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HERRENHAUSEN CONFERENCE
HERRENHAUSEN PALACE, HANOVER

CONFERENCE SUMMARY
“Religious Pluralisation — A Challenge for Modern Societies”

Organizers: Volkswagen Foundation in collaboration with the Academy of World Religions (University of Hamburg), EPHE Paris, Boston University

For a long time religion was regarded as a marginal theme in both the public and academic discourse. This was due to a narrow and exclusivist understanding of “secularization” as well as to a diminishing social relevance of religion. But this has changed fundamentally with an increasing tendency towards globalization of the societies around the globe at the beginning of the 21st century: Religion can be an important factor for mutual understanding and act as “putty” for the cohesion of a pluralised society. Thus, the aim of the conference “Religious Pluralisation — A Challenge for Modern Societies” was to gain insights into ongoing scientific research projects and to explore socio-political options for dealing with religious pluralism. The conference was organized around five thematic clusters: Religion and Dialogue in Different Contexts, Community Building and Policymaking in European Perspectives, Contribution of Religious Education to Dialogue and Integration, Interreligious Forum on Dialogical Theology, as well as Interreligious Communication and the Role of Media.

Before going into detail, an important aspect of the conference should be mentioned: In addition to 30 internationally renowned speakers, 30 young researchers were given the opportunity to present their research in so-called Lightning Talks. Their projects focused on different dimensions of religious pluralisation located in different contexts such as the USA, Canada, Kenya, Indonesia, the UK, France, Spain, Ukraine, Israel, and various cities in Germany.
In his welcome address, WILHELM KRULL (Secretary General, Volkswagen Foundation) referred to Leibniz’ rationalist approach concerning theology and ecumenical issues. For Leibniz, an ideal religion should not rely on authority or dogmas but include mutual dialogue between all religions. Krull stressed that the conference’s focus could contribute to coping with the challenges of ambiguities, contradictions and rational gaps between co-existing religious orientations and mindsets originating from religious plurality in modern societies. WOLFRAM WEIBE (Academy of World Religions, University Hamburg), emphasizing that Leibniz’ attitude not to let religious dogma guide a person’s thinking, pointed out two major developments regarding religious plurality: On the one hand, there are different religious groups, some with a tendency towards an individualization of religion as individuals themselves interpret and practice religion. On the other hand, fundamentalist approaches emphasize the differences of various religions putting one above all others. According to Weiße, an increasing number of citizens are affiliated with different religious groups. Thus, his main question is: How can we address religious difference in a manner that allows for civil coexistence in a culture of mutual recognition?

HONEY DEIHIMI (Head of the Social Integration Unit of the Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration, Germany) addressed three additional problems in her introductory speech “The Role of Religion for Living Together in a Diverse Society”: 1) How much religion can a modern society bear? 2) How much diversity can it cover? 3) Who has which responsibilities? Deihimi emphasized that fear is a major factor for the loss of dialogue. She called for an open public discourse and a concerted effort to promote mutual understanding.

PETER BEYER (University of Ottawa) in his talk on “Global Migration, Religious Diversity and Dialogue” showed that global migration is one of the most influential factors of pluralisation. Another major aspect is modernization. For Beyer, modernization was often understood in a manner that excluded religiosity. Conversely, religiosity equated to less modernity. But this has changed with globalization, which leads to pluralisation and opens the door for religious plurality. Regarding the phenomena of diversity, Beyer introduced the term “glocalization” (local and global), which means that the same thing is done differently in different contexts. Glocalization has effects on the old understanding “Whose realm, his religion”. Beyer suggests dialogue as solution to the challenges
caused by diversity. This dialogue should be characterized by “deep equality”, meaning true equality in day-to-day affairs rather than equality on a theoretical level. Concluding, Beyer underlined that the problem could be the solution itself: “Unified in Diversity.”

**Peter Berger** (Boston University) looked at pluralisation as twofold: Plurality of religious beliefs and world views in the same society and, secondly, plurality in terms of the discourse between religious and secular groups. On both levels of pluralism, religion has an effect on individuals. It leads them to question why they made a specific decision and reflect on their actions. This questioning, though, leads to uncertainty rather than reassurance, and can open the door to fundamentalism as fundamentalist approaches often promise such a desired reassurance. The influence of religion is also to be seen on the level of institutions and the state. Berger drew attention to the necessity of separating state and religion, but the important question according to him is: What is the minimum of religious freedom guaranteed by the state?

The juxtaposition of modernity and religiosity approached by Beyer was shown for France by **Jean Paul Willaime** (Sorbonne, École pratique des hautes études). He focused on the recent discussions about the restrictive influence of the state, and chose the “burkini-case” as an example. Willaime emphasized that most restrictions are a result of a broad understanding and extensive interpretation of *Laïcité* and asked whether or not this concept should be revisited. Another problem in the case of France is the narrow understanding of “Frenchness”, which, according to Willaime, is no longer valid today. Fraternity, freedom and equality should be understood as allowing and not restricting diversity.

As if it were a practical example of the solution “Unified in Diversity” and of the cooperation of politics with different religious groups presented later by Nagel, **Jörg Stolz** (University of Lausanne) presented a study on religious congregations in Switzerland. He asked whether the established religious congregations are privileged when it comes to resources and if so, do they defend these privileges by excluding newcomer congregations. This is not the case as the established religions foster dialogue and acceptance of diversity. Motives behind this could be strategic ones to meet the expectations of state and society, to gain funding, or theological reasons like the Second Vatican Council in the Catholic case.
In his paper “Governance of Religious Diversity — Socio-Legal Dynamics”, **MATTHIAS KOENIG** (University of Göttingen, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity) dealt with a specific ambivalence concerning religious plurality. In modern society, secular law is often seen as a mode of integration and as a mechanism of conflict resolution. By that, it is assumed that religious freedom and state neutrality are the legal principles which serve as principles for governing religious diversity, including its “judicialization”. But judicial politics of religious diversity lead in Koenig’s opinion to both de-monopolization of the religious field and to their re-regulation.

**ALEXANDER-KENNETH NAGEL** (University of Göttingen, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity) presented his case study on urban governance of religious diversity in two German cities. He showed that the political orientation of the cities should be taken into account, because of its direct impact on urban governance of religious diversity as well as on interreligious initiatives and projects. The case studies show that the mayor plays an important role on such initiatives, which Nagel calls a “neopatrimonial style” of policy making.

Like Willaime, **JULIA MARTÍNEZ-ARIÑO** (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen) focused on the French case of laïcité but more on the local practice. She underlined that it is not possible to use laïcité as an analytic key for dealing with diversity in France. On the contrary, she suggested to look at local understandings of laïcité. On the one hand, local concepts can be open for the acceptance of diversity, while on the other hand they can be exclusive and can cause drawbacks which may have a negative impact on the discussion of diversity beyond the local level.

As a more concrete example of the (newly) established religious groups presented by Stolz and their effects on religious dialogue and education, **ANNA KÖRS** (Academy of World Religions, University of Hamburg) introduced the Hamburg model of a state contract with the Alevite and Muslim communities. The so called “Hamburg treaties” ensure the Muslim community the right to a denominational form of Islamic religious education. Körs underlined that the question of religious education became a powerful instrument to discuss diversity and to make different groups aware of their rights. Although the recognition of religious communities leads to a certain degree of
standardization, it makes secular groups aware to be recognized, which enables them to be part of the dialogue of diversity.

DÖRTHE VIeregge (Academy of World Religions, University of Hamburg) and THORSTEN KNAUTH (University of Duisburg-Essen) presented their case study on different models of religious education in the German cities Hamburg and Duisburg. They concluded that the Hamburg model of religious education leads students to more subjective answers to religious problems and to more independence and reflexivity in religious matters, whereas other models can lead to more standardized answers and a more or less artificial “interreligious cautiousness”.

Globalization and its effects on society were in a more specific sense discussed by ROBERT JACKSON (University of Warwick/Stockholm University) in his paper “Contribution of Religious Education to a Better Living Together”. He stressed that each person can have his own “truth” for himself but has to find a common language and common ground with others and cannot force his “neighbour” to accept this “truth”. Dialogue is necessary to find a common ground, therefore religious dialogue should be implemented in school education aimed at interreligious understanding and awareness of the multicultural diversity in society.

Concerning the question of the Relevance of Interreligious Dialogue in the Public Sphere, HANDAN AKSÜNGER (Academy of World Religions, University of Hamburg) drew attention to the effect of dialogue as a possibility to acknowledge certain “hidden” religious communities, like the Alevi faith, which is possibly based on a “hidden theology” like the taqiyya/takiye among the Alevi. ANANTANAND RAMBACHAN (Saint Olaf College, Minnesota) invited to understand interreligious dialogue as a “health care program for society”. He argued that the purpose of the dialogue is to form a community based on mutual trust and respect. Rambachan insisted that exchange with people of different religious faiths can lead to an “identity-creating” theology. PERRY SCHMIDT-LEUKEL (University of Münster) pointed out that religious diversity should rather be seen from a theological perspective and drew attention to the fact that mass media and religious and political leaders tend to entrench differences rather than promote objective discussion on religious plurality. The latter also has an impact on religious education, which could be the tool for arriving at mutual understanding in a
multicultural, diverse society. **JOHANNES FRÜHBAUER** (Stiftung Weltethos, Tübingen) focused on another aspect: that of communication. He stated that one of the most important aspects of dialogue is the communicative exchange of experiences.

**SALLIE B. KING** (James Madison University, Georgetown University) illustrated some examples of Buddhist answers to the questions raised in this forum. Although there are some theoretical bases and many practical examples for achieving cohesion in a multicultural country in Buddhist theology, she showed that there are also some extremist groups among Buddhist monks that promote Buddhist nationalism. **PAUL KNITTER** (Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York) suggested a more practical approach: A dialogical social engagement where the common fears and needs of people are the focus. Agreeing with Knitter, **EPHRAIM MEIR** (Bar-Ilan-University Ramat Gan) also stressed social engagement as a powerful instrument for interreligious dialogue and dialogical theology. According to him, it is important to revive the tradition of dialogue in every context. **CAROLA ROLOFF** (Academy of World Religions, University of Hamburg) called for dialogue on different levels of diversity: Gender dialogue and the role of women in the dialogue, i.e. interreligious and intrareligious dialogue as well as dialogue between religious and secular groups.

**MANUELA KALSKY** (University of Amsterdam) highlighted the Dutch project “niew wij” which uses the internet as a low key instrument to engage on e.g. virtual platforms to help create a new “we” through dialogue. She stressed the fact that there is more and more an “as-well-as” understanding instead of an “either-or”. **UWE JUSTUS WENZEL** (Neue Zürcher Zeitung) showed that most media rather focus on the “either-or” concept, especially when it comes to Islam and topics related to religiously motivated violence. Although many journalists try to promote the “as-well-as” concept and show the rational motivation of violence, the majority refers to religious motives without bringing forth a clear definition and understanding what “religion” means. He calls this “perceptual distortion”. **GRITT KLINKHAMMER** (University of Bremen) stressed a paradox: Entering into interreligious dialogue does not necessarily mean to be motivated by religious feelings (see Stolz). Like Nagel, Klinkhammer suspects that some dialogue circles rather have secular reasons and might politicize interreligious dialogue.
What impact does this have on further research in the field of interreligious dynamics? VOLKHARD KRECH (Bochum University and Käthe Hamburger Kolleg) referred to the need for historical and contemporary research on interreligious dialogue and diversity, both on the global as well as the local level. The distinction of “central” and “periphery” should be replaced by a polycentric paradigm and there should also be more contextualization of religious traditions, e.g. more emphasis on “what” religion is rather than asking for the “environment of religion”. LESLIE SEIDLE (Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP), Montréal) underlined this latter point by also criticising the negative effect of media. He divided the goal of further research into three major points: 1) Information, 2) Interaction, and 3) Involvement. For Seidle, the main objectives of future action is to break down stereotypes, identify promising models and good practice, support innovative projects, and shift focus away from highly politicized restrictions on the national level.

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