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"Between God and Mankind. Chances and Challenges of Islamic Anthropologies"- September 12 and 13, 2018

Report by Alexander Boehmler, Baptiste Brodard, Dilek Ucak Ekinci and Nadire Mustafi

The conference "Between God and Mankind. Chances and Challenges of Islamic Anthropologies" was organised by the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society of the University of Fribourg with the support of the Mercator Foundation Switzerland and the Swiss National Science Foundation. The evening programme on September 12 included a public lecture and a panel discussion, while different panels took place on September 13, in which various researchers reflected and discussed different dimensions of human existence.

September 12th, 2018

Dr Asma Lamrabet (Rabat) gave the evening programme's keynote speech, a gender perspective on Islamic anthropology, speaking in French in a very crowded auditorium of the University of Fribourg. Prof Hansjörg Schmid, the director of the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society, briefly introduced the topic of the conference. Then he went on to present the activities of the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society and its central aim to address contemporary social debates while including the perspective of various Islamic traditions and discourses and using an academic and multidisciplinary approach.

Mr. Andrew Holland, the Director of the Mercator Foundation Switzerland, explained that we live in a pluralistic society, which led the Foundation to think about the ways in which our society addresses this diversity. Diversity within our society is a chance but also a challenge, which can be overcome through mutual understanding and knowledge of other cultures. After having mentioned the positive outcomes of the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society, he added that Muslims were often depicted negatively in the media, with actually very little knowledge of Muslim life. The University and such a conference hence gave the opportunity to understand Islam and Muslims better.

Dr Lamrabet, whose speech bore the title "*Women in the Qur'an: a feminist lecture of the sources)*", first pointed out the specifics of her own perspective as a medical doctor living in Morocco, respecting her own Muslim tradition but wanting to reform it. Therefore, she considers necessary to look at Muslim traditions in a way that is first reformist and second feminist. Many people, either in Muslim countries or in European ones, were skeptical about

whether Islam and feminism could go together, but for Dr Lamrabet, such attitudes are resulting from false understandings of what feminism is about. She prefers a wide definition of feminism, encompassing all kinds of struggle against gender-based oppression, in all cultures, be it in theory or in practice. Her own work focusses on decolonisation and human rights, and is not aiming at opposing men, but cooperating with them for the sake of liberating society as a whole.

She went on to describe recent women's movements in Arab and Muslim countries. Whereas some may feel uncomfortable with the term 'feminism', many women are tired of others speaking in their name, be it local men, religious authorities or Western scholars. Arab and Muslim women want to reclaim their own voice, own their history and experiences. Still, she admitted, only a small part of all women living in the concerned countries are active in this movement.

Issues of gender equality remain unresolved on a worldwide scale, but there are local differences. Religions are an important part of culture, helping people to make sense of the world, but often their authority to provide moral orientation and guidance is exploited in order to support claims for political power. This happens in all religions, and unwillingness to share the power explains why religious actors often fail to support women's rights.

In Muslim majority contexts, religion plays an especially large role, but Lamrabet is convinced this is not for spiritual reasons. Rather, religion is used as an identity marker when confronting modernity and Western claims of supremacy. In this context, it is important to understand one's own and others' cultures on their own terms, and to have the courage to self-analyse and self-criticise.

There is not one Islam, but there are many: different local cultures, but also different approaches within the Islamic tradition such as Qur'anic exegesis, jurisprudence and mysticism (sufism). Misunderstandings need to be clarified, for example, only 5 to 6% of all Qur'anic verses are juridical, usually referring to concrete historical situations. No one but ISIS, says Lamrabet, advocates for the return of warfare and slavery. Contemporary challenges concern jurisprudence, including issues of marriage, divorce and inheritance, where established rulings come from another context and should not be blindly followed anymore.

But this does not mean getting rid of Muslim theological discourse, rather it should be revived by the following approach: people need to stop taking Qur'anic verses out of context, approach issues such as women's rights within the Qur'an's global perspective and look at the aims of the Qur'an: furthering well-being, abolishing compulsion and establishing justice. There are four dimensions of the Qur'an: A universal ethics based on monotheism, knowledge and reason; Humanism based on mercy and justice; Normativity: principles such as responsibility, integrity and compassion; and finally a sociocultural dimension of the Qur'an reflecting the time of its revelation.

Lamrabet insists that the last dimension is the only one causing problems today. The refusal to re-read the Islamic tradition is ingrained in the established institutions. One should have the courage to inquire, to ask questions and to engage in social and political activism. This is based on Islam's own principles. Therefore, it is important to spread awareness of different ways to read the Qur'an so that Muslims could stop using Islam as an identity marker with the

aim of rejecting the other, but to understand the Qur'an rather as an ethics respecting human diversity.

Mr. Mauro Dell'Ambrogio, State secretary for Education, Research and Innovation described the relationship between ethics and law from his own background as a lawyer. He appreciates the research done by the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society and its aim to enhance scientific debates on both ethical and normative aspects of Muslim life in Switzerland.

Finally, a discussion was held between Asma Lamrabet and three local stakeholders from the Fribourg area: Dr Michela Vilani, a sociologist at the University of Fribourg; Pascale Michel, director of the women-only association *espacefemmes* and Mohamed Ali Balbout, President of the local Muslim association AMF.

Michel spoke about a diversity of ways to practise Islam, but worried about reduced working abilities of those strictly practising the Ramadan fast, especially when taking care of children. Lamrabet said there were few such problems in Morocco, since fasting practices were adapted to a person's health and strength. Whether and how to fast should be a personal decision.

This was followed by a discussion between Batbout and Lamrabet, in which Batbout spoke of a strong role of women both in Islamic history and his own association, whereas Lamrabet responded that there was an almost universal hegemony of misogynist doctrine throughout Islamic history, including great thinkers such as ar-Razi and al-Ghazali. For her, the most important is that there should not be one single opinion, but a debate about and between several perspectives.

Vilani then spoke about how young Muslim women in Switzerland are trying to be sexually active while hiding it from their families. Lamrabet added that this is also an identity issue: controlling women's bodies is seen by many Muslims to be a way of affirming one's Muslim identity. To her, the Qur'an's rule that adultery may only be punished if there are four witnesses means the private sphere of people needs to be respected. She also advocated for sexual education, so that people could gain a healthy understanding of sexuality.

The evening ended with some questions from the public. One question was about marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man. Lamrabet considers that since the Qur'an explicitly allows mixed marriage for Muslim men, the same should apply to Muslim women, and her answer would be that whatever applies to men also needs to apply to women. She also finds it frustrating that many people convert for marriage in order to please a state or family

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that requires it, while both the "convert" and the spouse from a Muslim family are not religious at all.

While refraining from attacking or even naming people who hold contrary positions, Lamrabet made a strong case for her own ideas. For the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society, her speech and the following discussion reached two important goals: engaging with diversity within Islam by giving visibility to different positions, and building a link between international Islamic discourses and the local Muslim population in Switzerland.

13th of September 2018

The next day's conference started with a lecture by Prof Dr Dr Rotraud Wielandt of the University of Bamberg on "Key topics of anthropological thought in Islamic theology and philosophy through the ages".

She showed that questions of basic anthropological relevance were dealt with on the basis of two key issues: the question of human freedom and the concept of man as a rational being.

First, she pointed out that in early Islam, freedom was always discussed in connection with human action and divine predestination. Theological opinions in this regard diverged not because of anthropological differences, but rather because they prioritised different aspects of the divine nature. Man's reason, the gradual development of his abilities and the extent to which he can acquire knowledge were intensively dealt with in classical Islamic philosophy.

Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina formulated theories about the teaching of the intellect, influenced by Neoplatonist thought. Both believed that philosophers could acquire the same kind and

amount of religious knowledge as prophets. What distinguished philosophers from prophets was their extraordinary imagination, by which they transformed the abstract divine truth into images for ordinary people.

Ibn Sina added intuition, which he called "highest form of human rationality", to the abilities of the prophets. Through this extremely fast and sharp kind of knowledge, prophets have direct access divine truth, while philosophers reach it only at the end of a long and laborious chain of syllogisms.

Prof Wielandt recognised an "anthropological turn" in the works of Islamic theologians and philosophers since the early 20th century. Influenced by the ideas and thinkers of the Enlightenment, discussions focussed increasingly on the notion of "man". Most contemporary Muslim thinkers consider that one cannot reflect on man without also reflecting on God, rediscovering the anthropological content of the Qur'an. In the late 19th century, many Muslim theologians and philosophers no longer saw reason as a means of gaining knowledge of God, but started to see reason as a scientific rationality by which to explore the laws of nature and make them usable for one's own civilisation. Discussions about reason and revelation now centred on whether belief in the truth of the Qur'anic message is compatible with the findings of modern science. The assumption that the validity of scientific discoveries cannot be questioned on religious grounds had gained acceptance among Muslim intellectuals.

Prof Wielandt's speech was followed by the first panel, entitled 'Man as a Rational Being and the Question of Human Autonomy'. Alexander Boehmler summarized main thoughts from Prof Ben Abdeljelil's speech, who unfortunately was unable to attend. Prof Ben Abdeljelil is a strong advocate of using the work of the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) as a central reference for the construction of Muslim anthropology. He began by describing the context in which Ibn Rushd was writing; the Middle Ages' Aristotelian century in Andalusia. Although certain educated Muslims had a huge interest in philosophy, particularly in Aristotelian philosophy, there were some who saw an incompatibility between *kalam*, i.e. the approach of dialectical theology, and the philosophical Aristotelian perspective. The dominant opinion of *kalam* taught that God was created out of nothing and that God created everything that happens. In Aristotle's concept however, God was the cause of all causes, the form of all forms, and the unmoved mover. He had not created the world out of nothing, but he created it from *Hyle*, the eternal matter.

Existence is often divided in two categories that are clearly distinct from each other: the material or sensual existing and the intelligible existing. In contrast, Ibn Rushd considered that intelligible existence in the knowledge of its existence is the same thing as the material sensual existence, trying to offer an alternative perspective to the opinion prevalent in *kalam*. He also postulated a symmetry or congruence between the sensual and intelligible world, calling them equivalent.

Ibn Rushd develops a positive view of human reality, describing it as the result of human agency. Therefore, he considers the human being to be an active being who has not only the ability to intervene, but also to change the world in order to realise humanity in a masterful

way. This is due to Ibn Rushd's definition of the universal, which has no real separate existence, but exists only as knowledge in the intellect or in the soul.

Dr Markus Kneer (University of Philosophical and Theological Studies Münster) began with citing a famous poem called 'Message from the East' from Muhammad Iqbal. For Dr Kneer, this poem with his dialogue between God and Man illustrated responsive liberty, the central point of Mohamed Aziz Lahbabi's concept, a contemporary Moroccan philosopher.

He went on to speak about Mohamed Aziz Lahbabi`s personalist philosophy while presenting four steps: First, an outline of the philosophy of the person, then how the human person is constituted in Islam, thirdly his argument for freedom of reason, and finally a conclusion.

The way Lahbabi formulates his questions shows that he wants to develop an alternative to the dominant postcolonial discourses, such as argued by Frantz Fanon or Albert Memmi. For Lahbabi, it is not the nation, the culture or the religion, which must be liberated, but the human person who lives and acts within these frames of nation, culture, and religion. 'Liberation', a word used frequently in postcolonial discourse, therefore is taken to mean personalisation. The theoretical framework of Lahbabi's approach consists in his analysis of the personalisation process as a decisive shift from an existence in fear to an existence as a mere personal being. Through his phenomenological approach, he argues the attaining of self-consciousness to be the decisive step in the process of becoming a person. He identifies this step in the Islamic religious experience with the capacity of pronouncing oneself a Muslim, the *shahada*.

He then outlines the fields of personalisation in distinguishing two major areas: the horizontal and deepening dimensions. In contrast to Sartre's concept of the self, Lahbabi understands the constitution of the self to be embedded in an intersubjective process, where personalisation happens in various dimensions: a flow of time, spatial horizon, world of language, emotion, as well as in a world of values and commitment.

Time as history comes about when the self experiences time as time shared with others, and realises that time is going on. Horizons come about by the self locating itself spatially in relation to others. Language, meaning communication, emerges only through interacting with others. The same applies to one's inner, mental life and emotions. The self, i.e. the person, transcends its own boundaries in relationships with others, and thereby goes beyond itself. The other therefore is omnipresent in the constitution of the person.

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The process of transcending the boundaries of the self that depends on the relation to other beings leads to the demand that each person should strive for self-fulfilment. Muslim personalism is based on finding a balance between the self, the we, and the others.
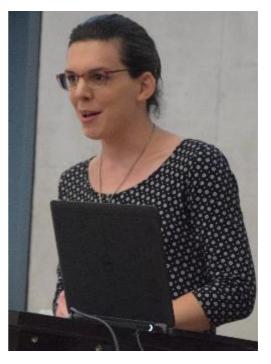
The second panel was entitled "Man as Created and Worshipping Being". It addressed the conception of mankind according the Qur'an, at a more theological level. This subject was first approached by Dr Saban Ali Düzgün, Professor of Islamic Theology at Ankara University in Turkey. He gave an interesting presentation about the topic "Between Dependence and Independence: W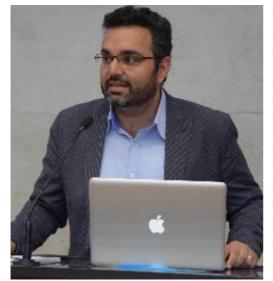orshipping as the Basis of Holistic Personality", using verses of the Qur'an in order to develop his own thesis. He namely focussed on the meaning of the term "worship", developing a deep etymological analysis of the term, referring to classical theologians such as Fakhraddin ar-Razi and Ibn al-Arabi. Starting from the concept of worship, he led the audience to the analysis of other terms such as intentionality, cognition and freedom.

Asked questions on societal integration during the following discussion, Düzgün suggested not to use terms like 'Islam in the West', since doing so would lead to an *islamisation* of discourses, which finally prevent approaching societal questions from an anthropological point of view.

The next speaker was Ms. Mira Sievers, M.A., from Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany. Her presentation was entitled "When I have Shaped him and Breathed from My Spirit into Him" – Creatureliness as a Key Concept of Qur'anic Theology", referring especially to verse 72 of Sura Sad in the Qur'an. She explored the concept of "creatureliness" based on different Qur'anic verses.

Both presentations asked deep theological questions using references from the Qur'an but also from ancient Muslim theologians' works. Both lectures led to a deep reflection on the potential of Qur'anic analysis and a theology that could promote unconditional respect for human dignity.

The third panel was entitled "Man as Ethical Being and the Example of the Prophet" and introduced two ways of looking at Muhammad's example in order to gain an understanding of what his biography could mean for developing an Islamic social ethics. Sajjad Rizvi, Associate Professor of Islamic Intellectual History at the University of Exeter, focussed on the notion of *theosis*, which he defined as the acquisition of sage-like properties and a resemblance to the divine. This concept, found in philosophical and mystical discourses within Islam, was prominent in the thought of Mulla Sadra, who considered imitating the friends of God (saints) to be an efficient way towards attaining a status of being close to God. Finally, Rizvi pointed out that whereas historically, concepts of *theosis* often were elitist, they do not necessarily need to be so. A philosophical quest for perfection and transcending the limits of every day existence is not only open to everyone, but can contribute towards a democratic society.

Amir Dziri, Professor for Islamic Studies at the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society, then focussed on *kalam* – Islamic systematic theology, and *sira*, the biographical literature written in the first centuries of Islam, and had a critical look at the perception of Muhammad in these traditional Islamic disciplines. Dziri showed how the perception of Muhammad changed throughout time: Whereas at first, it was assumed that every man had an inner disposition towards prophethood, later dogma privileged Muhammad himself. Ash-Shafi, founder of one of the four basic schools of Sunni Muslim normativity, went as far as to teach an equivalence of the Sunna, the Prophet's example, to

the Qur'an. Dziri then went on to discuss problematic aspects of overidealising Muhammad, and noted that it is possible for Muslims to honour their Prophet while avoiding excesses.

The speaker of the last session was Mona Siddiqui, Professor of Islamic and Interreligious Studies at Edinburgh University, who began her lecture "Man, Morality and Meaning: the Challenge of Modernity" with two personal

anecdotes to show persons' lives caught in a tension which has probably always existed in the lives of the faithful. She pointed out that Muslims are doing things without thinking whether it is the right decision islamically. This shows how in recent times there are many competing sources of knowledge and how the religious knowledge as a sacredness of practical behaviour falls away. She indicates that whereas traditional faith sees humankind in relation to the divine, modernity emphasizes man's relationship to other human.

Liberal democracies thrive on people of different backgrounds and beliefs being able to live together. However, this seems to face difficulties with migration, refugees, Muslim presence and the rise of the right-wing sentiment across Europe. The political and media narrative implies that Muslims always seem to be at odds with European ideals of liberalism, freedom and tolerance. Siddiqui sees this view as a postcolonial lens, which make it necessary to argue for a complex understanding of histories. Hence, according to her, we have to abandon the idea of insisting carelessly on historical identities, since it would lead to societal division in the present.

Dr Joshua Ralston, an expert of Christian-Muslim relations at the University of Edinburgh, finally helped to summarize all the different inputs expressed throughout the conference. He concluded that European societies are at a philosophical, theological and political junction with several challenges. One of the main challenges according to Ralston lies in the fact that political, cultural and social cohesion in Modern times cannot be claimed to be as self-evident as it has been in pre-Modern times. In order to manage present-day diversity, he argues, it is necessary to regain more consciousness about ways and forms of mutual encounter and knowledge. Religious resources, while based on rational ethics, could contribute to such a Modern culture of mutual encounter.

Esma Isis-Arnautovic finally concluded with a remarkable statement, that is, although there are so many different aspects on Islamic anthropologies to discuss, the conference began with questions about society and also ended with questions about society.