

## RELIGION, TRANSFORMATION, DEVELOPMENT

*Perspectives on Interreligious Dialogue in the Middle East*

*The mandate of the Catholic Academic Exchange Service (KAAD) – the scholarship organization of the Catholic Church in Germany – is to serve the common good, to contribute to a holistic development of each person and, by doing so, to contribute to a holistic development of the respective society. The intercultural as well as interreligious dialogue is the “structural principle of KAAD”, as its former, long-standing president Peter Hünermann puts it.*

*The global KAAD community with its scholars, alumni and partners all over the world is part of the global discourse on religion, conflict and conflict transformation. Together they make an effort to conceptualize and analyze the potentials that religions have to offer for de-escalation, conflict transformation and ultimately reconciliation. Against this background, KAAD initiated two conferences in the Middle East with the focus on the overall role of religion in conflict situations, one in Beirut and one in Cairo. This volume brings together the results of both conferences and presents some perspectives on interreligious dialogue in the Middle East.*



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*Perspectives on Interreligious Dialogue in the Middle East*

*Nora Kalbarczyk (Ed.)*

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Hausdorffstr. 151, 53129 Bonn, Germany  
Phone: +49 228 91758 - 0  
Fax: +49 228 91758-58  
zentrale @ kaad.de  
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# PREFACE: PERSPECTIVES ON INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*“Faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved.”<sup>1</sup>*

This conviction of religiously motivated support and even love for a person regardless of their religious affiliation is a milestone in the history of interreligious dialogue, expressed in the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living together* which Pope Francis signed along with Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of al-Azhar, during his historic apostolic journey to Abu Dhabi in February 2019.<sup>2</sup> The Catholic foundation of this document is – among others – the conviction that followers of other religions need to be encountered with “prudence and love” (*Nostra Aetate* 2).<sup>3</sup> This is the starting point of an interreligious dialogue that paves the path to peaceful coexistence worldwide.

Against the background of religiously motivated conflicts and wars in the past and present, the peace potential of religions is generally a rather contested issue. While some writers emphasize a theological relation between monotheism and violence, others accentuate the ambivalence of religions in this regard. In times of dramatic global polarizations, such as we are experiencing today, in which religious or ideological hatred is on the rise, the potential for peace and reconciliation of religions becomes an issue of utmost political relevance and several initiatives have been started at various political and religious levels. In 2016, the German Federal

- 
- 1 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_documento-fratellanza-umana.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html), 07.10.2019.
  - 2 As for the background of this journey, see for example Timo Güzelmansur, “‘Menschliche Brüderlichkeit’. Anmerkungen zur Papstreise nach Abu Dhabi und zum Dokument”, in CIBEDO-Beiträge zum Gespräch zwischen Christen und Muslimen 2/2019: pp. 54-64.
  - 3 [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html), 22.10.2019.

Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) has launched an initiative to involve religious actors more broadly and strategically in development cooperation programs. In the following year, the German Federal Foreign Office invited 100 international representatives of religions from more than fifty countries to an exchange on the “Responsibility of Religions for Peace”; in its comprehensive and inclusive scope, this event was unprecedented. Since then, numerous conferences, workshops and meetings have taken place in order “to intensify cooperation with religious communities around the world”<sup>4</sup>. The increasing awareness of this topic can also be observed at the level of the European Union, which has just recently announced a project on the relevance and role of religions in societies.<sup>5</sup> The world meeting of *Religions for Peace* in August 2019 in Lindau, Germany, emphasized the same concern. At this meeting, Cardinal Marx stressed that “on the basis of our respective religion we stand for openness, dialogue and cooperation – and by this means we are serving peace”<sup>6</sup>.

In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, given in Lebanon in 2012, Pope Benedict XVI emphasized the specific role which the Middle East as an interreligious melting pot with a conflict-ridden past and present plays when it comes to peaceful coexistence: “The attention of the whole world is fixed on the Middle East as it seeks its path. May this region demonstrate that coexistence is not a utopia, and that distrust and prejudice are not a foregone conclusion. Religions can join one another in service to the common good and contribute to the development of each person and the building of society.”<sup>7</sup>

The Catholic Academic Exchange Service (KAAD) – the scholarship organization of the Catholic Church in Germany – has the mandate to do exactly this: to serve the common good, to contribute to a holistic development of each person and, by doing so, to contribute to a holistic development of the respective society. The intercultural as well as inter-religious dialogue is the “structural principle of KAAD”, as its former,

long-standing president Peter Hünermann puts it.<sup>8</sup> In fostering such a dialogue on a worldwide level, KAAD “dreams and shapes utopias of a new convivence”.<sup>9</sup>

The global KAAD community with its scholars, alumni and partners all over the world is part of the global discourse on religion, conflict and conflict transformation. Together they make an effort to conceptualize and analyze the potentials that religions have to offer for de-escalation, conflict transformation and ultimately reconciliation.

Against this background, KAAD initiated two conferences in the Middle East with the focus on the overall role of religion in conflict situations, one in Beirut and one in Cairo. They were conducted under the responsibility of the former head of KAAD’s Middle East department, Dr Christina Pfestroff.

## “RELIGION, CONFLICT, CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION“

Religions are in need of spaces for self-reflection to unfold their peace-promoting power – that was one of the main conclusions of the KAAD *Auslandsakademie*<sup>10</sup> in Lebanon. The academic event “Religion, Conflict, Conflict Transformation“ took place at the Jesuite Saint Joseph University of Beirut (USJ) from 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> June 2017. It brought together 54 scholars, alumni, representatives of KAAD partner universities and external guests.

Since summer of 2015, KAAD has supported more than 50 students from Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan in starting or continuing their Master studies at Middle Eastern universities. The goal of the Third Country Scholarship Program is to establish a network of refugees and local sector experts who jointly engage in finding solutions to the major development

4 <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/themen/kulturdialog/-/229304>, 29.10.2019.

5 <https://www.vaticannews.va/de/welt/news/2019-09/bruessel-belgien-europaeische-union-austausch-religionen.html>, 22.10.2019.

6 „Wir stehen auf der Grundlage unserer jeweiligen Religion für Offenheit und Miteinander, für Dialog und Kooperation – und dienen so dem Frieden.“ <https://www.dbk.de/presse/aktuelles/meldung/kardinal-marx-spricht-auf-der-weltversammlung-religions-for-peace/detail/>, 22.10.2019.

7 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20120914\\_ecclesia-in-medio-oriente.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20120914_ecclesia-in-medio-oriente.html), 22.10.2019.

8 Peter Hünermann, „KAAD: Eine ‚Zukunftswerkstatt‘“, in Heinrich Geiger, Nora Kalbarczyk, Thomas Krüggeler, Marko Kuhn and Markus Leimbach (ed.), *Bildung und Wissenschaft im Horizont von Interkulturalität* (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2019), p. 256.

9 Margit Eckholt, „Von anderen Ufern, Verwundbarkeit und Utopien einer neuen Konvivenz“, in Geiger et al, *Bildung und Wissenschaft*, p. 41.

10 KAAD holds annual conferences in one of its countries of focus, alternating between the five main regions (Latin America, Eastern Europe, Middle East, Africa and Asia); these are called “Auslandsakademie” in German. Besides this, KAAD hosts an annual conference in Bonn, called the “Jahresakademie”.

problems of the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> This is why KAAD President Professor Eberhard Schockenhoff (University of Freiburg) said in his opening address: “This academy is unprecedented. For the first time in KAAD’s history we were able to welcome scholars studying at Middle Eastern Universities to an *Auslandsakademie*.” Schockenhoff expressed his gratitude to the committed KAAD partners in Lebanon, Professor Souad Slim and Father Dr Jules Boutros, emphasizing their active assistance in building up the KAAD Third Country Scholarship Program in Lebanon as well as in preparing the conference.

The thematic focus of this *Auslandsakademie* in Lebanon was proposed by KAAD scholars and alumni in Lebanon at an alumni seminar in 2016. Scholars perceive the dialogue between various religions and denominations, especially regarding their potential for reconciliation, as a counterpoint to the prevailing perception of religion as a trigger for conflicts in the Middle East. Many KAAD scholars in Lebanon as well as in Germany come from war-ridden Syria and have lived under constant insecurity and fear; some of them witnessed appalling acts of violence, including violence committed in the name of religion. The same holds true for our alumni and partners who experienced the Civil War (1975-1990) in Lebanon. They all know the reality of war, post-war reconstruction and sectarian fragmentation. As the former head of KAAD’s Middle East department put it: “It is not a theoretical exercise for you to think about the dynamics by which religion is used to mobilize people for violent acts. It is more of an existential, desperate attempt to understand why and how religion is turned into a source of hatred and bloodshed.” The KAAD *Auslandsakademie* was therefore meant to offer a space for exploring perspectives from different contexts – some of the papers presented at that occasion are now published in the present volume.

## “RELIGION AND TRANSFORMATION: THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANS & MUSLIMS FOR PROCESSES OF SOCIAL CHANGE”

The other KAAD conference had been held on 4th June 2014 in Cairo under the motto “Religion and Transformation: The Role of Christians and Muslims for Processes of Social Change”. Only a few days after the election of the new Egyptian president, around 30 KAAD alumni and local partners came together to analyze the repercussions which the transformation processes had on the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and to discuss ways of participation of religious actors in post-revolutionary Egypt. Particular appreciation for the conference was expressed through the attendance of the late advisor of the Grand Imam of al-Azhar for interreligious dialogue, Professor Mahmoud Azab (d. 2014)<sup>12</sup>, who explicitly warned of an instrumentalization of religions by political actors. Although this conference took place in a peculiar historical setting several years ago, some of its results can still be considered valid and are therefore included in this volume.

## RELIGION – TRANSFORMATION – DEVELOPMENT: PERSPECTIVES ON INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The aim of the present volume is to bring together the results of both conferences and to present KAAD’s perspectives on interreligious dialogue in the Middle East:

In his opening article “Times of Transformation – Times of Faith: The Potential of ‘Change Agents’”, KAAD’s Secretary General, *Dr Hermann Weber*, examines the different expressions and corresponding concepts associated with a ‘transformation’ brought about by so-called ‘change agents’. In doing so, Weber elaborates on several political approaches and theological concepts that are not only central to the debate about the role of religious

11 The project is funded by the German Bishops’ Conference (DBK), the Central Catholic Agency for Development Aid (KZE) and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

12 We were saddened by the news that Professor Mahmoud Azab, one of the distinguished speakers contributing to our event, passed away just a couple of weeks after the seminar. The sudden death of the widely esteemed advisor to the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar is deeply mourned by his partners and colleagues in the interreligious dialogue. May he rest in peace.

actors in conflict transformation, but are also at the core of KAAD's philosophy and mandate.

In his paper "The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion as a Source of Conflict and Peace", *Professor Dirk Ansoerge* (Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology, Frankfurt, Germany) presents the current debate about the aforementioned ambivalence of religion by introducing the positions of Jan Assmann and René Girard. Whereas the former assumes that violence is a key feature of monotheism itself, which, by definition, the believer cannot overcome, the latter emphasizes the pacifistic function of religion as it transforms the violence that is naturally inherent to the human being. The diametric approaches concerning religion and violence can be resolved by referring to the work of the American sociologist Douglas Marshall, who outlines a complex description of the different layers and functions of religion. On this basis, Ansoerge concludes that the peace-promoting power of religion relies on three basic dimensions: recognition of difference, ability of critical reflection as well as a compassionate attitude towards the victims of violence.

*Dr Elias El Halabi* (Christian Muslim Studies Center, University of Balamand in Lebanon) outlines a theological approach of the Orthodox faith and its possibilities for harmony and reconciliation in his contribution "The Orthodox Spirituality and the Potentials for Peace". He describes six theological features of a specific Orthodox spirituality that brings the believer towards a state of unity and peacefulness.

The paper "Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue in the Age of Globalization: Opportunities and Limitations" by *Professor Wessam A. Farag Alieldin* (Medieval History, Mansoura University, Mansoura, Egypt) inquires into the diverse and pluralistic reality which each religion itself faces with regard to its own history and present, notwithstanding other religious currents. How can the different religions cope with internal and external religious diversity and pluralism – a pluralism which is not an ideology, but a reality in today's globalized time? *Farag Alieldin* portrays dialogue within a religion and between religions as the key method of maintaining and gaining peace and describes the possibilities and limits of this method.

In "Concept of 'Dynamic Citizenship': The Role of Christians and Muslims for Processes of Social Transformation", *Rev. Dr Andrea Zaki*, President of the Protestant Churches of Egypt and President of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services, analyzes the role of religion in Arab societies and in its identity-forming function. Out of the problem of linking national identity to a specific religion and therefore limiting the scope of

national identity, he develops a "Concept of 'Dynamic Citizenship'", i.e. a pluralistic concept of belonging to a nation state that is not based on religion. It is by this form of identity that the development of a civil society can be fostered.

To replace religious boundaries and affiliations on a national level of political representation is exactly the demand of the protesters in the current demonstrations in Lebanon (October/November 2019). *Professor Ziad Fahed* (Director of University Mission, Notre Dame University, Louaize, Lebanon) elaborates on the question of "Religious Identity or National Identity: The Case of Lebanon". In a sectarian system such as Lebanon, identity – together with political loyalty – is linked to the respective religious group, not to a specific culture or to the nation state as a whole. Fahed traces the history of modern Lebanon from the impact of the Millet system in the Ottoman Empire to the Lebanese Civil War from 1975 until 1990 in order to explain the system that prevails today – and to pose the question of whether a transition from one system, namely the sectarian one, to another is possible.

The Ottoman history of Lebanon is also referred to by *Professor Souad Slim* (Director of the Centre of Documentation and History at the Institute of History, Archeology and Near Eastern Studies, University of Balamand). In her article "Prejudices and Presumptions in Christian-Muslim Relations", Slim discerns anachronistic explanation patterns in contemporary Christian-Muslim relations and explains why it might not be suitable to evaluate certain concepts that evolved in former times with modern day's judgement. In order to assess certain concepts or events, it is crucial to consider them in the broader framework of their respective times.

In her contribution "Education for Conflict Transformation", *Professor Roula Talhouk* (Université Saint-Joseph, Relations islamo-chrétiennes) presents a best practice example of how education about (inter-)religious matters can lead to dialogue and reconciliation (namely the establishment of the Institute for Islamic-Christian Studies that was founded during wartime in 1977 at the USJ).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to our KAAD partner committees in Egypt and Lebanon for making the two conferences possible. In the light of our responsibility for a peaceful common home, I would like to thank all the speakers at these two conferences as well as the authors of this volume for their in-depth elaborations and discussions of a topic that is of utmost importance to societies all over the world, especially to the countries of the Middle East.

Last but not least, I am grateful to my colleague Mareike Klemz; this volume would not have been possible without her thorough proofreading and typesetting skills.

*“Make us an Instrument of your Peace”*

Bonn, All Saints Day 2019