

## **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 of the European Wasatia Graduate School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, and, on the second day, by Dr. Vittorio Montemaggi, the Director of the Von Hügel Institute, St. Edmund's College, University of Cambridge. The participants were welcomed, the context set, the aims of the meeting outlined, and the urgent need for inter-faith dialogue as an avenue for conflict resolution reflected.

### **Presentation by Professor Esra Ozyurek, Cambridge University**

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 focus on Germany, the presentation ranged far and wide on 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 sciences which were advanced in the sixties and seventies. They 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 several 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.

### **Visit to the Cambridge Central Mosque accompanied by Dr. Timothy Winter, Cambridge University**

The Cambridge Central Mosque, which was officially opened in 2019, represents a significant milestone in the history of Islamic architecture in the United Kingdom. It is situated on Mill Road, Cambridge, a remarkable blend of contemporary design and traditional Islamic elements. The Mosque project began in the early 2000s, as a result of the local Muslim community's desire to establish a place of worship to serve as a center for interfaith dialogue and community engagement. The most significant proportion of Cambridge's Muslim believers were drawn from the Bangladeshi community, followed by those from the Middle East and North Africa. Conversely,

the project faced numerous challenges, including financial constraints, planning permission issues, and concerns from some local community sections.

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.

The struggles in building the Cambridge Central Mosque reflects broader challenges Muslim communities face 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. Tim Winter, Shaykh Zayed Lecturer in Islamic Studies at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, engaged in a thought-provoking discussion with PhD. students from the University of Flensburg and Fellows from the University of Cambridge in the lecture hall of the mosque. The conversation centered around the role of religion in conflicts, drawing parallels between historical conflicts which are rooted in religious differences and contemporary issues, such as Islamophobia and religious extremism. He also looked at how to transform religion into an integral part of resolving conflicts and problems.

Key points of discussion included, 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 to break down barriers and dispel misconceptions about Islam. Its tripartite structure of an outer courtyard, inner courtyard, and central worship space enable 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 design team's dedication to sustainable development

principles 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 Remarks**

The visit to Cambridge Central Mosque, accompanied by Dr Timothy Winter, provided valuable insights into the history, architecture, and 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 the following day were graced 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 peace is a specific topic for any European university. Celebrations of Europe Day provide a constant reminder of its miraculous establishment and its fortifying elements nowadays. In the words of Schuman, Europe today will not fall into war so easily again. Europa Universität Flensburg is located on the border with Denmark, situated along a former territorial zone of struggle and conflict for decades. The university's location has enabled it to achieve an international status, and it is engaged in teaching students on both sides of the border.

Dr Vittorio Montemaggi offered 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 crucial 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 that enable the sharing of moments can be given another meaning. Key ideas that unite the community 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 that requires constant vigilance and action?

### **A Discussion on Scriptural Reasoning was 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 1990s by Jewish and Christian scholars, who advanced the notion that they could better understand and approach the particular text in view by employing such reasoning. An essential 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 pioneered this method, but the university has fully endorsed it within its

curriculum, and the 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 understand conditions that are necessary to create a better conversation.

Other attributes and conditions enabled by the method include, that texts are chosen from each faith and only two of the three faiths can be represented in the conversation, then a third potential text can be identified and employed in a future conversation; that short passages are chosen, that one can grasp quickly; that each passage is to be read out aloud; that the focus remains on the details of the text itself and not allow the discussion to stray to idiosyncratic topics; that no one claims exclusive ownership of interpretive power of one's own faith' text, quite the opposite tendency is encouraged.

Further on, there is no requirement to reach a consensus or any agreement, the paramount virtue is the willingness and ability to listen. The benefit is a better understanding of the disagreement basis rather than the assumed disagreement. Overall, no expertise is necessary since every participant is assumed to be a non-expert in at least one of the three holy scriptures.

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. 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 open question-and-answer discussion revealed several further qualifications.

Ideally, the number of participants should be between 8 and 12, with more than one participant from each faith. The type of text should be composed of a narrative containing general principles so that non-experts can better deal with the material; the method is not about reaching an agreement but rather adopting a respectful listening mode.

The reading is not intended to provoke an interpretation, whether conservative or innovative. Instead, the aim is to elicit a personal feeling and then share perspectives of Europa Universität with the small group.

Scriptural Reasoning resources are available and 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, and 4) the many publications by David Ford, Peter Ochs and Daniel Weiss.

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

This session involved an insightful presentation on the experience of Northern Ireland. Dr Mason, a nonconformist minister active in reconciliation efforts, reminded the audience that there are almost weekly headlines of terror attacks from either side. This is not fake news, but these headlines help to engrave on 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 the 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 of 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 backward, does it mean that the divisions and conflicts of the old never heal? Does the past continue to write the present and to some degree 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 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 and 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 also concurred, 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 noted 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 actual events. Still, its use can alert us both to the dangers of perpetual tension and provide a springboard for trust and reconciliation if used wisely and selectively.

### **Keynote by Professor David Ford, the Regius Professor of Divinity em., Cambridge University**

The final event was a public lecture, “On Being Healthily Plural: Scriptural Reasoning and Its Analogues, " by Professor David F. Ford. This was a fitting way to bring many of the conference's themes together, and it was delivered in a magisterial, 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 comprised three parts. First, the speaker outlined the concept of SR, its history, and its prevalence today. He illustrated the wide variety of the actual practice of SR within several 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 headline “Faith in Leadership.” Further illustrations were drawn from the development of SR in the UK, Chile, India, and Germany.

Second, the speaker discussed analogs of SR. For example, he showed how research in the context of the SR method helped better understand 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 joint position could be developed through SR-analogous methods.

Third, 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.

Professor Ford's lecture was a very inspiring and thought-provoking piece of work. 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 promising methodology for conflict resolution and the abiding search for reconciliation.

The conference taught Ph.D.-Students new perspectives of thinking about religious conflicts and in particular how religious encounter through SC can benefit political reconciliation.

Methodological the conference was a full success in that high-ranking academics from the University of Cambridge led young Ph.D. students and contributed to their final year of studies. Likewise, the students considered the approaches to be highly innovative and fruitful for the completion of their Ph.Ds.