

Neither East nor West: Inter-religious Dialogue and Local Politics in the Age of Globalization

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Introduction: monotheism and space

First published in 1889, Rudyard Kipling’s famous “Ballad of the East and West” begins with two memorable and almost proverbial (but often misinterpreted) lines: “*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet / Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat*”. For a lecture on Muslim-Christian dialogue this seems to be a rather misleading motto. Christianity and Islam are neither “East” nor “West”; they are *universal* and, more and more, *global* religions. As the Koran says, God is Lord of the two Easts and of the two Wests, *rabbu l-mashriqayni wa-rabbu l-maghribayn* (Koran 55:17; see also 73:9); and Jesus requested his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them all the commands He gave them (Matthew 28:19) so that salvation may reach the remotest parts of the earth (Acts 13:47).

Looked at under the angle of peace-building, the universalism of both Christianity and Islam is an asset as well as a burden:

A *burden* because both religions’ hunger for souls, devotion, and submission cannot be saturated by local, territorial compromises. What a peaceful world this could be, if only Christianity would remain in the “West” and Islam in the “East”? But they cannot! Sure, the wars between Protestants and Catholics in 16th- and 17th-century Europe were domesticated by the formula “*cuius regio, eius religio*” (Peace of Augsburg, 1555) that established the right of the local rulers to decide the religion of their subjects. But, in the first place, this formula was rather *imposed* on the churches by pragmatic politicians. Secondly, it was not meant to be a final solution, but rather a temporary settlement. Thirdly, far from smothering the missionary zeal of Christianity, it rather helped redirect its momentum towards regions outside Europe.

Spreading the truth of the One God to all humankind is an essential part of monotheist religions and it is very unlikely that their respective adherents will be deterred by any territorial boundary from continuing that mission. What does this mean for the possibilities of Christianity and Islam to coexist peacefully side by side? In 1991, the Swiss Orientalist Fritz Meier (1912-1998) gave a sobering answer to that question: “Just as Muslims won’t be safe from Christian evangelism,” Meier said, “Christians won’t be safe from the Islamic *jihād*. The former is demanded by the Bible, the latter by the Koran. What is to be done to prevent the break-out of wars? The safest way

probably still is a sufficient military defense.”¹ This is perhaps not the kind of answer one would expect from a scholar who had devoted his long and quiet academic life in Basel² to the study of Islamic *mysticism*. But it comes quite close to the old peasant proverb: “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Fortunately, this is not the whole story. True, the universalist claims of monotheist religions have time and again been used to promote aggressive expansionism. But monotheism also advanced the idea of *universal peace* among the believers irrespective of their genealogical, regional or national affiliations. Furthermore, the emergence of the idea of *one* universal God was essential to promote the ecumenic idea of *one humankind* in which even unbelievers were considered to be creatures and instruments of the One God. Considering that de-humanizing one’s enemies is a way to legitimize merciless warfare, the idea of one universal humankind was a major contribution to humanize inter-human conflicts.

Plurality and difference as part of the human condition

Strictly speaking, it is not the *divine* component of monotheist religion that breeds war, but the *human* one. In the broadest sense, religion may be defined as the field of social acts, ideas and symbols that are linking human behavior to transcendental powers.³ Monotheist religion, thus, is not just about God, but about man’s relation with Him. God is One, but mankind is buzzing with differences, contradictions, and conflicts. The world of God is a *universe*; the world of man as a political being, however, is – as Carl Schmitt once put it – a “*pluriverse*”⁴. Problems arise when the universalism of monotheism is exploited and limited by the particularisms of that human pluriverse.

Plurality in time and space is a constituent part of the human condition. It is acknowledged by both Christianity and Islam as part of God’s will. We are creatures of One God, but children of many mothers. In Christianity, the plurality of mankind is theologically reaffirmed by the miracle of the *Pentecost* (Acts 2:1-14), when the disciples of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, suddenly acquired the ability to speak in other languages, so that listeners of many nations heard them speaking each in his native language. And in the first verse of *sūrat an-Nisā’*, the Koran calls the believers: “*wa-ttaqū llāha lladhī tasā’alūna bihi wa-l-arḥāma*” / “واتقوا الله الذي تساءلون به والأرحام” (Koran 4:1), meaning that man should fear and respect *God* (singular) and the *wombs* (*arḥām*, plural), i.e., the bonds of blood relationship. In *sūrat al-Ḥujurāt*, humans are reminded that God created them from a male and female and formed them into nations and tribes so that they may recognize each other (Koran 49:13).

¹ Fritz Meier, “Über die umstrittene Pflicht des Muslims, bei nichtmuslimischer Besetzung seines Landes auszuwandern,” *Der Islam* 68 (1991) 1, pp. 65-86 (p. 82, my translation, T.S.).

² On Meier’s biography, see Gudrun Schubert, “Fritz Meier (1912-1998),” in: *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 150 (2000) 1, pp. 5-10.

³ See Thomas Scheffler, “Religion, Violence, and the Civilizing Process: The Case of Lebanon,” in: Jean Hannover, ed., *Guerres civiles: Economies de la violence, dimensions de la civilité*, Paris/Beyrouth: Karthala/CERMOC, 1999, pp. 163-85 (p. 163).

⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen. Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1963, p. 54.

Religion and political power

Religion becomes an element of particular human power politics as soon and wherever its ‘*vertical*’ links between humans and God are used to create ‘*horizontal*’ bonds between humans and humans. Wherever ‘*vertical*’ links to transcendental powers are considered to be a source of success and salvation, they have been one of the most powerful incentives to bring people together, to make them meet in the same rituals and places, follow the same calendar, to eat together, marry one another and breed children together. It is this community-building potential that makes religion a basic element of power relations to be reckoned with even by the most agnostic politician.

As a community-building power, religion is confined by the *spatial* limits of inter-human communication. For the purposes of this paper, we may distinguish between a *local space*, where people regularly communicate on a face-to-face basis and know one another by personal experience, and, on the other hand, several spheres of *wider space* (for instance, provinces, regions, states, empires, the inhabited world as a whole, and the cosmos) – i.e., spheres to which people relate via intermediate channels, such as hearsay, rumors, messengers, delegates, governors, newspapers, books, television, etc. In early human history, the local dimension was the predominant and almost only dimension of human life. But in the course of history, matters have become nearly reversed, and the local sphere is now everywhere over-determined by its wider social and political contexts, be it national, macro-regional, or global ones.

Three traditional levels of inter-religious “dialogue”

What does this mean for the possibilities and limits of inter-religious dialogue? If we mean by inter-religious “dialogue” any form of non-violent interaction between adherents of different faiths, the range of possible types of dialogue becomes indefinitely large, at least in theory. For the purposes of this talk, however, it may be sufficient to distinguish between three categories of actors:

- (i) the local population, i.e., the people whose mental map was mainly formed by face-to-face interaction with other people living next to them in the villages, valleys, and towns they inhabited;
- (ii) the political rulers of the overarching political units; and
- (iii) the religious specialists of the different religions: priests, prophets, churchmen, religious scholars, etc.

Without going into historical detail here, I would argue that in the Middle East as well as in Europe, the readiness to tolerate other gods, rituals, and creeds was greatest on the local level and – to a lesser degree – on the level of the rulers.

On the *local* level, sharing sacred sites with members of other religions, participating in other religions’ feasts and rituals, and praying to saintly figures of other religions, has had a long tradition in the Middle East. The readiness to live side by side with adherents of other religions in the same village was

more a question of personal trust and time-tested relations than of theological purity.

Rulers, too, were often inclined to turn a blind eye on religious heterodoxy in their country as long as their subjects paid their taxes, refrained from riots, and did not conspire with foreign rulers. By and large, their attitudes towards adherents of other faiths depended more on the pragmatic imperatives of power consolidation than on personal piety. The reasons that made Roman emperors adopt Christianity were probably not that different from the reasons that made Henri IV of France convert from Protestantism to Catholicism, or persuaded the Shihāb Emirs of Lebanon to switch from Sunni Islam to the Maronite Church.

For a long time, those who displayed the most rigid and hostile attitude towards any compromise and syncretism in religious matters were usually the professional “representatives” and specialists of religion: priests who were interested in preserving the *ritual* purity of their community, and theologians who, concerned with the *intellectual* purity of their beliefs, tried to develop them into a coherent body of strict norms and unambiguous regulations and, hence, tended to exclude or devalue deviating norms and regulations.

The fourth dimension of dialogue: the global sphere and its limits

The flourishing industry of inter-religious dialogue as we know it today owes its major impulses to the emergence of a *fourth sphere* that we may call “world society” – a transnational world beyond the realms of local life, political rule and church politics, a sphere whose actors mainly consist of non-government organizations and committed individuals, be it laymen, politicians, businessmen, or religious leaders.

We may mention initiatives and institutions such as the World’s Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, the International Association for Religious Freedom (1900), the Religions of Empire Conference (London 1924), the World Congress of Faiths (London 1936), the Temple of Understanding (1960), the World Conference on Religion and Peace (1970), the Parliament of the World’s Religions (Chicago 1993, Cape Town 1999); as well as the many initiatives initiated by transnational bodies like the World Council of Churches, the Middle East Council of Churches, and the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council.

The merits of those projects can’t be denied: They gave (and give) a voice, an audience, a symbolic visibility, moral encouragement, and (sometimes) resources to peace-loving and open-minded individuals and minorities who have difficulties to be listened to in their own countries and churches. But whatever merits these global-level initiatives may have had, in the following I rather would like to discuss the *limits and obstacles* that the global sphere imposes on inter-religious dialogue.

(1) Numbers and negotiations

The first problem is a technical one: The complexity of dialogue depends not only on the theological-dogmatic differences at stake, but also on the

number of actors involved. The world of religions is much more complex and much less structured than the world of states. Today, the United Nations Organizations has 190 member states – and more than fifty years of UN history have taught us how difficult it is to build consensus among them, let alone arrive at any meaningful decision. But this is nothing compared to the technical difficulties of interfaith dialogue:

By mid-2000 there were, according to the second edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, “at least 10,000 distinct and different religions across the world”.⁵ In addition, only few of these religions are as strictly organized as the Roman Catholic Church with the Pope as an identifiable global leader. Most of them are more loosely organized. Not surprisingly, the authority of the official religious and spiritual leaders of these communities is often challenged by all kinds of counter-authorities: dissident priests, local preachers, charismatic lay persons, separatist congregations etc.

As a result, basic prerequisites for dialogue and negotiation remain quite diffuse: Who is supposed to dialogue with whom? Who represents whom and by whose authority?

(2) End of the Cold War

A second problem is the impact of international politics on inter-religious dialogue:

To a considerable degree, the flourishing of Muslim-Christian dialogue initiatives in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s has been facilitated by the Cold War between “East” and “West”, i.e., between international communism and Western democracies and their respective super-powers, Russia and America. Atheist communism was a common enemy to both Christianity and Islam, and Western governments had every reason to persuade Christian and Muslim religious leaders to postpone their doctrinal differences and focus instead on the battle against Soviet atheism. With the breakdown of communism in the late 1980s, inter-religious dialogue has lost this unifying enemy. The end of the Cold War reduced the pressing need to forge a worldwide multi-faith coalition of believers against organized atheism and increased anew the incentives for inter-religious competition.

(3) Globalization and inter-religious competition

Increasing competition between the world’s religions is all the more likely as global capitalism is also eroding the power of the nation-state and the welfare-state, i.e., institutions who, for a long time, had been serious competitors to the power of religious leaders and religious charitable institutions. The decline of the welfare state increases the importance of religious charitable work. Deteriorating standards in public schools and universities help enhance the attraction of religious schools. Social and political insecurity nourishes the longing for absolute, faith-based, certainty. And the more public morals and international law are twisted and mocked at with impu-

⁵ David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A comparative survey of churches and religions in the modern world*, 2nd. ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, vol. 2, p. 4.

nity by ruthless transnational “players”, religious bodies might become again the most important defenders of public ethics.

The growing opportunities offered to religious organizations by declining or failing states might lead to increasing inter-religious competition for adherents and converts. Sure, at the most general level, competition is a mechanism of all kinds of ‘markets’. It does not necessarily lead to violence – as is shown, for instance, by the competition between Mercedes, Volkswagen or BMW.⁶ Competition between different monotheist organizations, however, may turn violent and unforgiving if issues such as poverty, injustice, and oppression are involved.

Unfortunately, due to different demographic fertility rates, the center of gravity of most important world religions is increasingly switching to the countries of the global “*South*” in which precisely these problems – poverty, injustice, oppression, hunger and diseases, etc. – are endemic. Until now, for instance, Christianity has been often taken as a “Western” religion. But, as Philip Jenkins has shown, it is increasingly developing features of a “Southern” religion. According to Jenkins, there will be 2.6 billion Christians in the world in the year 2025, “of whom 633 million would live in Africa, 640 million in Latin America, and 460 million in Asia. Europe, with 555 million, would have slipped to the third place. Africa and Latin America would be in competition for the title of most Christian continent. ... By 2050, only about one-fifth of the world’s 3 billion Christians will be non-Hispanic Whites.”⁷

“Western” and especially European Christianity, due to centuries of domestication by the absolutist state, the nation state and the welfare state, has a reputation to be a particularly quietist, peace-promoting kind of religion, at least at the domestic level. Karl Marx once called it “the opium of the people”, comparing it to a strong tranquilizer.⁸ But with the “Southernization” of Christianity this might change. Theological innovations like Latin American “Liberation Theology” in the 1960s and 1970s, or the *Kairos* statement of South African Catholic and Protestant leaders of 1985 prove that under conditions of poverty, injustice, and oppression even Christianity might breed less quietist interpretations of religiosity. After all, it is important to remember that monotheist religions are not concerned with keeping *peace* at any price. They are concerned with salvation, i.e., *deliverance from Evil*. Prophetic religion arose out of deep political crises which could not be solved by the political classes.

Another problem intensifying inter-religious tensions is the globalization of information. Today, news about inter-religious clashes in one country are almost immediately broadcast by TV, radio, and internet to many other countries where they may help intensify inter-religious tensions in completely unrelated places.

Last not least, as Roland Robertson once put it, “the globalization process itself – the rendering of the world as a single place – constrains civilizations and

⁶ I owe this comparison to Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 118.

⁷ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 3.

⁸ Karl Marx, “Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie” [1844], in: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, vol. 1, Berlin: Dietz, 1969, p. 378.

societies (including assertive national-ethnic solidarities) to be increasingly explicit about what might be called their *global callings* (their unique geocultural or geomoral contributions to world history). In a nutshell, globalization involves the universalization of particularism, not just the particularization of universalism.”⁹

All in all, the global trends of the present world do not augur well for peaceful inter-religious dialogue in the coming decades. Religious communities in countries with a reasonable chance to stabilize peace at the local level are well advised to “*de-globalize*” their local dialogue(s), i.e., to focus on the solution of their local problems without linking them too much to global structures and events.

An important precondition to do this is to develop a mutual understanding of the particularities of the common space they are sharing with adherents of other religions, i.e., to develop an inter-religious “*theology of space*” centered around the question why God made so many religions, denominations, and nationalities coexist in a single land. It is local face-to-face encounters and spatial proximity that may help us best to test and overcome ideological stereotypes and discover the Other’s humanness and dignity. This, at least, is the message of Kipling’s *Ballad of the East and West* which describes the face-to-face confrontation between the son of a British colonel and a Pathan chieftain at the Afghan/North-West Indian frontier – two men who finally become friends because both of them arrive at respecting their opponent’s courage, generosity and manliness: “*But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, / When two strong men stand face to face, tho’ they come from the ends of the earth!*”

Lebanon – a laboratory of multicultural coexistence

De-globalizing dialogue may be a particularly difficult task for Lebanon, one of the most globalized countries of the Middle East and subject to many international pressures. At the same time, however, Lebanon, showcases a completely unique local experience.¹⁰ With 18 officially recognized sects from three monotheist religions, living together on only 10,452 km² in a conflict-ridden region that for centuries has been a frontier as well as a meeting-place between Christianity and Islam, Lebanon may be considered, as Pope John Paul II put it, as a “*terre exemplaire*”¹¹, a laboratory of multicultural coexistence in a global setting and a seismograph for cultural, economic and political developments in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The model of a tolerant, multi-confessional Lebanon, as Michel Chiha (*Shīhā*) once suggested, would have made the Zionist state of Israel look

⁹ Roland Robertson, “Globalization Theory and Civilizational Analysis,” *Comparative Civilizations Review* 15 (Fall 1987) 2, p. 21.

¹⁰ For the following part of my paper see my “Introduction: Religion between Violence and Reconciliation,” in: Th. Scheffler, ed., *Religion between Violence and Reconciliation*, Beirut/Würzburg: Ergon, 2002, pp. 1-27 (pp. 14 ff.).

¹¹ *Une espérance nouvelle pour le Liban: Exhortation apostolique post-synodale de Sa Sainteté Jean-Paul II aux patriarches, aux évêques, au clergé et à tous les fidèles du Liban*, Cité du Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997, § 119.

like an anachronism.¹² According to Chiha (1891-1954), Lebanon, conceived as a “country of associated confessional minorities”¹³, seemed to be obliged by its very nature to develop the mental and political virtues of tolerance and freedom that fitted best its liberal and cosmopolitan economy.¹⁴

Inter-religious dialogue: secular and ecclesiastic dimensions

However, even Chiha seemed not entirely convinced that *religious* leaders, clergymen and ‘*ulamā*’, would be the right persons to build that multi-confessional model society. In Chiha’s view, the main locus of inter-confessional association should be a secular *Parliament*, a national “assembly as a place of encounter and union of the communities, designed for the common control of political life”. He continued: “If you are suppressing the assembly you will inevitably shift the debate to the sanctuary or into its shadow, and to the same degree you will delay the formation of civil society.”¹⁵ Obviously, Chiha had not too much confidence in the civilizing qualities of „sanctuaries“. The “sanctuary” (meaning: the church, the mosque, the synagogue) was seen as a place of seclusion, as a refuge, not as a place of deliberating with the “other”.

In fact, one of the weak points of Lebanon’s confessionalist system before the war was the fact that trans-confessional interaction between the country’s *secular* elites was much more developed and institutionalized than communication between its respective *clergies*. There was the Chamber of Deputies and – on the cultural-intellectual level – the *Cénacle libanais* (1946-1974) as a regular meeting-place for the secular elites. Comparable national forums on the side of the *clergies* did not exist.

The “*First Muslim-Christian Convocation*”, held at Bhamdoun (April 22-27, 1954), is often praised as the first step to Muslim-Christian dialogue.¹⁶ But a closer look at the proceedings of that conference shows that the project had not grown out of inner-*Lebanese* discussions. Sure, already at that time, we see the young Ghassan Tuéni playing a most active role in that conference; but according to one of its conveners, Garland Evans Hopkins, a Methodist churchman and vice-president of the “American Friends of the Middle East,” the idea to launch the Muslim-Christian convocation was born during a conversation he had had in the palace of the King of Libya in early 1952 (i.e., shortly before the Egyptian Revolution).¹⁷ By and large, the whole project was suspected to be a brainchild of global Cold War strategy and had to be given up a few years later.

¹² Cf. Michel Chiha, “Lebanon in the World” [1951], in: idem, *Lebanon at Home and Abroad* [1966], Beirut: Fondation Chiha, 1994, p. 130.

¹³ Chiha, *Liban d’aujourd’hui* [1942], Beirut: Fondation Chiha, 1994, pp. 59, 67.

¹⁴ Cf. Chiha, *Propos d’économie libanaise* [1965], Beirut: Fondation Chiha, 1994, 9, 48-51.

¹⁵ Chiha, *Liban d’aujourd’hui*, loc. cit., p. 59 (my translation, T.S.).

¹⁶ See Juliette Nasri Haddad, “Trente cinq années de rencontre musulmans-chrétiens,” *Travaux et Jours*, no. 59, 1997, pp. 31-47 (p. 32 f.); Augustin Dupré la Tour s.j. et Hisham Nashabé (eds.), *Déclarations communes Islamo-Chrétiennes, 1954c.-1995c / 1373h.-1415h. : Textes originaux et traductions françaises*, Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1997, pp. 11-16.

¹⁷ *The Minutes of the First Muslim-Christian Convocation, Bhamdoun, Lebanon, April 22-27, 1954*, n.p. [New York]: Continuing Committee on Muslim-Christian Cooperation, n.d. [1955 ?], pp. 29-30.

Another important step towards Muslim-Christian dialogue in Lebanon barely displayed its genuine religious dimensions: On October 23, 1959, President Fu'ād Shihāb (r. 1958-62), upon consultation of Mgr Jean Maroun, then Lebanon's delegate at the UNESCO, commissioned a French Dominican priest, the Reverend Père Louis-Joseph Lebreton (1897-1966), an outstanding pioneer of Catholic development theory and practice, and his Institute for Research and Training in Development, commonly known as IRFED (*Institut International de Recherche et de Formation en vue du Développement integral et harmonisé*), to undertake a systematic survey of Lebanon's socio-economic potential and deficits in order to prepare a comprehensive development plan for Lebanon.¹⁸ Between 1960 and 1964, a team of IRFED specialists worked in Lebanon and finally came up with a three volumes report.¹⁹ The IRFED report was the first systematic study of social and regional disparities undertaken in Lebanon; and it focused on the needs of the socially most disadvantaged regions: the South, the Bekaa, Sidon, and Tripoli, i.e., regions which are mainly populated by Shiites and Sunnis. Apart from its thought-inspiring effect on young Lebanese intellectuals, the IRFED mission was an enlightened, yet low key Christian contribution for redrawing the social balance in Lebanon in favor of its disadvantaged Muslim population.

On the level of religious leaders, however, inter-religious dialogue before the war was mainly the concern of a few far-sighted and committed individuals such as Metropolitan Georges Khudr (b. 1923) and Imam Mūsā al-Ṣadr (1928-78). It was not before 1993 that a permanent "National Muslim-Christian Committee for Dialogue" (*al-lajnah al-waṭaniyyah al-islāmiyyah al-masīḥiyyah li-l-ḥiwār*) was founded in which the religious heads of the country's main Muslim and Christian sects are represented. The Committee takes position on numerous issues of national interest. Its activities are broadly reported in the Lebanese press. In postwar Lebanon, problems of Muslim-Christian dialogue also receive a lot of scholarly and theological attention in Lebanon, and some of the country's academic institutions are primarily devoted to the promotion of Muslim-Christian mutual understanding, most notably the *Institut d'Etudes Islamo-Chrétiennes*, founded in 1977/1980 at the Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut, and the *Center for Christian-Muslim Studies*, founded in 1995 at the Greek-Orthodox University of Balamand.

It remains an open question to what degree the open-minded individuals participating in these inter-religious dialogue initiatives are representing the real state of mind of the communities they come from or whether their much-publicized dialogue activities are just concealing the inertia of the "rest" of their co-religionists.

Nevertheless, despite the scars and wounds left by the civil war, Lebanon's religious leaders, in my opinion, are in a much better position to manage local inter-religious dialogue than religious leaders in many other countries:

¹⁸ Cf. Boutros Labaki, "Dans un Liban qui panes ses plaies, la pensée de L.-J. Lebreton omniprésente", in: *L'Économie humaine et la dynamique du développement à l'heure de la mondialisation, Actes de la rencontre organisée par Les Amis du Père Lebreton, Centre L.-J. Lebreton, IRFED, Economie et humanisme, ... Paris, 13 novembre 1998*, Paris: Centre L.-J. Lebreton, 1999, pp. 43-45.

¹⁹ *Besoins et Possibilités de Développement Du Liban: Étude préliminaire, Mission IRFED, Liban, 1960-1961*, 3 vols., Beirut: République Libanaise, Ministère du Plan, 1960-1961.

In Lebanon, inter-religious dialogue is neither a vague “dialogue of cultures”, nor a series of uncommitted encounters between academic cosmopolites of different denominational affiliations. Religious leaders and institutions in Lebanon are powerful political actors providing guidance not only in spiritual matters but also in political, social, and cultural ones. Due to the decline of secularist parties during and after the war, their visibility in the public square is much stronger today than before 1975. Ecclesiastical bodies and their filiations are a thriving part of national civil society, and, at the same time, help connect the country to its Diaspora and to religious networks outside Lebanon. Besides, due to the deficits of Lebanon’s public welfare system, more and more Lebanese, impoverished during and after the war, have become increasingly dependent on the charity of their respective religious communities.

Above all, however, religious leaders have much more to lose from *non*-dialogue and from unforgiving inter-religious feuding. Their privileged role in Lebanese society and their outstanding constitutional rights are mainly due to the fact that there is a *balance* to maintain between many religious communities, and that there is not *one* established state religion, but many officially acknowledged religions. Preserving that balance, rather than eliminating it, cultivating religious difference without using it for oppressive purposes should be a vital concern for every religious hierarchy in Lebanon.