the people and a potential danger for the emergence of a culture of peaceful conflict transformation. As *Fadi Abi-Allam* – a local peace activist with over 25 years of experience – mentioned, it is precisely this identity factor scriptures represent that makes their use indispensable in conflict transformation: There cannot be no recourse to religious texts, as they are also frequently employed in the course of the conflicts and as the clarification of some interpretations may represent an important step towards peaceful change. However, indeed, the main challenge for the present context should be seen in the necessity of effective arms control instruments, whereas theological and hermeneutical issues play, according to Abi-Allam, much more a secondary role.

In this situation, Dr. Kanso added, the standards for the interpretation of scriptures to be applied – which can well be phrased as ethical standards pertaining to scriptural hermeneutics –, nevertheless play a crucial role. This means acknowledging the pluralisms for which the various religions, including Islam according to his own researches, allow and to accept the manifold ways in which interpretation of scriptures can be done. This could be seen as an

application of Tarek Mitri’s call to change the focus from the “use” of scriptures to the issue of how the scriptures are speaking to us.

Another set of conclusions referred to the fact that the workshop made clear that standards in hermeneutics – which were at the centre of quite many parts of the debates – constitute themselves an issue of ethical relevance. Although the context of Lebanon led many participants to the opinion that the use of scriptures in conflict resolution was of less importance compared to the analysis of its role in conflict exacerbation, it became visible that the general question of whether and how scriptures and religious arguments can and ought to influence conflict resolution processes in a positive way is indeed of a certain relevance in all contexts where the recourse to scriptures played a role during open confrontations.



A third set of conclusive statements, finally, referred to the methodology of intercultural dialogue on ethical issues. The workshop constantly oscillated between pragmatic, empirical, hermeneutical and normative aspects of the issue, as it is often the case in debates on the ethical questions pertaining to a topic that reaches far beyond the mere normative level. As some discussants pointed out, the methodology of the workshop clearly showed that the joint process of identifying the ethical questions represents itself a first step of doing ethics, particularly in the international and intercultural setting. However, it also became apparent that the common understanding of how and where normativity comes to play a role and how normativity can be understood does represent one aspect of both intercultural and inter-religious dialogue.

3. Conclusions

The workshop was perceived by most participants as a success, raising the important relevant to the topic. For FDCD, the officials said, the workshop brought the opportunity to launch discussions around a topic that was of crucial relevance for the work on the ground, but that had not been tackled enough so far. For Globethics.net, the workshop showed both the value of regional workshops even for the global focus the initiative intends to give its activities in general and the importance of investing time and efforts into the development of specific capacities in the realm of the methodology for global dialogue in ethics. As the closing discussion in particular showed, the issue of how scriptures ought to be used for the resolution of conflicts, especially when they were used for the exacerbation of tensions beforehand, remains to be debated among scholars and practitioners, in order to develop sustainable strategies and to be able to make use of the peaceful potential of scriptures and religious arguments.