

Interfaith Dialogue Initiatives for Human Rights Promotion in Egypt

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The relationship between religion and human rights is much contended. The question that this research asks is how can interfaith dialogue lead to strengthen human rights. The research builds on the history and structures of inter-communal relations as well as current initiatives of interfaith dialogue in Egypt in order to try to understand the weaknesses of interfaith dialogue initiatives in the Egyptian setting. This research brings forth a new call for democratized interfaith dialogue that assists rather than weaken human right promotion in Egypt.

Keywords: Human Rights, Egypt, Religion, Dialogue, Democracy, Interfaith.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE INITIATIVES FOR HUMAN RIGHTS PROMOTION IN EGYPT

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INTRODUCTION

“I come from the Coptic Christian community in Egypt, a community that have often been regarded as a minority and was often marginalized. As a result, I grew up finding myself in a community that is closed on itself and isolated from the bigger community. Until recently, I knew very little about my identity as an Egyptian citizen, about other Egyptians coming from different religious backgrounds- except from the negative picture that was depicted to us about the violence of Islam. All of this changed when I started working in a community development project that brought me in contact with the wider community, helped me break a lot of

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stereotypes about “other” Egyptians, and made me understand what does it mean to be an Egyptian citizen. Since then, I became very interested and focused on transferring the same experience to my friends and acquaintances in the church and other Christian communities”

-Mirette, Egypt (2011)⁽¹⁾

Mirette’s example shows how daily life interfaith dialogue can break down stereotypes between members of different faith and enhance relations between Muslim and Christian communities. It may involve individual citizens, or representatives of institutions. It can involve discussions that aims to take action to assist communities to get along, or resolve inter-communal tensions, or just increase understanding and trust among communities.

Today, inter-religious dialogue in Egypt takes many forms. There is dialogue in governmental committees, civil society organizations, dialogue and development arms of the religious institutions and off course the media. In this respect, late Egyptian Islamic thinker Gamal al- Banna pinpointed the weaknesses of interfaith dialogue in Egypt. He stated that

“interreligious dialogue is not a good way of treating religious matters, mainly because the religious institutions provide great obstacles, preventing good understanding. These institutions are like lawyers whose mission is the defense of their particular religion. This is because they are mere institutions and not the real religion itself. They have monopolized the defense of religion. Therefore, the dialogue with these institutions is not only difficult but has no meaning at all. If we speak about beliefs as such, we will go nowhere. The real treatment of this matter must happen among the

freethinkers of all religions and should not be initiated by institutions such as the Church or al-Azhar. The institutions cannot compromise⁽²⁾.”

Thus, interfaith dialogue thus has a great potential in promoting a culture of tolerance and acceptance of diversity thus reinforcing a human rights culture. Yet, the risks in interfaith dialogue as an approach to human rights promotion are various. At worst, such a dialogue, structured in an exclusive fashion, may exclude some human rights or some communities' rights rather than promote human rights for all. Thus some values of human rights may be compromised.⁽³⁾ Yet, on the positive side a religious consideration may be a good lead into human rights promotion. Presented on its own, human right values may be seen as an alien imposition.

This paper tries to shed light on the types of interreligious dialogue taking place in Egypt. It consists of two parts the former is theoretical, attempting to understand the conceptual basis through which dialogue between interfaith communities can lead to human rights promotion. Does the human rights promotion happen as a byproduct of that dialogue, or must its main purpose be to discuss issues pertaining to human rights? Does all interfaith dialogue necessarily lead to such promotion or only a few and if so what are their characteristics. Moreover, how can we maximize human rights culture promotion in coming dialogues?

The latter part of the paper is an empirical investigation of the Egyptian context for dialogue and mapping the most important interreligious dialogue initiatives today. It analyzes the current characteristics of interfaith dialogue initiatives in Egypt, connecting it to background information on Egyptian culture and the status of religion in that culture. It aims to analyze the actors involved in interreligious dialogue and the structure of the dialogue taking place. It questions the purpose of dialogue conducted by the different

organizations and entities examined. It also analyses the weaknesses of this dialogue in Egypt. The paper concludes with a list of recommendations through which to help foster human right values through interreligious dialogue initiatives.

PART I: DEFINITIONS AND THEORY

DEFINING INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Interfaith dialogue is a very broad term referring to the “cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, (i.e. "faiths") at both the individual and institutional level.”⁽⁴⁾ Interfaith dialogue involves numerous initiatives and has many paradigms. The content of dialogue can also differ. One can be a theological dialogue to understand the faith of other religion. Another type is a cultural dialogue to reach a common understanding on issues such as on citizenship, its equal rights and duties. In this respect, inter-religious dialogue is a dialogue that deepens the values of mutual co-existence and shared citizenship and ultimately human rights⁽⁵⁾. Some dialogues are planned and structured, while others take place by virtue of exposure, as in Mirette’s example above.

Based on this understanding on the possibility of having a religious basis for respect and adherence to human rights, different of types of interfaith dialogue can be addressed.⁽⁶⁾ Below we differentiate types of interreligious dialogue, by structure, aim, actors and content. This will be followed by an explanation of the factors and characteristics of interfaith dialogue that are to be taken into consideration in order to effectively promote human rights.

BY STRUCTURE

Dialogue may be structured or unstructured. *Structured dialogue* is a dialogue that is planned before hand and involves an agenda and points of discussion to lead from problem, identification discussion to solution. This dialogue involves all relevant stakeholders in a relevant context. This dialogue benefits is maximized if the stakeholders voices and contributions are equally balanced in the dialogic process.

Guided dialogue is a form of structured dialogue that has a power unbalance among the stakeholders. A stakeholder or a group of stakeholders can impose a specific position over others. This form of dialogue may be counterproductive to inter-communal relations, but it aims at reaching a specific, pre- set goal.

Unstructured dialogue, is a dialogue that may not lead to a specific solution or adopt a particular stream from problem to solution. This is usually a form of dialogue that is characterized by egalitarianism between the different stakeholders. Their discussions are valuable due to its rigor and power of argument rather than by its applicability or by the acceptance of major actors of it.

BY AIM

As we stated that dialogue can have different aims. A type of dialogue can be *Action Oriented dialogue*. This type of dialogue aims to reach an common action, position, policy, resolution or recommendations to defuse tensions or improve inter-communal relations.

On the contrary to this type of dialogue, dialogue may take place in order to “actively create greater mutual understanding and greater insight.” Here the goal of dialogue is not to reach the same understanding, nor is action oriented. Parties in a dialogue can come out of it having different points of views. They will however, have

greater and deeper understanding of the other's point of view.

BY CONTENT

The content of dialogue is also indicative. *Theological dialogue* includes discussions on theological and philosophical issues. Muslims and Christians, for discuss their conceptions of God, revelation, prophecy on an abstract level. The basis of this discussion is the examination of one's religion and interpretation of religious texts⁽⁷⁾.

Cultural Dialogue on the other hand attempts to build the philosophical and intellectual foundations for resolving practical issues of common concern. For example, reaching agreements on the relationship between religion and the state, the rights of religious minorities, issues such as interreligious marriage, religious conversions.. etc. This type of dialogue is often attempts to reach common action⁽⁸⁾.

BY ACTORS

An important type of dialogue "*institutional dialogue*" which is an organized effort by religious institutions to initiate and facilitate various kinds of dialogue meetings. It enhanced communication between institutional representatives of religious organizations. This encompasses much of the work done by the Azhar and the Coptic churches in Egypt⁽⁹⁾.

"*Elite Dialogue*" is different from institutional dialogue in that those who engage in the dialogue are not religious or governmental leaders, but rather freethinkers, intellectuals, autonomous professors, judges, scholars that act on their behalf and do not represent any institution. These as Dr. Al- Banna noted are more free thinking and

less “dogmatic” than religious leaders.

On the contrary, “*grassroots dialogue*” is the ultimate form of democratized dialogue. This does not involve leaders or experts. It involves the people themselves with their neighbors, friends, colleagues and larger community. This type of dialogue comes after steps have been taken to enhance trust and ensuring respect for beliefs of the other⁽¹⁰⁾.

It is important to note also the *spaces for dialogue* are also worth analysis. Is the forum for dialogue a space provided by religious institutions, local civil society organizations, international interfaith organizations, public or private schools or universities, individuals or even just the street (as in the case of the January 25th demonstrations).

VISIONS INTER- CULTURAL DIALOGUE

Discussing the relationship between human rights and interfaith dialogue is a topic that stems directly from visions on intercultural dialogue. On the one hand, the values of human rights are engrained in Western culture, yet, on the other hand, Islamic countries have a somewhat different reference, which is Islam. The topic at hand thus pertains to a cultural dialogue between the Islamic and Western worlds.

There are a variety of visions for intercultural dialogue. These can be divided into hegemonic and non-hegemonic visions. The former visions, are those forms of dialogue that pre-impose a particular point of view or principle which serves the interests of a group in power. For them, it is conducive to their worldview to view “Islam” and the “West” as monolithic blocs which are mutually exclusive and thus different and necessarily conflictive. This is clearly expressed by the orientalist worldview, whose logical conclusion is a clash between two very different blocs or civilizations. A lighter

version of this discourse, the rightist neo-orientalist discourse, is one that maintains certain economic and political principles and states that any society that does not adhere to these principles are necessarily underdeveloped. It thus insists on seeing society in a static and nonnegotiable way⁽¹¹⁾.

On the contrary to these visions, *a popular grassroots world view* is not one that holds such a hegemonic discourse. It particularly tries to undermine any form of hegemony. A common interest between people of different societies is established that their cooperation is necessary to resolve their problems. Thus, overcoming their differences is necessary for that common goal. This goal could range from environmental problems such as global warming to economic exploitation or an agenda for global peace. In all ways people realize that they need to cross cultural boundaries and find common grounds to work with one another to achieve their goals. Interfaith dialogue thus becomes one of the ways that these people can cross that cultural divide⁽¹²⁾.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The interaction between the Western world and Arab world in areas of human rights and religion relates to the above theories. The Arab World does not represent religion nor the West human rights. There are atheists and secularists in the Arab World, just as there are human right breaches in the Western world. Thus, we do not envision both cultures as monolithic.

Indeed, as Dr. Nazila Ghanea, University of Oxford lecturer observes, both religions and human rights are competing paradigms for attaining human dignity, in that respect, their similar aims allows a mutual dialogue in which both traditions learn from one another.⁽¹³⁾

There are a variety of views on Islam and its relationship to human rights. On the one hand some authors decided to dismiss the question in one way or another, claiming that human rights are completely compatible or incompatible with Islam other authors give a more nuanced interpretation.⁽¹⁴⁾ *On the other hand, others critique the very question of the importance of examining the compatibility of both frameworks.* Abdullah Ahmad Al- Nai'm states, "if I am faced with the choice between being a Muslim or commitment to human rights I will choose to be a Muslim without any hesitation."⁽¹⁵⁾ To him, the important question is not of Islam and Human Rights are compatible, but rather, how the commitment to human rights as an international global framework has made Muslims refer to and re-interpret our understanding and practice of Islam.⁽¹⁶⁾ To Dr. Nazila, lecturer in International Human Rights Law, the question is how to win a "universal grassroots commitment to human rights that can serve as an effective guardian to the realization of these standards⁽¹⁷⁾."

To conclude, the framework in which this dialogue operates may not necessarily be a secular framework, as the secular and "neutral" language of the human rights instruments. Most importantly is that people can adhere to the human rights standards within their moral framework in order for them to be able to protect these rights if violated. This will allow them to break a circle of "human rights dependency" on external actors and frames of reference. For that very reason the idea of "imposing" human rights, shall be counter-productive.⁽¹⁸⁾

A HUMAN- RIGHTS ORIENTED INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Interfaith dialogue, comes in a variety of categories and types. At the bottom line, in order for interfaith dialogue has to succeed in reflecting human rights standards both in form and content. Implicitly,

dialogue must be open and inclusive of all relevant stakeholders in the particular context of a dialogue. It must not be restricted to a particular group due to their numerical strength or political impact. In addition, the dialogue must be as participative as possible engaging people across social class, age and gender lines. Restricting dialogue to the group of established religious leaders and/ or some religions in a certain territory can result in the exclusion of certain voices. Limiting dialogue to certain participants of a particular category and/ or religion must be with good reason rather than implemented thoughtlessly.

There are, needless to say a number of factors that influence the capacity of people at the popular level, professionals or grassroots to engage in this dialogue. Factors include, personal characteristics: sensitivities to differences and capacity to have tolerance to other faiths. Also, socio- economic conditions do have an impact on the capacity of people to engage in dialogue. These include, levels of education, standards of living, history of religious conflict in society.. etc.

PARTII: INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN EGYPT

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON INTERFAITH RELATIONS IN EGYPT

Egypt is comprised of population of more than 85 million with a majority of Muslims. According to the CIA World Factbook, approximately 91% of the population is Muslim and 9% is Christian of different denominations⁽¹⁹⁾. Shiah Muslims amount today to one percent of the population, or around one million people.⁽²⁰⁾ Other minorities exist where Bahais constitute less than 2,000 individuals- but are not recognized by the state as a religion, about 1000-1500 Jehovah witnesses⁽²¹⁾ and less than 200 Jews⁽²²⁾. There are also reports

that Mormons, Quranists and Ahmadis exist, but no information exists on their numbers or localities.

Research confirms that Egyptians, Muslims or Christians share a conservative religious attitude and a level of pious tolerance. Piety is thus an important part of their identity. According to one poll, 98% of those surveyed stated religion to be ‘very important’ on a day-to-day level while the remainder stated ‘somewhat important’.⁽²³⁾

However, this is also combined with high governmental religious restrictions and social hostilities. At the end of 2011, Pew Research Center ranked Egypt as having “very high” restrictions on religion. Its index on social hostilities based on faith is gradually growing since 2007⁽²⁴⁾. According to Pew research figures, 39 percent of Egyptians think that the government is doing too little to protect religious minorities. A 50% of Muslims in Egypt thought that most of Christians were hostile against them versus 35% of Muslims who thought that Muslims were hostile against Christians. Thus a deep feeling of hostility and distrust exists⁽²⁵⁾. With respect to Muslim-Muslim relations, a 27% of Muslims think that tensions between the more devout of the Muslims and the less devout of their out community constitutes “a very big problem”⁽²⁶⁾. Little polls discuss the situation of the Jews or Bahai or Shiah religious minorities.

Faith	Restriction	Social Hostilities
Copts	Unequal rights with respect to houses of worship accused of insulting Islam	Violence on issue of unlicensed churches, political matters or trivial everyday matters is often started by the local communities with the incitement of the other Shaykhs Discrimination in jobs, and public jobs
Shi'ah	Azhar approves of them as a major Muslim Denomination Their mosques have been closed down Security campaign against Shia activists accused of insulting the prophets companions	Views that they support an international plot against Sunni Islam “destabilizing the country and fracturing unity and weakening the national fabric” insulting the prophets companions Led to lynching and killing of Shia in Abu Musalam June 2013

Baha'i	Rejected by al- Azhar as infidels Their religion is not recognized by the state (despite legal precedents of recognizing it) They are not allowed to have houses of worship Their marriage is not recognized by the state (thus their children have no access to schools..etc) accused of insulting Islam	Public views that they are connected to Zionism and they came to destroy the heavenly religions.
Jews	Security campaign against them led them to leave the country Movie "Jews of Egypt" banned.	Public views that "all Jews are Zionists"
Jehovah's Witnesses	Rejected by Pope of Coptic Orthodox Church They have been refused status of religious minorities. Thus they cannot practice their religion freely	Public views that they are connected to Zionists

TABLE: MAIN RESTRICTIONS AND HOSTILITIES FOR EACH FAITH COMMUNITY

On interfaith relations, relations between different faiths are marked by an increased level of intolerance due to lack of knowledge. Despite that 78 % of Muslims admitted that they don't know much about Christianity, a 56% stated that Christianity and Islam are very different⁽²⁷⁾. Thus, ignorance of another person's faith and beliefs is combined with an uninformed judgment that they are very different. A 23% in 2013 stated that it's not good to have members of other faiths very free to practice their faith⁽²⁸⁾. Only 4%of the Muslims surveyed had engaged in interfaith meetings⁽²⁹⁾ suggesting that interfaith meetings is at best an elite engagement.

Egyptians at large have a great deal of respect for religious (establishment) institutions. A survey conducted in December 2011 on Egyptians' level of respect to religious institutions. It found that 95% of Egyptians had confidence in the Al-Azhar. Tahrir Trends asked a similar question in 2013. It stated that it found that 91% of Egyptians

had “either a great deal of confidence (79%) or some confidence (12%) in religious institutions in general”.⁽³⁰⁾

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN EGYPT

Most of the documented dialogue initiatives are the formal and institutional initiatives that involve major religious figures. Yet, different religious groups speak of a grassroots dialogue based on “shared and common living” at the hey-days of their life in Egypt in which there was a mutual understanding and tolerance of communities of the others’ faith. For example, the Jews of Egypt lived side by side of Muslims, had integrated with economic and cultural activities and some of the most prominent musicians, artists and business men were Jews. Similarly, Bahai’s report of a similar treatment by their fellow Egyptians, in the earlier twentieth century, when their conversion to bahai’ism was not seen by the state or by their neighbors as a major problem⁽³¹⁾. During that time in Egypt, “there was a great deal of discussion and especially dialogue opening up and investigating new ideas.”⁽³²⁾ Together faith groups thus confronted common challenges and worked together for common goals without having faith as an obstacle or main concern.

EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Thus we can note that at the early decades of the twentieth century there was a greater religious freedom and a greater scope of interreligious dialogue than is the case today. Jews at that time amounted to 75,000 and 80,000 in 1933.⁽³³⁾ Similarly, Bahai’s first National Spiritual Assembly (elected governing body of the Baha’i

faith) in Egypt was established in 1924 and the following year the religion was recognized as a religion by a Sharia court thus allowing it official recognition by the state.⁽³⁴⁾ Egypt was the first Islamic state to recognize the Bahai's which inspired other religious minorities to live in Egypt. In 1930, for example, the Jehovah's witnesses entered Egypt and started spreading their faith.⁽³⁵⁾ With respect to the Shiites, in 1948, the association for Rapprochement between the Islamic Legal Schools (Jamiyyat al-Taqrīb bayna al-Madhahib al-Islamiyyah) was formed. This organization was designed to bridge the religious divides between Sunni and Shia. Azhar Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut and Muslim Brotherhood leader Hassan al- Banna took part in establishing it⁽³⁶⁾.

With respect to the Copts, since the advent of the British occupation in 1882, sectarian problems started to emerge. The occupying forces used the notorious policy of divide and rule in Egypt against the Copts. Thus, the occupying forces, started increasing the numbers of Muslims in the bureaucracy and reducing the number of Copts, while giving the impression that it was the Muslims doing so.⁽³⁷⁾ This increased the sectarian sentiments. In March 1911 in the Coptic Conference was convened to agree on and draft a set of Coptic demands. These included equality in public jobs and representative councils ,a holiday for Christians on Sunday, and that the public treasury should fund both Muslims and Christians facilities indiscriminately.⁽³⁸⁾ The conference was held within a national unity frame.⁽³⁹⁾ However, these demands were refuted in an Islamic Conference that was held a few weeks later. A surge of sectarian sentiments came to the fore due to a number of policies that was implemented by the governments after 1923. In 1934, El- Ezaby Pasha issue the ten conditions for Church building in Egypt which were very restrictive and became a source of Christian Muslim conflict later on.⁽⁴⁰⁾

POST 1948

In the immediate aftermath of the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the Jewish minority was immediately targeted. In November 1948, bombs exploded in the Jewish Quarter killing 70 Jews and wounding 200. In the aftermath of the Tripartite Aggression on Egypt in 1956, Egypt expelled 25,000 Jews and put 1000 in detention. Jews were no longer welcome and forced to leave the country.⁽⁴¹⁾

Meanwhile the other communities were left. In the 40s and 50s Bahai festivals were open to the public and publicized in the media. Their local assemblies reached 13 Egyptian cities that served a small community of 5000⁽⁴²⁾. Jehovah Witnesses were registered as a religious denomination in 1951 in Cairo. With respect to the Shia community, their relationship with the state and society improved. The Shia – Sunni issue was politicized by Nasser who gave support to the Shiite clerics who opposed the shah⁽⁴³⁾. Thus, in the late 50s the Azhar Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut issued a fatwa allowing prayer according to the Jafari school⁽⁴⁴⁾.

NASSER

However, this was not to last. In the sixties however, the state gave blows to the Bahai, Jehovah communities on allegations that they were connected to Israel. In 1960, President Nasser issued decree 236 in which he stated that “all Baha’i assemblies and centers [are] hereby dissolved, and their activities suspended.”⁽⁴⁵⁾ All Bahá’í community properties, including Bahá’í centers, libraries, and cemeteries, were confiscated. Another decree banned all Jehovah's Witnesses activities. According to the State Department, there are between 1,000 and 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses living in Egypt.⁽⁴⁶⁾ They could still practice the faith at home, but they were no longer given the protection of the state.

Yet, during Nasser's era the Coptic- Muslim sectarian sentiments were tangibly reduced due to the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamist currents. Nasser's social policies benefited Copts and Muslims equally⁽⁴⁷⁾. Some electoral zones were restricted to Copts, which allowed for a positive discrimination for Copts in 1957⁽⁴⁸⁾. However starting from 1964, the new policy was the appointment of Copts in parliament through the number of seats reserved for presidential appointments increased the number of Copts in parliament.⁽⁴⁹⁾

SADAT

The short peace of the Coptic community soon was overturned. This was in part due to Sadat's policies that led to the release of the Islamist groups from jail. He added himself to the controversy by declaring that he is a "Muslim President of a Muslim Nation" which led to the Islamization of public space. The 70s saw sectarian tension erupt in different places in Egypt such as Ikhmim and al-khanka against the Copts.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Due to the increase in tension, both Coptic and Islamic Conferences were convened once more. In 1977, the Church held the Coptic conference and issued a statement which included the main Coptic demands including freedom of creed, cancelling the 1934 conditions for Church building, not applying shariah on Christians and equal opportunities in public positions and parliamentary representation.⁽⁵¹⁾ This was followed by an Islamic conference in which shaykh al- Azhar Abd al- Halim Mahmud assured of the importance of implementing shariah and that it is not acceptable to postpone its implementation out of concern for Coptic sentiments.⁽⁵²⁾

As a result in the 70s, "The decade of Sectarian strife in Egypt" as called by a prominent scholar a new formal phase of dialogue started. This phase concluded with a set of formal dialogues between Muslims and Christians in order to try to deconstruct the basis of the

interfaith tensions that have been taking place, and setting solutions to them⁽⁵³⁾. An example is the formation of the Religious Fraternity Association in 1975, which was established by the former minister of health Abdu Saleh together with Azhar Shaykhs.

MUBARAK

In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, the state started security measures against Shites. This included closing down the Al Bayt Association and confiscating its property. The former fatwa issued by Shaykh Shaltut was annulled by Shaykh Abdul Rahman Bisar. In 1980s and 90s, tens of Shia were arrested occasionally and accused of espionage. In 1996, 50 were arrested accused of the attempt to form a “husayniyah” and forming a revolutionary cell⁽⁵⁴⁾.

In the 80s and 90s, while the regime kept the other minorities under repression further spaces for dialogue was found between Muslims and Christian elites. Several seminars took place which discussed the position of Copts in Egypt and the basis of citizenship on an elite level⁽⁵⁵⁾. This dialogue however, was restricted between Muslims and Christians, rather than involving the other religious minorities. The Shite community came under surveillance for fear of relations with the Islamic Republic. In 1987 Bahai’s had sentences pronounced against them, for taking part in Baha’i activities and possessing Bahai books⁽⁵⁶⁾.

Muabark took a pragmatic approach towards Copts. Politically, Mubarak treated Copts as a single bloc headed by their patriarch. As a result, Christian-Muslim relations was ruled with a so called Mubarak-Shenouda pact that allowed the patriarch control over the Christians affairs on the condition that he does not oppose the president.⁽⁵⁷⁾ The Coptic Orthodox Church became the principle channel for handling Coptic concerns.⁽⁵⁸⁾

However in spite of that pact, Christians as well as Muslims lives were lost at the iron hand of security in several locations such as Giza (2010), Nag' Hamadi (2010)⁽⁵⁹⁾ sectarian attacks seldom were taken to court or justice applied.⁽⁶⁰⁾

The attacks against Shites also increased in the end of Mubarak's days in relation to several political developments. After a Hizbullah Cell was discovered in Cairo in January 2009 a wave of arrests took place against Shiite leaders under the Emergency Laws. They were accused of "forming a group trying to spread Shiite ideology that harms the Islamic religion" and insulting Islam. In October 2010, Egyptian prosecutors charged 12 Shiite Muslims with promoting Shiite doctrine, insulting the Companions of the Prophet Mohammad, plotting to overthrow the ruling regime⁽⁶¹⁾.

Prior to the revolution, a surge in human rights discourse and proliferation of human rights organizations allowed religious minorities to seek legal assistance and demand protection by the state. This was applicable to many religious groups, including Copts, Bahai's and Jehovah witnesses. For the bahai's a major battle was won with respect to issuing their national ID. The state refused to state their religion in the ID card, as it did not recognize the Bahai religion. On the other hand, they could not accept to be written as members of any other religion, as that would be contrary to their faith. A 2009 court ruling allowed them to state "-" in the religion box of their ID cards a their religion. This was accepted as a compromise by the state and them⁽⁶²⁾. Jehovah witnesses similarly have resorted to Egyptian Courts to compel the government to recognize them as a religious denomination. Yet, the Cairo Administrative Court dismissed their lawsuit⁽⁶³⁾.

THE REVOLUTION

All religious minorities were hopeful that the 2011 Revolution would

also mean a revolution that would improve their status and grant them more rights. This is yet to be realized. The latest constitution only recognizes the three Abrahamic religions, while the shi'ites are still prevented from practicing their religious rites (such as commemorating Ashura) and forming husayniyahs. Bahai's are struggling with the state to recognize their marriages and admit their children in school⁽⁶⁴⁾.

Yet, more than just religious restrictions, the social hostilities against the religious minorities have increased in the aftermath of the revolution. This includes the Copts, in the immediate aftermath of the revolution and the June 30s protests which culminated in a wave of attacks on Coptic churches. In addition, 4 shites have been killed in Zawiyet Abu Mussalam in Giza in June 2013 by people after local Shaykhs incitement⁽⁶⁵⁾.

The historical timeline shows that the relations between members of the different faiths were best when their relations were not politicized. Yet almost every minority was accused of bearing foreign relations that aimed at harming Egypt's national security. The initial persecution of the Jews, due to the political circumstances of the Arab- Israeli war, eventually was extended to all other religious minorities. In this respect, Egyptian contemporary history shows that the rights of one community is bond to the rights of all religious groups. Particularly in the aftermath of political events, security campaigns would follow which would discredit the faith group in the eyes of Egyptian society. Eventually, this led to direct attacks against members of particular faiths.

THE MAP OF INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE INITIATIVES IN EGYPT TODAY⁽⁶⁶⁾

Interfaith dialogue initiatives today are mainly between the recognized

religions in Egypt. The current interfaith initiatives in Egypt are: 1. Religious and Interreligious Institutional Initiatives, 2. Faith Based CSOs 3. Interfaith Dialogue initiatives unrelated to Religious Institutions and finally 4. Academic studies centers.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

AL- AZHAR

Al- Azhar's engagement was previously formal and institutional. In 1997, Al- Azhar created a religious dialogue committee entitled "the Permanent Committee of Al- Azhar for Dialogue with Monotheistic Religions." It addresses dialogue in an institutional fashion in which the representatives of the Azhar would meet with representatives of other religious denominations worldwide⁽⁶⁷⁾. The role of al- Azhar was diplomatic and international. This was restricted to official meetings, lacked grassroots activities and was restricted to the three monotheistic religions.

In November 2010, a development took place with the cancellation of the Committee and replacing it with the Dialogue Center. The Center has a permanent high board that meets on a monthly basis headed by al- Azhar Shaykh, in addition to an advisory council of experts whose expertise may be consulted. These will be from within and outside the Azhar. Finally a multi-lingual secretariat will be formed to manage the day to day operations of the center as well as to coordinate initiatives⁽⁶⁸⁾.

Dialogue was expanded to include not only the monotheistic religions, but even atheists and national Islamic partners, such as the Salafis, Muslim Brotherhood and even secularists⁽⁶⁹⁾. Dialogue was defined as it was not to tackle creed, rather it would strengthen relations between the Muslim and non-Muslim (mainly Christian)

communities. The broader implementation of dialogue was different from the former, based on diplomatic representation and exchange of opinion, to dialogue “on the ground”⁽⁷⁰⁾. Its role, according to Dr. Mahmud Azab, head of the center, became to spread the “culture of dialogue” among community members⁽⁷¹⁾. The engagements included engaging with university scholars and the people of different faiths rather than just religious leaders⁽⁷²⁾.

In spite of these positive developments, al- Azhar’s internal dialogue was marked by political positions and conservative religious views. (see Bayt al- Aila below)

ORTHODOX CHURCH

The Orthodox church engages in dialogue on two levels. First, is the international level, in which the Pope and bishops engage directly. This institutional form of dialogue is not restricted to Christian Islamic dialogue but even Christian- Christian dialogue.

Nationally, the Orthodox Church engages in dialogue on the level of youth and on the level of intellectuals, social scientists and academics. The Cultural Development Group of the Orthodox Church operates on the level of youth. Formed in 1986 it operates under the Youth Bishopric of the Coptic Church and engages youth in cultural and dialogic activities through meetings, lectures, round table discussions and publications. The goals of the CDC were set as the following: 1. Reading the churches’ heritage in a cultural contemporary reading, 2. Rereading Coptic history through a national history perspective, 3. Studying contemporary social phenomena, 4. Engaging with society and opening up to its developments, 5. Developing the thinking abilities of youth and intercultural skills. A course was designed for cultural development and Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt was the main focus⁽⁷³⁾.

On the other hand, the Coptic Center for Social Sciences; a research institution, formed in 1994. It researches social phenomena, citizenship issues and issues of social and political participation of Copts in public life. It operates as a support center to BLESS the Bishopric of Public Ecumenical & Social Services and engages intellectual elites in cultural and dialogic activities. Since 1994 it is very active and engaged with scores of Muslim thinkers, such as Muhammad Selim el – Awwa, Tariq El Bishri and Muhammad Immara and has tens of studies on the different cultural and religious trends in Egyptian society⁽⁷⁴⁾.

The much cited weaknesses of these activities is that they are mostly restricted to Coptic youth but due to lingering conservative attitudes and security pressure do not include Muslim youth. This however, has witnessed some change in the after math of the revolution in which the Coptic Church hosted dialogues that was open to youth of both religions.⁽⁷⁵⁾

EVANGELICAL CHURCH

In addition to the institutional meetings of the top religious leaders in the Evagelical Church, CEOSS is the main development and dialogue arm of the Church. The mission of CEOSS is “to promote the sanctity, equity, and harmony of life. It seeks to contribute to the transformation of society by nurturing moral and spiritual awareness, enhancing a sense of belonging, promoting respect for diversity”.⁽⁷⁶⁾ CEOSS is a development organization with three main programs; development, resource development and cultural development. Starting as a literacy organization in 1950, it gradually moved to a full-fledged development organization. Today, CEOSS reaches out to more than 2 million Egyptians annually in more than 100 rural and urban communities.⁽⁷⁷⁾

CEOSS dialogue component is rather broadly defined. There is dialogue in the Church, in the conflict management program, which trains church leaders on conflict resolution and prevention. Also, a Muslim-Christian dialogue module exists in the religious leaders program. Finally, the Intercultural Dialogue Forum includes national dialogue forums for media professionals, for academics and young innovators (youth) on subjects of national interest not only pertaining to Muslims and Christians⁽⁷⁸⁾.

COPTIC CATHOLIC CHURCH

The dialogue arm of the Coptic Catholic Church is the Egyptian Justice and Peace Commission. It follows the Catholic Papal and Bishops Council in Egypt directly. It was formed in the early seventies as a response to a need of dialogue in Egyptian society. The goals of the Commission is to “awaken the social conscience for the humanitarian, national, religious and economic events that are taking place and to encourage every human being to work to install justice and peace in the world”. Its objectives include: To increase the awareness of the need to promote justice and peace values (dialogue, human rights, cooperation, accepting the other and forgiveness etc). To help in building bridges between Egyptians (Christians - Muslims) through dialogue. To deepen the sense of responsibility among Egyptians towards their society.. To study the problems of the Egyptian society (cultural, economic, social etc) and try as much as possible to find solutions. To cooperate with different organizations adopting the same values and engage in similar activities. It relies mostly on lectures and workshops which invites religious social and political leaders to discuss issues of concern⁽⁷⁹⁾.

THE EPISCOPAL / ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF EGYPT

The Episcopal / Anglican Diocese of Egypt serves all Egyptians through hospitals, clinics, nurseries, schools, micro-enterprise ventures, vocational training programs, and services for refugees, the deaf and disabled. In this manner of “life dialogue” comes one of its main dialogue components⁽⁸⁰⁾.

More formally, it plays an important part in institutional interfaith dialogue with Al Azhar al-Sharif and other Islamic leaders in Egypt⁽⁸¹⁾. This is implemented through Imam-Priest Exchange, a project coordinated by the Diocese of Egypt bringing together Muslim imams and Christians priests. The first meeting was held in March 2013, hosted by the Grand Imam of Al Azhar and involved 20 imams and 20 priests. The 20 imams were selected by Al-Azhar. The 20 priests were selected by their respective denominations: 12 from the Coptic-Orthodox Church, 3 from the Anglican Church, 3 from the Evangelical (Presbyterian) Church, and 2 from the Catholic Church.

They were selected from areas of previous conflict or current tension. Thus the participants in the first meeting were from Sohag, Assiut, Suez, the Delta region, Alexandria, and Cairo⁽⁸²⁾.

In addition to the formal priest- imam exchange, Arkan Centre which is under Episco- Care is a dialogue arm for youth. It is an art and culture centre, established in 2012 open for all, Christians and Muslims that aims at dialogue through the arts. Through its workshops and events, the Arkan Centre encourages people to create art based on themes of human rights, citizenship and democracy. The centers events drew in visitors from the wider community⁽⁸³⁾.

INTERRELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

BAYT AL- 'AYLAH AL- MISRIYA

Bayt al- 'Aylah was initially an initiative proposed by Shaykh al-Azhar in the aftermath of the detonation of the Two Saints Church in Alexandria on New Year eve in 2011. It was established on 12th August 2011 by a Prime Ministerial Decree 1279 as a agency headed by both the Azhar Shaykh and the Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church.⁽⁸⁴⁾ The purpose of the Family House is to assist in strengthening the unity of the Muslim Christian relations and finding solutions and providing recommendations to government and civic society with respect to tackling sectarian crisis and improving interfaith relations. It holds a serious interfaith dialogue among the religious leadership in Egypt. It may communicate and coordinate with agencies and ministries in order to submit recommendations. It may also establish branches and convene conferences in all governorates. The main idea behind this initiative is to act as an interreligious peace force that would act in the different governorates to prevent and tackle sectarian crisis when they happen⁽⁸⁵⁾. Branches were formed in different governorates such as Alexandria, Assuit, Malawi (Minya) , Biba (Beni Suef), Buharia, Luxor, Aswan and Portsaid⁽⁸⁶⁾.

Bayt al- Ayla activities includes a number of capacity building for Muslim preachers and Christian bishops and priests. This includes communication for peace and how to dialogue sessions. In addition to that, Bayt al- 'ayla has succeeded in ending some conflicts before they escalate as in Kom Ombo⁽⁸⁷⁾ and Asyut⁽⁸⁸⁾ and also holding factfinding missions if they escalate such as in al Khusus case⁽⁸⁹⁾. They did also take part in the reconciliation sessions after violence among Christian and Muslim clashes in Minya (2013).

Two major risks for Bayt al 'Ayla come to the fore. First, is its

political positions that make it take actions that may be incompatible with its main purpose. An example is the conference it held and was publicized as a “conference to support the constitution” of 2013/2014. This is not the mandate of Bayt al- Ayla and to take a supportive or a rejecting position of the constitution would compromise its autonomy⁽⁹⁰⁾.

Secondly, Bayt al – ‘Ayla has taken a religiously strict position in a some affairs, that may or not may be related to politics. In the aftermath of the Maspero Incident (described above) Bayt al ‘ayla discussed the possibilities of a unified houses of worship law that would give the same rules to Church building as it would to mosques. This was a long awaited law that was discussed in the (governmental) Committee for Justice. The decision was announced by Dr. Mustafa al-Fiki in October 16th 2011 in which Bayt al- ‘Ayla headed by the Grand Shaykh of al- Azhar Ahmad al – Tayyib refused the unified Houses of Worship Law on the pretext that both Copts and Muslims have different prayer systems⁽⁹¹⁾. This has led to much controversy on the reasons that this decision is taken, that many felt were not removed from the political atmosphere of the day. This led some activists to even to take a stand that “its not our house and not our family”⁽⁹²⁾.

PROJECTS OF OTHER FAITH BASED INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is the international humanitarian organization of the Catholic community in the United States. Founded in 1943 by the U.S. bishops, it reaches 130 million people in more than 90 countries⁽⁹³⁾. Its work in Egypt started in the aftermath of the

Suez War, in which it provided humanitarian aid to the victims. Currently, CRS/Egypt focuses on three programs: refugee assistance, livelihoods, and strengthening of civil society through capacity building and interfaith action⁽⁹⁴⁾.

CRS perspective to interfaith dialogue is “interfaith action”, doing instead of talking and thus bringing the dialogue to grassroots action that benefits the community. Its strategy “promotes collaboration between Muslims and Christians in at-risk communities in Egypt to reduce interreligious conflict through community action” and joint projects. In 2012 a CRS project was led by Egypt’s Coptic Catholic Church but did not involve any Muslim organizations in its implementation. It lasted for only three months and did not reach out to much of the community. In the aftermath of the violence that left dozens of churches torched in August, the TA’ALA (Tolerant Attitudes And Leadership for Action) project was approved. Unlike the 2012 project, Ta’ala is to be implemented jointly by the Coptic Catholic Church; Nour al Islam, an Egyptian Muslim nongovernmental organization; and Bayt al- ‘Aila. It is to be implemented in the governorates of Cairo, Assiut and Sohag. The project will work directly with 72 religious and clan leaders and 360 youth to reach 12,000 Christian and Muslim community members⁽⁹⁵⁾.

The project supports religious and clan leaders as well as youth by training them on skills and mechanisms to resolve conflict. The religious leaders will first be trained in models and methods for identifying, analyzing and intervening in potential conflicts. The leaders will themselves pass on this to train Muslim and Christian youth in their areas. They will learn to work together to collaborate on a common vision. They will collectively come up with ideas of development projects, managed mutually, that their communities need. Ta’ala will then pay to implement these interfaith projects.⁽⁹⁶⁾

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE INITIATIVES UNRELATED TO RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

THE MORAL REARMAMENT ASSOCIATION

The Moral Rearmament Association in Egypt was founded in 1988. Its was founded by later minister of health Dr. Abdu Salam. It is now headed by Dr. Nagia Abd al- Mughni. Moral rearmament is based on 4 pillars: Love, Purity, Honesty and selflessness. We foster moral attitudes inspired by conscience and faith, we build respect for the other by encouraging transparency, understanding, selflessness, tolerance and love, and we build self respect by building capacity and self value⁽⁹⁷⁾.

It is a branch of the international Moral Rearmament movement that emerged in the aftermath of the second world war. Its main vision is that conflict among humans is not to be resolved in a violent manner but with “morals” which is a more effective weapon. It promotes reconciliation with oneself, God and others without reference to their sex religion or any other aspects⁽⁹⁸⁾.

Abd al-Mughni sees that moral rearmament today comes as a response to the increase of apathy, lack of tolerance and corruption. It responds to this need by the organization of workshops and conferences. In addition it attempts to support Egyptian society and its moral values. In light of this it sees that to face the challenges of the Arab spring MRA work should focus on building national consensus which necessitates “ respecting the fact that we are all partners caring for the safety, unity and prosperity of our very dear country and that everyone is needed and has a role to play”⁽⁹⁹⁾.

The major weakness of the Moral Rearmament association is its lack of a vision and strategy for the future work⁽¹⁰⁰⁾. It sometimes gets lost in slogans, rather than specifying a field of action. However, inspite of this weakness, the association was successful in achieving

on the ground. Its achievements include hosting the Imam and Pastor workshop in Egypt⁽¹⁰¹⁾, holding international conferences, making documentary movies and researches on reconciliation and bridge building in Egypt using comparative case studies. It also aims at an ambitious literacy campaign that merges illiteracy eradication with promoting shared moral values, reinforcing our national unity and social fabric⁽¹⁰²⁾.

CENTER FOR CIVILIZATION STUDIES AND DIALOGUE OF CULTURE: CAIRO UNIVERSITY

The Center for Civilization Dialogue was formed in 2002 and gave particular interest to cultural analysis and studies of civilization. In 2007, the center expanded and became the Center for Civilization Studies and Dialogue of Culture⁽¹⁰³⁾. The center is a purely academic center and think tank affiliated with Cairo University that engages researcher students and academics on issues of dialogue. Among its research projects was a module on the Interfaith Dialogue. The center is particularly concerned with analyzing and understanding the full scope of interfaith dialogue in inter-cultural dialogue from an academic perspective that covers the historical, social, political and theoretical aspects of the relations⁽¹⁰⁴⁾. Among its aims is to facilitate research projects in the field of comparative cultural studies, holding seminars and workshop in the field of cultural analysis, holding trainings in the field of cultural studies and trainings for intercultural dialogue and monitoring the situation of dialogue between the Arab world and the West⁽¹⁰⁵⁾.

CENTER FOR INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE AND TRANSLATION

The Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation (CIDT) is an Egyptian civil company dedicated to promoting understanding between Muslims and Christians in both the Arab world and the West, and thus assist both communities to cooperate to face common challenges. CIDT focuses on a media component in which it tries to promote dialogue through the media, using peace journalism as a tool and media critiquing unbalanced reporting that lead to further the conflict. It was founded in 1994-1996 after it was discovered that that several Western media and activists had misrepresented incidents involving Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt. Another component of CIDT's programs is its internship program that hosts students and researchers from the Western countries in Egypt, in order to get a first hand experience on the intercommunal relations in Egypt from a grassroots perspective. It also hosts Egyptian interns and gives them an opportunity to work in a multicultural, multi faith setting⁽¹⁰⁶⁾.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the past ten years, interfaith organizations, based on citizens initiatives for grassroot activities have weakened. Interfaith initiative oriented on the main religious actors is quite high and growing. Thus our main finding in this regards is that there is an increase of interfaith initiatives from faith based civil society organizations and religious institutions, there has been a stagnation of the interfaith Egyptian dialogue organizations that are not based on religious institutions. This denote the success of a long standing security policy to eliminate such discussions from the public space and pushing it aside to "religious space" or space of religious actors.

In the Egyptian case, the relationship between interfaith dialogue and human rights is multifaceted. On the level of the religious organizations, they have a framework based on a religious understanding. Thus they will be open to understand the notion of human rights within certain social and religious parameters.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ The problems that this may cause, particularly for the adherents of non-Abrahamic religions are many. Some segments may be denied the same rights as citizens because they are not recognized by the religious authorities of the country. This shows the extent to which interreligious dialogue in Egypt is still undeveloped fully and that more work must be put to make religious authorities and social and governmental elites to accept faiths and styles of living that they may not necessarily agree with. It is important to focus on this in the future as not to marginalize other faiths (Shiah Islam, Baha'ism, Judaism, Jehovah's Witnesses as well as others).

In addition, institutional dialogue seem to be the prime case in Egypt. As most of the organizations working on interfaith dialogue in Egypt represent the religious authorities and elites. A small minority represents grass-root attempts to tackle sectarian strife and interreligious dialogue.

When late Islamic thinker Gamal al- Banna was interviewed in 2008, he gave a very negative opinion about the way interreligious dialogue was conducted in Egypt. To him, it's not the religious institutions, it's the independent organizations and thinkers that should lead this dialogue. They are more free than religious institutions, and not entrenched in its hierarchy.

This view comes with a great contrast to the current state of interreligious dialogue map in Egypt, that is mostly conducted by religious leaders and by religious institutions. Most interreligious dialogue spaces in Egypt, are either governmental spaces (such as the ministerial committees that aim at reaching decisions to improve

interfaith relations) or based on a religious institution (Church or Mosque). This of course stems from the communal authority that religious leaders have in Egypt and from a strong culture of religiosity.

On the other hand, despite the current limitations, the dialogue may gradually increase space of adherence to human rights principles. This does not come in a day, but requires a long process and a commitment to dialogue. This processes should thus be opened and should not be restricted. Future dialogues in Egypt should gradually include other denominations that are not recognized by the state and by the religious authorities themselves. Furthermore, grassroots initiatives should be allowed to grow within the framework of a civic discourse of tolerance and acceptance. In a word, interfaith dialogue initiatives must be democratized. ❖

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107. In that respect, it must be pointed for example that the discussion between representatives, al- Azhar, al- Nur (salafi) Party and the three Churches on religious freedom in the constituent assembly of (2013) has completely ruled out some categories from applying their own religious codes in personal status and family matters. The Christians for example rejected that Jehovah's witnesses be allowed to identify their religious leadership. In addition the Ahzarites rejected that the Bahai's have the similar rights as Christians do when it comes to choosing their religious leadership and applying their canon laws in personal status affairs. In this respect for example, Bahai's marriages are still unacceptable to the state.