

THE CHALLENGES OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND DIALOGUE

The West, the Middle East, and Japan

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Beginning with two international symposia held in March 2005 on “Dialogue among Religions around the World” (Bulletin 29 (2005): 9–19) and “In Search of Dialogue among Religions in the Middle East” (『南山宗教文化研究所 研究所報』15 (2005): 4–9), the Nanzan Institute has taken steps to enter actively into discussions with scholars of religions that have so far been marginal to the dialogue within Japan. In 2007 this initiative was reciprocated by the University of Sousse in Tunisia with the generous support of then Ambassador of Tunisia in Japan, Dr. Salah Hannachi. What follows is a brief report of the discussions on religious pluralism held last spring in Tunisia, to which the Nanzan Institute led a delegation from Japan.

The international Symposium on “The Challenges of Religious Pluralism and Dialogue: The West, the Middle East, and Japan” was held in Sousse, Tunisia, from 31 May to 1 June 2007, under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Technology and the Ministry of Education and Training of Tunisia. The Symposium was jointly organized by the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture (Japan), the University of Sousse (Tunisia), the Ben Ali Chair for Dialogue among Civilizations and Religions (Tunisia), the Center for Research and Study on Dialogue of Civilizations and Comparative Religions (Tunisia), and the Society of Tunisian Alumni of Japanese Universities. It was supported by the Japan Foundation, the Embassy of Tunisia in Japan, CISMOR (the Center for Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions) at Doshisha University (Japan), Walter H. Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion and Public Life at the University of California (USA), and the Center for Information on Religion (Japan). The Symposium was convened at Hotel El Mouradi Palace in Port El Kantaoui, near Sousse, located 140 kilometers south of Tunis, facing the Mediterranean Sea.

According to the organizing committee, the goal of this symposium was to develop and promote cultural understanding, and to inculcate a willingness to accept the cultures of others among all citizens on earth, particularly among the younger generations. By celebrating world diversity, the committee further aimed at bringing forth the desire and joy of learning more about themselves. It believed that the study of religions is a part of the ongoing search for tolerance and peaceful co-living; that by means of multinational, intellectual, academic networks, people must enhance the global dialogue on religious pluralism and cultivate their feelings to rejoice in diversity as well as universality. As a result, the committee earnestly hoped that this Symposium would serve as one channel in reinforcing mutual understanding and tolerance in the world.



Well attended, the Symposium succeeded in drawing deep interest from the audience on the multifarious subjects of religion, which were addressed by some thirty-five speakers and commentators. The participants came from a wide variety of organizations, institutes, and universities from numerous countries: Bulgaria, France, Japan, Lebanon, The Netherlands, Tunisia, The United Kingdom, Turkey, and the United States of America. Speaking in English, French, and Arabic, simultaneous interpretation facilitated communication during the Symposium. Stimulated by enthusiastic intellectual arguments at the venue, the local press, including newspapers and radio stations, elaborately covered this international Symposium.

The program of the Symposium consisted of four sessions as shown below. All sessions included responses by commentators either referring to an individual presentation or to the broader context.

1. Opening Session
2. Academic Session 1: Islam and Religious Pluralism in Europe and Japan
3. Academic Session 2: The Study of Religion and Inter-religious Dialogue in the Middle East
4. Closing Session

For both the opening session and the closing session, I will introduce only some selected remarks for want of space. For the academic sessions, I will briefly comment on all the papers presented.

Opening Session

The event began with a welcome speech by Ahmed H. HELAL, President of the University of Sousse. The president stated that the principal objective of this symposium was to activate dialogue among different civilizations and religions in the world by bringing various scholarly views together and exchanging their opinions on important issues.

As one of the keynote speakers, SHIMAZONO Susumu (Professor at the University of Tokyo) spoke on the Buddhist pacifism of Niwano Nikkyō (1906–1999), the founder of Risshō Kōseikai, a unique lay-Buddhist group in Japan. Niwano dedicated himself to founding the World Conference on Religion and Peace. For him, the importance of a “peaceful mind” can be equated to “benevolence” in Buddhism and “love” in Christianity, providing what is most needed to interact with others. His aim was to realize peace by means of religious cooperation, not only in organizational structure but also in developing mutual understanding and the joining of hands among all people. His ultimate goal was the unification of religion. Shimazono argued that, though Niwano’s views on Buddhism and Eastern thought may be considered too optimistic, ultimately there can be no doubt that his peace movement has obtained noteworthy results as a contemporary religious movement in Japan and around the world.

Another keynote speech concerned recent changes in the mutual relationship between Europe and Islam, as presented by James A. BECKFORD (Professor at the University of Warwick, UK). Describing the situation of the growing Muslim population in Europe, he warned that it is not easy to generalize about Islam in Europe because of the diversity of expressions and experiences of Islam, as well as the diversity of Europe in terms of culture, religion, politics, economy, and history. Moreover, some of the experiences that Muslims have had in Europe are more related to their status as migrants and relatively disadvantaged ethnic minorities than to Islam. To promote their religious, cultural, political, and sporting interests, Muslims have not only been actively involved in voluntary, commercial, and professional activities, but also have created formal relationships with state agencies. Nevertheless, the increasing evidence of suspicion, hostility, discrimination, prejudice, and violence towards Muslims must be recognized. Illustrating some experiences of Muslims prisoners in Britain and France, he concluded that Muslim experiences in Europe are highly diverse, conditioned by both internal and external factors to Muslim communities. Research on this subject needs to pay attention to these differences.

Academic Session 1: Islam and Religious Pluralism in Europe and Japan

The first speaker of the academic session was Effie FOKAS (Government Department, London School of Economics), who spoke on “Islam within the Changing Religious Landscape of Europe.” She began with a consideration of literature that questions Europe’s secularity. Many scholars have revealed that there is significant evidence of religiosity in Europe, especially Christianity. People “believe” in different ways: some through affiliation with traditional religious institutions, others through no affiliations. Religion also survives as a form of collective memory, the so-called “chain of memory.” In this context, Islam’s increasing presence in Europe has been a formidable challenge both to notions of Christian European identity and to conceptions of a secular Europe, evident in a number of factors. One factor is various historical conflicts between Islam and Europe, which contributed to the creation of negative images of Muslims by Europeans. These images have grown in recent years. Relying on other scholarly works, Fokas showed how the concept of European “secular neutrality” has been questioned in the public sphere. She concluded that Islam has entered Europe at a time when Europe’s policies on religion are in a state of flux. Thus the European response has been a dialectical relationship between religion in Europe in general and Islam in Europe in particular.

Another topic on European Muslims, but from a different perspective, was offered by Nancy VENEL, maître de conférence, at l’Université de Lyon 2 (France). Her contribution on French Muslims entitled, “Islam as Display? The Social and Political Experience of Young People with a North African Background,” aimed at giving an overview of the ways French Muslims define



and experience their identity. Her study demonstrated the diversification of religious practices of Islam in Europe and the extreme diversity of being Muslim in France. She focused on two issues: the general background of the settlement of Islam in France, and French Muslim identity and religious practice. Starting with the first issue, Muslims, whose population is estimated at between 3.5 and 5 million, are currently the largest religious minority in France. They come from a wide range of nations, approximately 123 different nationalities. Some 60–70% of Muslim immigrants to France are from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Muslim immigrants from Turkey and West Africa are the next largest group. To explore Muslim identity and religious practice in France, Venel conducted 50 one-to-one interviews with young Muslims from a Maghreb origin and where both parents were Muslims. The purpose was to identify how they represent the role of a citizen and how they speak about their ordinary citizenship. Venel drew up four types of Muslims, while warning that her typology is artificial and should not be taken as reflecting reality itself. The types are: 1. the French devotees, 2. the conciliators, 3. the contractualists, and 4. the neo-ethnics. Thus her research revealed a real heterogeneity in the way people experience Islam, and of conceiving their national heritage. According to a recent study, an increasing number of French-born Muslims are more religious than their immigrant parents. Venel viewed this phenomenon not as an Islamic revival, but rather the growth of a specific Muslim consciousness. Taking into consideration how Muslims are viewed by others in examining their identity formation, it can be said that a discourse about Islam is imposed upon them because they have no control of their images by others. Their claims of belonging are not connected with a real religious experience. Hence, what we face now is Islam as display rather than an Islamic revival.

KASAI Kenta (Research Fellow at the Center for Information on Religion, Japan), gave a paper on Muslims in Japan. The goal of his study was to identify Muslim groups in Japan for the purpose of developing a mutual understanding between Muslims and Japanese. The large number of Muslim residents in Japan are primarily from Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Turkey. Kasai introduced a survey study by a high school teacher of world history on misunderstandings about Islam among Japanese high school students. According to the survey, students with a little knowledge of Islam do not have a negative impression of Islam, while students with more knowledge tend to have more negative images of Islam. World history concerning Islam should be reconsidered so that students can hold a more balanced impression of Islam and learn about the diversity of Muslims. After describing the history of Islam in Japan, Kasai classified Muslims into six groups: 1. trainees staying for a short term, 2. unskilled workers, 3. business traders, 4. elite Muslims or students, 5. converted Japanese Muslims, and 6. the missionary group. Kasai maintained that these

six groups should be treated differently according to their living situation in Japanese society. Suggesting other tasks, such as spreading more unbiased information of Islam in Japanese society by way of media and education, he emphasized that different treatment according to the particular interests of each group are crucial for promoting friendship and mutual appreciation between Muslims and Japanese in Japan.

Academic Session 2: The Study of Religion and Inter-Religious Dialogue in the Middle East

This session on the Middle East opened with a presentation on “Religious Pluralism in Tunisia: A Founding Ideal,” by Hajer BEN HADJ SALEM (University of Sfax, Tunisia). She has investigated the foundations of pluralism in post-colonial Tunisia, a Muslim state that has Christians and Jews as minorities. Her investigation proceeded on two parallel tracks. The first track examined how the founders of the Tunisia fifty years ago addressed religious pluralism when there was no pressure from foreign countries to do so, on the basis of internal dialectics of religious diversity, including sectarian divides and minority rights within their nation. The second track explored how their efforts were premised on maintaining the place of Islam in the nation, by reassuring both the universalism and enlightenment of Islam, and by demonstrating how basic Islamic tenets can be employed within modernizing pluralistic societies. Her definition of “pluralism” was based on its Western concept: it has always been associated with “diversity” and is understood as the acceptance and encouragement of diversity. “Pluralism” is not a given, but an achievement; it is more than toleration and inclusion of minority groups. Ben Hadj Salem then illustrated the different mechanisms that operate effectively for the establishment of pluralism, including the Code of Personal Status, the Constitution, the modernization of education and society. She emphasized in her conclusion that societies must spontaneously cultivate the positive value of tolerance through reflection, education, and internalization and that the success of Tunisia in reconciling Islam to modernity can be a good model for other societies.

Another Tunisian scholar, Mabrouk MANSOURI (Assistant Professor at the University of Sousse, Tunisia), addressed the importance of comparative religion as a subfield of the science of religion in North Africa. First, he clarified one area of modern intellectual discourse on the study of religion, initiated by North African scholars, in response to many challenges for their cultural identity particularly after gaining independence from French colonization. For instance, Maghribi intellectuals dealt with religion-related subjects through logical argumentation by reexamining Islam in comparison to Christianity and Judaism. The Algerian thinker Mohammad Arkoun is critical of the existence of complic-



ity among the faithful of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Second, the concept of comparative religion and the cause of promoting comparative religion were explored. Since Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have benefited and suffered in pluralistic societies, comparative studies of these religions open a door to augment cross-cultural perspectives. Mansouri suggested themes for examination such as comparison of prophetic figures in the Middle East as well as the comparison of the treatment of specific issues in ethics, jurisprudence, and theology in the historical development of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Current Arab views of comparative religion are limited; some departments dealing with comparative religion in the Arab countries do not reflect current tendencies toward comparative study, except for a new attempt in Tunisia. Thus, Mansouri asserted that comparative religion helps deepen knowledge of religions, which ultimately leads to increasing mutual understanding.

The last speaker of the academic session was Ziad FAHED (Assistant Professor at Notre Dame University, Lebanon). His paper was on “Lebanese Religious Pluralism and Inter-Religious Dialogue: Opportunities and Challenges for the Third Millennium.” Lebanon is known as a society structured according to religious confessions. With as many as eighteen officially-recognized religious confessions in Lebanon, confessionalism has become the core for political representation. Because of the coexistence of different religious groups, a real “dialogue of life” can take place; at the same time, such structures can be easily manipulated for political reasons by leaders, which can be regarded as an indirect cause of the civil war. Fahed proposed key questions: “Can Lebanon survive as a cohesive mosaic of religious cultures, while confessional conflicts are raging?” “How can old religious communities contribute positively in building a modern state?” Having explained how this religion-oriented society has been formed by

tracing the history of the country, Fahed indicated the formation of Lebanese population according to the different religious groups by noting a reduction of Christian communities as Muslim communities have expanded. Lastly, for the purpose of overcoming the challenges, he suggested that Lebanon needs to undertake a “purification of memory” from resentment and violence caused by wars and “the action of civil society” against any kind of discrimination and intolerance by building bridges connecting the different parts of the society.

Closing Session

MORI Kōichi, Director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions, Doshisha University (Japan), presented a proposal that we should reach a consensus on the “manners of disagreement” among different religions for the coexistence of different religions. Stopping the discourse on “religious truth” and “universal values,” we must appreciate the differences in each other and must not try to assimilate others into our own beliefs and values. As the director of a center for the study of monotheistic religions, he finds great significance in conducting research and education on the three Abrahamic religions in Japan. Japan has been outside of the history of conflicts among these three religions. This neutrality of Japan can serve as a mediator to promote peace and mutual understanding between different religions and civilizations. Mori is convinced that his program at Doshisha University is entrusted with the role of the mediator for the purpose of accomplishing peace and security in the world.

The necessity and encouragement for the appreciation of diversity was reconfirmed by Paul L. Swanson, Director of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture (Japan). In his view, the world is dominated by struggles for power and money, violence, hate, and conflict. Some people think that a gathering such as this, where we talk about pluralism, diversity, dialogue, and the hope for coexistence and peace, is a futile exercise in naïve optimism. As we encounter such responses, we become easily discouraged. However, we must say “no” to despair. The forest grows slowly but steadily, and can be destroyed in a day, but we must welcome diversity and encourage the roots of coexistence to grow.

The symposium closed with the speech by His Excellency, Dr. Sadok KORBI, Minister of Education and Training of Tunisia. He was delighted to be present at the event on religious pluralism and dialogue between the West, the Middle East, and Japan, which was hosted by Tunisia. Hoping to strengthen friendship and cooperation among the participants, he emphasized that he believed the outcome of this Symposium will contribute to achieving coexistence and peace.

As a result, the organizing committee of the Symposium issued the Sousse Declaration calling for:

The necessity to further the study of religion so as to promote religions as a force for tolerance and peaceful coexistence;

- ✧ the necessity to educate citizens to perceive diversity and promote building bridges of tolerance;
- ✧ the necessity to reject all forms of extremism and discrimination against religious minorities;
- ✧ the necessity to encourage cross-regional joint research which would boost and consolidate multi-centered research that would answer the need of the international community toward tolerance, pluralism, and dialogue;
- ✧ the necessity to promote exchange programs among children and youth from different religious and cultural backgrounds;
- ✧ the necessity to promote school education and educational content that encourage tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude to the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture for inviting me to participate in this Symposium as one of the commentators in the academic session. As a specialist in Arabic literature, I was delighted that this event was held in an Arab-Muslim country, Tunisia. Through this event, I greatly benefited not only from papers and discussions but also from informal cultural exchanges with other participants. With the relatively small size of the Symposium, we could easily become acquainted with one another and foster friendship. One memory is a pleasant nocturnal chat with some of the participants on the last day of the Symposium at an Arabic cafe in the marina of Port El Kantaoui. I still remember how refreshing the sea breeze was, which was blowing over my cheeks from the Mediterranean. That cozy atmosphere suggested signs of success in building a culture of pluralism and dialogue among the participants.

The title of the Symposium embraces “religious pluralism and dialogue.” Some papers demonstrated “diversity,” which reflects some realities of the world. Other papers showed intersections among different religions. The diversity must be used to achieve pluralism through the active seeking of understanding beyond the borders of difference. It is crucial for us to commit ourselves to learn from diversity for the purpose of developing mutual benefit. I believe that the encounter of people and the constructing of human relationships, such as those made at the Symposium, will certainly bear fruit in future.