

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Conflict Resolution and Interreligious Encounter

5-8 September 2023 | St Edmund's College, Cambridge, UK.

The conference was inaugurated by Professor Ralf Wüstenberg and Dr Zeina Barakat, European Wasatia Graduate School for Peace and Conflict Resolution who welcomed the participants, set the context, outlined the aims of the meeting and reflected on the urgent need for inter-faith dialogue as an avenue for conflict resolution.

The first substantive presentation was a discussion of a recent volume, “Subcontractors of Guilt: Holocaust Memory and Muslim Belonging in Post-War Germany”, written by Professor Esra Ozyurek, Sultan Qaboos Professor of Abrahamic Faiths and Shared Values, and Director of the Cambridge Interfaith program, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge. Whilst the material discussed had a German focus, the presentation ranged far and wide in relation to how guilt can act as a basis for identity construction and memory formation in several other jurisdictions. A revealing aspect was the evaluation of several social psychological theories and contentions for the predisposition of certain societies to engage in mass violence and genocide. These theories derived from American social science advances in the sixties and seventies and were not necessarily generally accepted as a basis for accurate representation of periods of collective violence and hatred. A safer basis was the social structural and historical trajectory of societies such as Germany in the 1930s, having suffered defeat in the First World War and harboring a number of grievances. There followed a very lively and informed discussion where participants related the themes of the volume to their own particular situations in Palestine and Israel as well as contemporary Germany.

In the afternoon of Wednesday, 6th of September, we had the privilege of visiting the Cambridge Central Mosque with Dr. Timothy Winter, Shaykh Zayed Lecturer in Islamic Studies at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge.

The visit was both enlightening and informative, providing valuable insights into the history, architecture, and the complex interplay between religion and conflict.

History of Cambridge Central Mosque

The Cambridge Central Mosque, officially opened in 2019, represents a significant milestone in the history of Islamic architecture in the United Kingdom. Situated on Mill Road, Cambridge, it is a remarkable blend of contemporary design and traditional Islamic elements.

The Mosque project began in the early 2000s, with the local Muslim community's desire to establish a place of worship that could also serve as a center for interfaith dialogue and community engagement. The largest proportion of Cambridge's Muslim believers were drawn from the Bangladeshi community, followed by those from the Middle East and North Africa. However, the project faced numerous challenges, including financial constraints, planning permission issues, and concerns from some sections of the local community.

Design by a Jewish Architect

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Cambridge Central Mosque is that it was designed by David Marks, a Jewish architect. This choice of an architect from a different religious background underscores the project's commitment to inclusivity and interfaith understanding. Marks' design seamlessly incorporates Islamic architectural elements while ensuring the Mosque harmonizes with the surrounding urban landscape.

Struggles in Building the Mosque

The struggle to build the Cambridge Central Mosque reflects broader challenges faced by Muslim communities in Western countries. Resistance from some residents and planning authorities raised questions about the extent of religious freedom and the place of Islamic institutions in Western societies. Dr. Timothy Winter emphasized during our visit that this struggle for acceptance and integration is a recurring theme in the history of Islam in the West.

Discussion on Religion and Conflict

During our visit, Dr. Winter engaged in a thought-provoking discussion with the PhD students from the University of Flensburg and Fellows from the University of Cambridge. The conversation centered around the role of religion in conflicts, drawing parallels between historical conflicts rooted in religious differences and contemporary issues, such as Islamophobia and religious extremism.

Key points of discussion included:

Religion as a Catalyst: Dr. Winter emphasized that while religion has often been cited as a cause of conflict, it is often a catalyst rather than the root cause. Economic, political, and social factors often underlie religious conflicts.

Interfaith Dialogue: The Mosque serves as a platform for interfaith dialogue, promoting understanding and cooperation among people of different religious backgrounds. Such initiatives were seen as crucial in reducing religious tensions.

Educational Initiatives: Scholars discussed the importance of education in combating religious prejudice and fostering tolerance. Dr. Winter highlighted the role of institutions like the Faculty of Divinity in promoting religious literacy and dialogue.

Community Engagement and Sustainable Development: The Mosque's commitment to community engagement was lauded as a way to break down barriers and dispel misconceptions about Islam. Its tripartite structure of an outer courtyard, inner courtyard and central worship space enabled local residents to relax in the peaceful surroundings of the front-facing garden, while the inner courtyard was designed to handle the flow of often more than a thousand worshippers at prayers and services. Additional private rooms for discussion and meetings together with a spacious café area completed the layout. Of particular note was the dedication of the design team to the principles of sustainable development as both the materials chosen and the natural lighting enable the Mosque authorities to reduce their energy consumption and minimize their impact on the local environment.

Interim Conclusion

The visit to Cambridge Central Mosque, accompanied by Dr. Timothy Winter, provided valuable insights into the history, architecture, and the ongoing struggle for acceptance faced by Muslim communities in the West. It also facilitated a stimulating discussion on the complex relationship between religion and conflict and the potential for interfaith dialogue and understanding to promote peace and harmony in diverse societies. The Cambridge Central Mosque stands as a symbol of hope and inclusivity, demonstrating the power of architecture and education in fostering religious tolerance and coexistence.

The sessions on Thursday 7 September were initiated by a warm welcome from Dr Vittorio Montemaggi, Director of the Von Hügel Institute for Critical Catholic Inquiry, and Professor Ulrich Glassmann, Vice President for Europe and International, Europa Universität, Flensburg. Prof Glassman observed that the question of peace is a special topic for any European university. Celebrations of Europe day provides a constant reminder not only of its miraculous establishment, but also its fortifying elements nowadays. In the words of Schuman, Europe today will not fall into war so easily again. Flensburg Europa Universität is located on the border with Denmark, situated along a former territorial zone of struggle and conflict for decades. The university's location had enabled it to achieve an international status, and it is engaged in teaching students on both sides of the border.

Dr Vittorio Montemaggi, Director of the Von Hügel Institute for Critical Catholic Inquiry

His central motive was a series of reflections on the word encounter. He argued that all too often a profound sense of responsibility can be lost or undervalued in our academic work since publication seems to be the most important element. Academic work encourages a detachment between the writer and her/his ideas. Enabling a greater sense of responsibility towards the academic community can help to resolve this issue. Alternatively, within the cultural context, encounters which enable the sharing of moments can be given another meaning. Key ideas that bring the community together can encourage a partial resolution of these circumstances and foster a sense of

truthfulness for us and our relationships. Community encounters can also raise important questions- such as what is peace? Is it essentially the absence of conflict or is it something more purposive which requires constant vigilance and action?

A Discussion on Scriptural Reasoning led by Dr Daniel Weiss, Polonsky-Coexist Senior Lecturer in Jewish Studies, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge

Dr Weiss outlined the advantages of scriptural text reasoning which he described as a method for enabling dialogue between and within different faiths. It was initiated in the United States in the 90's, by Jewish and Christian scholars, who advanced the notion that by employing such reasoning they could better understand and approach the particular text in view. An important further development was when Muslim scholars were engaged in the process which enabled the triple actor encounter to reveal new insights which strengthened the method of interpretation. Both Cambridge and Virginia were the pioneers of this method, but the university which has fully endorsed this method within its curriculum and pedagogical approach has been Tübingen University. It was observed that the method does not insist that participants necessarily speak from a position of authority. Indeed, this openness for dialogue by any and all is one of its unique attributes for religious conversation. By employing this method participants are prompted to ask under what conditions we can create a better conversation.

Other attributes and conditions enabled by the method include:

- 1) Texts are chosen from each faith. Should only two of the three faiths be represented in the conversation then a third potential text can be identified and employed in a future conversation.
- 2) Short passages, that one can grasp easily.
- 3) Each passage to be read out aloud.
- 4) To give in footnotes a brief context for each passage.
- 5) Focus on the details of the text itself and not allow the discussion to stray to idiosyncratic topics.

- 6) A reminder there one cannot claim exclusive ownership of interpretive power of one's own faith' text, quite the opposite tendency is encouraged.
- 7) There is no requirement to reach a consensus or any agreement, the paramount virtue is the willingness and ability to listen.
- 8) The benefit is to have a better understanding of the basis of disagreement, rather than the assumed disagreement.
- 9) The role of the text gives a different nuance, with a notion of **reading** the text differently, rather than simply disagreement.
- 10) No expertise is necessary, since every participant is assumed to be a non-expert in at least one of the faith texts.
- 11) While some may claim more expertise than others, the spirit of any contribution is guided by the requirement to respect all others as equal and not to enforce an element of hierarchy or presumed authority.
- 12) The discussion does not require participants to identify with a specific tradition. But by attending one must respect the chosen text as a Holy text.

The question-and-answer discussion revealed a number of further qualifications.

1. The number of participants should ideally be between 8-12, with more than one participant from each faith.
2. Ideally the type of text should be composed of a narrative containing general principles so that non-experts are better able to deal with the material.
3. It does not follow that one's position on a liberal-conservative continuum with regard to the essentials of faith necessarily implies a readiness to listen. Recall that the method is not about reaching an agreement, but rather adopting a respectful mode of listening.
4. The selection of texts can be thematic.
5. The reading is not intended to provoke an interpretation, whether conservative or innovative. Rather the aim is to elicit a personal feeling and then sharing perspectives Europa Universität with the small group.

Should the topic be of interest there are a number of Scriptural Reasoning resources available. The most important were cited as being 1) The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning; 2) The Cambridge interfaith Program; 3) The resources provided by the Rose Castle Foundation.

“Religion, Memory and Legacy”, Rev Dr Gary Mason, Director of Rethinking Conflict

The next session involved an insightful presentation on the experience of Northern Ireland. Dr Mason, a nonconformist minister active in reconciliation efforts, reminded the audience that almost every week there are headlines of terror attacks from either side. This is not fake news, but these headlines help to engrave on the society’s consciousness the awareness of the heavy price paid since the establishment of the Good Friday peace agreement. The headlines encourage the perpetual sense of tension and suspicion and dent, in part, the long-term salience of peaceful co-existence. A powerful metaphor introduced was that the context produced a “form of forced amnesia.”

A common adage is that memories are two edged stories. Memory has a capacity to press the pause button of reconciliation. By constantly remembering the past the shadow of the conflict does not wane. Of course, memory can be highly selective and act as a strong determinant on any future vision and trajectory. It might be advisable to seek to remember less as time goes by. Thus, if more time is spent looking backwards, does it mean that the divisions and conflicts of old never heal. Does the past continue to write the present and to some degree actually shape the course of the future?

Given that memory is selective and subject to manipulation it is evident that no memory will ever recall faithfully the essence of past events, because every memory is laden with individual and collective desires and interests as well as collectively shared convictions, which are themselves shaped by cultural memory. In the Irish context the phrase "interpretative keys ", is a way of reading the past and history, that enables people to understand themselves, but also to perceive how their enemies fit into the story. As the

Irish Times columnist Fintan O'Toole comments of the Irish "In our collective memory we are always the victims, never the perpetrators."

Drawing on the work of the journalist David Rieff who has wrestled with questions of memory and conflict, with such phrases as –“The cult of memory- when history does more harm than good,” Dr Mason asked the profound question as to whether a collective, historical memory, as employed by communities and nations, leads far too often to war rather than to peace, to rancor and resentment rather than to reconciliation?

In closing the session, Dr. Barakat thanked Dr Mason for an enlightening lecture. She agreed with the speaker that memory is a perplexing topic; she believed, too, that it may play a crucial role in bringing reconciliation forward and at the same time, it can hinder reconciliation. It depends on how we use memory. She argued that when we are attached to tragic memories of the past, we find it hard to forgive, reconcile, and move on We should not forget that memory may not accurately reproduce real events, but its use can alert us both to the dangers of perpetual tension and provide a springboard for trust and reconciliation also if used wisely and selectively.

Key-note by Professor David Ford

The final event was a public lecture, entitled “On being healthily plural: Scriptural Reasoning and its Analogues” and delivered by Professor David F. Ford. This was a fitting way to bring many of the themes of the conference together and it was delivered in a magisterial if warm and friendly manner.

Professor Ford provided remarkable and enriching insights into an innovative technique for interreligious dialogue. He drew on his long experience with the technique given his role as one of its pioneers. The lecture was comprised of three parts. First the speaker outlined the concept of SR, its history, and its prevalence today. Thus, he illustrated the rich variety of the actual practice of SR within a number of jurisdictions. Taking as his examples the work of the Cambridge Interfaith Program, and the Rose Castle Foundation, he demonstrated the application of SR in China, under the topic

headline of “Faith in Leadership “. Further illustrations were drawn from the development of SR in the UK, Chile, India, and Germany.

In the second part, the speaker discussed analogues of SR. For example, he showed how research in the context of the SR method had helped to better understand the phenomenon of religious violence in societies worldwide. Another quite different example was research on combating malaria. Professor Ford described how, regarding controversies surrounding the disputed genetic modification of malaria-transmitting mosquitoes, a common position could be developed through the use of SR-analogous methods.

In the final part of the talk, Professor Ford reflected on some personal lessons gleaned from within the speaker's own Anglican tradition. He concluded his lecture by affirming his renewed passion for Christian unity and argued forcibly that SR-based dialogue could and should be used to work toward the goal of overcoming Christian divisions.

Undoubtedly Professor Ford contributed a very inspiring and thought-provoking lecture. The question of why and how SR can contribute to healthy pluralistic societies will continue to exercise the conference participants and stimulate much discussion on this very promising methodology for conflict resolution and the abiding search for reconciliation.