

Henry Luce Foundation Narrative Report on October 28-29, 2011 Workshop

Scholars from across the globe gathered at Harvard University on October 28-29, 2011 to participate in a workshop on pluralism, coexistence, and conflict in Muslim societies. Funded by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, the workshop was organized in cooperation with the Harvard Initiative on Contemporary Islamic Societies and Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies.

Workshop Review

The workshop was organized to examine several questions. How do diverse peoples coexist, and what institutional structures may promote or impede peaceful coexistence? When conflicts occur, are they understood as institutional breakdowns, or as something else entirely? How do societies move from prevailing coexistence to conflict and back again? The assembled included anthropologists, historians, political scientists, and scholars of comparative religions. They discussed the Middle East, South and South East Asia and comparative developments in India, China, and Europe.

Presentations were fit into five sessions, which were designed to focus and refocus on multiple notions of majority, minority, secular, sectarian, plural and pluralist. The first session was a historical overview entitled "Between the Nation and the Trans-National." It featured talks on the colonial experiences in Indonesia, India, the Arab peninsula, and the Sudan. It included as well a summary of late Ottoman imperial strategies and missteps in accommodating ethnic and religious diversity within and outside the empire's borders. From these presentations and the ensuing discussion, there emerged a sense of the pervasive tension, across the colonized societies of the Islamic world, between politically driven impulses to integrate or to segregate one's community with or from others, to minimize or to enhance the perceived distinctions between one's own traditions and those of others. This tension was observed to continue in various forms in many post-colonial states and societies even until the present day. One scholar described this as particularly evident today in the conflict between Sudan and South Sudan.

Sessions Two and Three considered the role of political, legal, and theological institutions in mediating between states and their diverse community constituents. Several motifs appeared repeatedly, as presenters spoke about a wide variety of cases. One theme was the use, by rulers and political parties, of prevailing social opinion regarding minority communities to maintain or shore up the power of the regime – to keep or restore order after stoking sectarian fears of conflict or disapproval of minority public practices. Egypt was a case in point, illustrating how military rulers or the praetorian guard wield power andacerbate sectarian divides. A second theme was the opportunistic nature, particularly of exclusivist strains of religious authority, in entering the political arena, putting forth a platform, and competing for power on behalf of

followers and against members of other ethnic or religious communities. In more than a few cases, sectarianism has been perceived to decrease when economic opportunities improve.

Session Four examined what is increasingly described as ethno-religious identity, both Muslim and non-Muslim, as a minority presence in secular states. In some cases, secularism has amounted to both privatization and diminishing of religious practice, especially where public debate on religion has been minimal. In other cases, debate on public practices has been loud and strong and has culminated in violence when talks did not achieve their goals. China furnishes an example of the former situation, while Bosnia demonstrates the second. A sort of compromise -- the designation of the family and the home as the repositories of ethno-religious learning and practice - has been implicitly recognized by many state governing bodies, with varying results. To the extent that state-sponsored schools and non-state-sponsored media have functioned across communities, public debate has been enhanced and identity and practice questions more carefully pursued in the realm of governance. India, Pakistan, and Turkey all have experienced improvements, set-backs or regains in different degrees in this regard, over the last five decades. In the absence of one or both of these institutions (public schools and independent media), opportunities to recognize or negotiate the management of diversity have been harder to find, and discussions have either become more strident or have withered, leading to various levels of marginalization or conflict within or between communities.

Session Five, designated the policy panel, asked questions based on the insights from the earlier panels, questions such as whether removal of the military from positions of political rule is both necessary and sufficient to bolster a pluralist vision of society, and whether enhanced democratic institutions can ameliorate long-standing obstacles to coexistence between ethnic or religious communities. Policy presentations focused primarily on six countries: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Turkey, the Sudan, and Egypt. In most of these countries the military played an active and heavy-handed role in governance after independence, and in each country, relations between majority and minority religious communities have at times been severely strained.

Several themes from earlier sessions of the workshop reappeared and were debated in a comparative manner from country to country. Some presenters argued that military regimes have borne primary responsibility for nurturing ethnic and religious strife, using it as an excuse to consolidate their own position on the political stage. Others disagreed, pointing to pervasive bigotry and intolerance in local communities and popular media and arguing that these attitudes reflect a deeply internalized set of values that are difficult or impossible to expunge from the public arena until they are confronted on personal and interpersonal levels. Still others emphasized a secular "politics of recognition," whereby ethnic and religious diversity can be set aside by the state, in its quest to regulate the economic and territorial aspects of citizenship, without involving itself in questions of confessional membership.

Even the discussion of the post-9/11 Hazara community in Afghanistan, and the fragile economic gains it has experienced since the US-UN invasion, reflected the prevalent themes just

described. Afghanistan has been effectively ruled by an international military regime and a proxy government since 2003, as security has been deemed the first priority. While the ethnic and religious distinctness of the Hazara in Afghanistan has long translated into economic marginalization for that community amid its powerful Pashtun neighbors, the Hazara since 2003 have benefited from the foreign military's preoccupation with the Taliban and that insurgency's geographic focus on Kabul and other Pashtun-dominated regions. The likely withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan in the near future threatens what gains the Hazara have made - a further example of the fact that military security alone cannot address issues of ethnic and religious exclusion or bigotry.

Implications for Further Research

Overall, the workshop featured numerous perspectives on historical, contemporary and future (policy-setting) patterns of coexistence and conflict within the plural ethnicities and religious traditions that characterize Muslim communities and societies. Many research implications emerged as food for thought; here, we highlight two that might serve as the next foci for our research endeavors.

The first question bears on institutions and their historical, contemporary and policy-building aspects - particularly on how institutions built to accommodate social and political diversity in the intra-Muslim context may weather some forms of change, and when they become untenable and must necessarily adapt. It is our contention that societies anchor themselves by their own historical perspectives on propriety and justice, and that large-scale shifts of perspective, like those underway in the Middle East and North Africa today, amount to threats to autocratic regime stability and to both opportunities and perils for diverse communities. A careful comparison of such shifts, both historically and on the contemporary stage, should help us gain a better sense of how some Muslim societies are evolving, what models they are drawing upon, and what lessons they have to offer others, both Muslim and non-Muslim, who may be engaged in or seeking transformations of their own.

The second question is of the ways in which ethnicity, religion, and nationality overlap and yet remain distinct in the Islamic world across time, based largely on the ways in which history chronicles and defines them. All three kinds of communities (ethnic, religious, and national) may opt for exclusive or inclusive ways of identifying themselves, and may make it relatively easy or difficult for individuals who wish to join or depart from the group. Normative and ethical claims may exert great influence on a community's self identity, as well as on its policies of interaction with other individuals or groups. It is a must for any community to make both its claims and its ethics very clear, and much of the challenge of enhancing stable and plural community coexistence lies in promoting the economic and educational conditions to allow community claims and ethics to be recognized, debated, and responded to, at the societal level. Clearly, further study of education and its socioeconomic dynamics in Islamic settings across time may advance this process.

Conclusions

Participants felt the workshop provided a stimulating and intense set of discussions from which they benefited. More than a few of them commented on how convivial the atmosphere was, and on how important such an atmosphere is, when conversations turn toward controversial and painful topics. In the final session, several voices suggested that this is an extremely important project that needs to continue, and that the research outcomes are particularly relevant to both academics and policy makers.

One of these was John Trumbour, Research Director of the Labor and Worklife Program at Harvard Law School, who summarized the policy-enhancing potential of the workshop as follows: “The Inaugural Workshop on Pluralism, Coexistence, and Conflict delivered a tremendous array of knowledge about the Muslim world that should eventually have an impact not only in the academy, but also in the global public arena. One presentation demonstrated how most western democracies exhibit a gross under-representation of Muslims in the leading political institutions. ... it will take intellectual awareness and political consciousness to address the issue, and the social scientific knowledge delivered at this workshop is a powerful first step.”

Dean William Graham, Harvard Divinity School, felt the workshop was a success and observed, “The striking thing about the workshop was the truly global nature of the perspective gained from the sessions. Here we could see scholars who work in vastly different parts of the world on topics related to Islamic societies...exchanging ideas about the major issues, their origins and development, and their intricacies that are important to Muslim communities and societies around the world.” Professor Cemal Kafadar of the Harvard History Department, the project’s Principal Investigator (PI), said “We hope to continue this discussion, both with colleagues in the local academic community and through larger workshops in Istanbul and beyond in the coming years. The goal is to build a local and global research network dealing with these enduring questions and to contribute to defining scholarship in this field.”