

Comments and remarks on the XV Muslim International Forum

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Introduction

Muslim International Forum (MIF) is an entity where the founding and supporting partners are inter alia Religious Board of Muslims of the Russian Federation, International Union of Muslim Scholars, Presidency of Religious Affairs of Turkish Republic, Al Mustafa International University (Qom, Iran), The Institute of Asian and African Studies of Lomonosow Moscow State University, Moscow Islamic Institute, Faculty of Asian, and African Studies of Sankt Petersburg State University (MIF 2019a). The XV Forum was also organised with support of German Muslim organisations (Islamische Federation in Berlin, Zentralrat der Muslime, and Islamrat für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland). One of the essential goals of MIF is the consolidation of moderate and constructive forces of the Muslim world. Islam of the 21st century stands against unprecedented challenges facing humanity such as numerous military and political conflicts, terrorism and extremism, cultural decline, insufficient scientific development, global health hazards, starvation, but also faces the hijacking of its name by quasi ideology of terrorism, extremism of criminal roots; taking the name of Islam on their banners. In such situation it is not enough to concentrate efforts to confront challenges in just one area. It is necessary to stand against whole spectrum of evil, by all the forces of moderate and peacefully religious Muslims. In the recent decades the scenario unfolding before our eyes is one of decline and neglecting of

the potential of Islam to serve humanity. The important features of Islam to emphasize are its simplicity and freshness. It is of paramount importance to consider the existing issues of the world and “not to press Islam into service to solve situations it was never intended to solve” (*Report of The Court of Inquiry* 1954, 232). If we do this “frustration and disappointment must follow our steps.” (*Report of The Court of Inquiry* 1954, 232)

The XV Muslim International Forum was intended to contribute to the following idea:

The consolidation, mobilisation of the most robust and responsible spiritual, social, intellectual, and cultural forces of the international Muslim community around the ideas of sustainable growth relying on traditional religious values are among the main goals of this Organisation. [...] The most important conditions for achieving this goal are the understanding of modernity and the actualisation of the global Muslim heritage and bringing together the intellectual resources of the global umma’s community of scholars.

Interreligious dialogue has been presented as an important component of efforts towards achieving that goal.

1 Historical view on European Islam

It is justified and natural that voices of moderation and revival of Islam in service for humanity and to advance wisdom and virtue, come from communities living in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. Representatives from these regions attended the XV Forum and were also accompanied by delegates of states of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan).

The traditional Muslim communities of Central Europe, inhabiting these lands for centuries, have never been the source of terrorist and extremist ideology. All these European communities trace their origins to the Medieval period political entities which emerged in 14th century out of tribal shamanic organisations and armies from the Far East, consequently becoming a type of princely Muslim states. This was also the case with Tatar Muslims living on Polish soil for some 600 years (Konopacki 2006). It may be noted that these Muslims whose ancestors were the upper or upper-middle class in



their original majority Muslim population states (khanates, emirates, horde¹) established themselves as permanent residents in states which never had a Muslim population, let alone Muslim majority (Poland, Lithuania). Once becoming permanent settlers in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Poland, current West Russia and neighbouring territories, they became a religious minority in these lands. These settlers were subjects of Christian kingdoms, princely states, and republics, never thought of pursuing the concept of a religious Islamic state. They grew with the political dynamics of their new environment. They became an integral part of their new homeland portraying themselves as useful, skilled, and loyal military men. They were included into the gentry class, were allowed to own land and were generally not dissuaded from following their faith (i.e. Islam). Twentieth century groups and organisations from the Middle East (see the list in Moore 2014) came forward with yet another revival of 18th century extremist, dangerous concepts promoting violence and open hatred to anything that was not within their ideology. These deadly ideas were presented by these groups as Islamic and the world started to identify the concepts from the “heart of darkness” to be representative of Islam². Muslims of Central Europe were never part of any Islamisation or radicalisation of their Faith and identity. On the contrary, when, in the 1990s Poland accepted many refugees from Arab regions into its borders, local traditional communities of Tatar Muslims were exposed to attempts of “Islamisation” by these guests from the Orient. However all these attempts failed. The Muslims of Central Southern and Eastern Europe do not question the fact that there is one Muslim world community of Islam. However, within that world umma³ there are many communities who have their own specific cultural heritage and their own way of life. They are within their rights to protect their heritage while simultaneously protecting their religious life in Islam.

¹ The following link presents a brief review how the Mongol Empire established in XIII century gradually evolved and broke into a number of khanates, hordes and in case of Central Asia – emirates, i.a. meaning separate states. By the end of XIV century these peoples embraced Islam and their states even though ruled by Muslim elites, remained almost permanently in military conflict. *Wikipedia*, “Golden Horde” [4.04.2020].

² I use the expression “heart of darkness” after the title of the novel by Joseph Conrad written in 1899. It is meant to signify spiritually “dark places” where reason, morality and civilisation are absent.

³ Muslim Community – in Quranic words “the best community” see Sura 3, ayat 110 (*Koran* 2018, 51).



The Muslim communities of Central Europe and neighbouring regions are not represented in the world media because these Muslims live a normal peaceful life. There is no news of any criminal, terrorist or extremist activity by these people. They do not create trouble in the environment they live in. Television, press and other media outlets are not interested in highlighting their life. The lack of positive press reinforces the negative image of Islam.

The problem of moderate Muslims majority is that they present their moderate views in a moderate way. The MIF acting as the voice of moderate traditional Muslims living in Europe for centuries, supported by Muslims from Central Asia, is an important contribution to present Islam as a partner in building Europe and the world of 21st century.

2 XV MIF – Interreligious dialogue in post secularism and the importance of “A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” (by Pope Francis and The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb)

The XV Muslim International Forum in Berlin had the motto: “Interreligious Dialogue in the postsecular world – search for platforms of interaction.”

The term postsecularism needs a brief description. As often is the case with sociological terminology there are many opinions and definitions of post secularism, to the extent that, in my opinion, we can quote the words of Jerzy Szacki in which he refers to the term “discourse” (in my opinion it may also be applied to post secularism)

The word “discourse” made a splendid career in contemporary humanistic and it is more and more difficult to be certain that it means anything at all as it is used in various ways and sometimes even as a kind of “learned” expression. (Szacki 2007, 905)

The term postsecularism was popularised by Jurgen Habermas. However, it should be noted that many believe that Habermas functioned on the sidelines of sociology with his true direction being philosophy. He is presented as an author, inter alia of the theory of communication activity placing it within postmodernism discourse (Szacki 2007, 911; 921–934).



Debate on the subject of postmodernism versus postsecularism is beyond the scope of this report. In my view, both the terms belong to the sphere of discovering and describing concepts of world changes in the 20th century and 21st century. In the last two and a half centuries, secularism in European history is correctly associated with competition, if not struggle, between sacrum and profanum, religion and the empirical (the world that can be experienced by senses). In Asian environment that differentiation has come to a different shape. That notion of modernity, pushing God aside into some private alcove with no interest to the outside world, is alien to Asian perceptions. The radical form of expression of that European idea is best encapsulated in words of Carl Gustav Jung: "I know and here I am expressing what countless other people know – that the present time is the time of God's disappearance and death" (Jung 1983, 90).

Such concepts are in line with some opinions about the Western mindset, which is considered to be "a truncated mind good for finding the best way to achieve a given goal but utterly useless in finding the right way. [...] Western man in this view is a hyperactive busybody forever finding the right means to the wrong ends" (Buruma and Margalit 2005, 76–77). These views, as presented in the source linked below, were expressed by the Japanese academics at the Kyoto Conference in July 1942 where the topic of discussion was "How to overcome the modern." The "modern" became associated with Europe, as its product conceived in 18th century and ever since then attempting to convince and prove itself to the whole world as embodiment and synonym of progress and humanity's only path forward. There is much to learn from that "Western modernity" in terms of technical science, natural science, economical thought and "instrumental rationality" (Buruma and Margalit 2005, 76). The European civilisation emerged (apart from Greco-Roman thought and law) with its spiritual nature being formed by tributaries of Christianity and Judaism. Even though Judaism is a much older creed, yet by itself it has never created nor was a pillar of any civilisation. To this spiritual tandem of religions tributaries to European civilization, Islam only started its contribution from the 10th century. The spiritual contribution is seen only in a long term. While Muslim contributions in science, literature, etc. were tangible, on the spiritual plane the Church considered Islam a "divine punishment" for sins. Yet, Muslims stayed in Europe. Excluding the ones settled in 10th or 11th century in Sicily and Iberian Peninsula. Those Muslim communities were destroyed and pushed away by various political powers. I purposefully do



not use the term “by Christianity” or “by Christians.” There were many different groups of peoples who lived in Europe and we only can read about them in history books. They “disappeared”, were pushed away, or melted into other ethnics (nations) often coming from far away. To use religious index in describing history is to strengthen the fideocentric discourse as a space for explaining history. In such discourse we create artificially simple solutions which lead to promoting such media friendly, yet dangerous, terms like “clash of civilisations” (see Huntington 1996) meaning Christianity clashing with Islam.

The public in Europe generally feel comfortable with this discourse. Events like the XV Muslim International Forum are of great importance as they help construct an image of Islam based on knowledge and European experiences of traditional Muslim communities, not the one created by the media, more than often identifying Islam with criminal terrorist groups. That image, based on Central European history and present day, is a reflection of Muslims living and helping build Europe for 600 years. Ian Almond writes in his book:

The lesson in all of this [history – MM] is that the decision to give up such words as “Islam” and “Christendom”, “infidel” and “Turk” requires a certain courage, a willingness to open oneself and one’s culture up to unreserved criticism. In many ways, a myth of a Christian Europe attacked by an army of Islam persists because we have not yet found that courage. (Almond 2010, 154)

For the last few decades interreligious dialogue (with reference to Islam and Christianity) was a popular subject engaging many institutions, individuals, media and academic centers. In my opinion its popularity made it more of a space of public relations activity than a platform for profound reflections on joint efforts for humanity’s well being. The creating of public relations space was a positive development as it contributed to public awareness of dialogue between Christianity and Islam and hopefully leads to the fading of the notion of the “other” with reference to Muslims. But at present a kind of “realpolitik” dialogue is needed.

It is not by chance that the 2019 MIF debated the subject of interreligious dialogue. The prime impulse to debate the dialogue in Berlin, was the meeting on February 2nd (Abu Dhabi, 2019) of the Head of the Roman Catholic Church Pope Francis and The Shaikh of Al Ashar University Ahmad al Tayeb



where they signed “A Document on Human Fraternity”. Compared to earlier documents and policy guidelines of the Roman Catholic Church, The “Document on Human Fraternity” contains new quality never previously expressed in statements on the dialogue with Islam, by the Church. This new quality is admission of Divine Will in plurality and diversity inter alia of religions. This new quality may be seen also in the very signing of document, which not only admits equality of the partners on personal level (which the Church stated already in the year 2000) but may also be signaling equality in religion. That is why that document was an important motivation for Muslims gathered in Berlin to look to future meetings with Christians with hope and enthusiasm

In my paper titled “European Islam – Poland, Review and Experience of Interreligious dialogue in XXI century” (Moroń, in press) I have quoted from essential document of the Roman Catholic Church which contains guidelines on what is considered to be a dialogue and how the other creed – Islam should be viewed. The declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith titled “Dominus Iesus” (2000) is this essential document. This document needs to be quoted to understand the Catholic position towards interreligious dialogue (inter alia with Islam): “Interreligious dialogue as part of the evangelisation mission of Church is just one of the actions of the Church in her mission ad gentes” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000). Another quote is : “Equality – which is a presupposition of interreligious dialogue – refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue not to doctrinal content not even less to the position of Jesus Christ who is God himself made man” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000).

It is surprising that such a secretive organisation as the Roman Catholic Church gives such an open explanation as to their policies on interreligious dialogue. It appears, from the quoted document, it is but an instrument to be used in globalisation of their doctrine. This tool is to be used in relations with partners of dialogue who are considered equal as persons and human beings, only. The principles of their Faith are considered as permanent error, sometimes “reflecting the ray of The Truth” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000). In the words of Catholic Church Truth is solely their property. That new quality and guidelines for dialogue with Muslims, seems to be indicated in “The Document on Human Fraternity,” It may be considered by Muslims as potentially significant step towards building a strong fraternity between Christians and Muslims as equal participants in understanding the Divine.



In my paper in Berlin I quoted, *inter alia*, the following from the “Document on Human Fraternity”: “The pluralism and diversity of religion, colour, sex, race are willed by God in his wisdom through which he created human beings” (Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb 2019).

I also presented in my paper at the Forum, a short description of work of the Polish Joint Council of Catholics and Muslims, (RWKM 2020) which is a platform for meeting and interacting with representatives of both Faiths. The Council was established in 1997. Following the signing of the “Document on Human Fraternity” one can hope that additional space will open for further interfaith meetings of the Council.

In his inauguration speech at the Forum in Berlin, H.E. Mufti of The Russian Federation Ravil Gainutdin quoted the Holy Quran (sura 5, ayat 48) “To each of you we have given a law and a way and a pattern of life. If God had pleased he could surely have made you one people (professing one faith). But he wished to try and test you by that which he gave you” (*Al Quran* 1987, 104). In my opinion the similarities to the words of the “Document of Human Fraternity” are significant.

It is remarkable that when the Mufti of Poland Jakub Szynekiewicz was addressing the Muslim Congress in Geneva in 1935 he ended his speech by quoting sura 5, ayat 48, words following the text quoted by Mufti Ravil Gainutdin. Those words being: “So try to excel in good deeds to him will you all return in the end when he will tell you of what you were at variance.”⁴

3 XV MIF – selected views of some speakers

When considering the Document on Human Fraternity it is surprising that among the guest participants at the Forum in Berlin there were no representatives from the Catholic Church. The representatives of the Protestant Church of Germany [term taken from the MIF program – MM] and Judaism in Germany had addressed the gathering. The representative of the Russian Orthodox church in Germany did not attend and there was no voice from the Catholic Church.

⁴ The “repozytorium” of The Białystok University (Poland) is a collection of research works, results and academic efforts of the academicians of The University of Białystok. The author (Marek Moroń) is a registered member of RUB (Repozytorium Uniwersytetu Białystok). See: Grzegorz Czerwiński, *Sprawozdania z podróży muftiego Jakuba Szynekiewicza. Źródła, omówienie, interpretacja* [21.03.2020].



It is perhaps worth noting that rabbi Aaron Hamel, one of the speakers on behalf of the Jewish community in Germany, stated that he and the community he speaks on behalf of “should not be identified with the state of Israel.” Rabbi Feldman, also from Germany, expressed his opinion that “personal and profound Faith [in God – MM] is the condition for participation in the dialogue.”

In his speech the Supreme Mufti of Kazakhstan Serikbay Oraz warned against “growing feeling of lack of values in the world youth.” In this context he pointed to the dangers of radicalisation and associated growth of criminal organisations. It is religion alone – Mufti Oraz continued – that can protect culture and morality. The task should be to “return humanity to light.”

The Supreme Mufti of Tajikistan Saidmukarram Abdulqodirzoda spoke that “Islam is being misused for various political and partisan interests.” He also added that Islam must stand up to the challenges of 21st century and not resist them.

The Mufti of Russian Federation Ravil Gainutdin in his speech recalled present position of Christians in the Middle East and Africa. The Mufti said that “Muslims should protect them as in fact was the case for centuries.” Instead they are victims of murderers hailing from primitive ideologies outside any civilizational framework. At the same time Mufti Gainutdin also reminded the audience of the fate of Muslims in Myanmar, China, and parts of Middle East.

Professor Ali Erbas, Head of The Turkey Directorate of Religious Affairs “Diyanet” said in his speech that the present “value crisis” may be traced to the 18th century process of denying mystical qualities and the role of mysticism and spirituality at the expense of reason and matter. I can add as my own remark, as far as Islam is concerned, that the 18th century was also the beginning of “mental constructs” in some communities, claiming to be “real” Islam. The extrapolation of these ideas in 20th and 21st century lead to terrorism and promoting hate. The Turkish leader also stated that “Europe must be sensitive to humanism and always take the side of weak.”

Pastor Andreas Goetze, of The Protestant Church of Germany, had a meaningful statement of support for dialogue between Islam and Christianity in a postsecular world.

I think it is also worth noting that the voice of Hartmut Rhein, who spoke as Representative of Government of Germany (as stated in the Conference Program documents). In his speech he used the phrase “religiously open



secularity.” We may question the extend “religiously open secularity” may be identified with postsecularity? He also called for “translating the religious language into secular action” and stressed the necessity of “enabling the coming together of religious environment and engage in cultural context” thus increasing knowledge of each other”.

It is important to note that the views and opinions presented in Berlin by leaders and representatives of centuries old Muslim communities in Eastern, Central and Southern Europe are credible, as they are backed by the history of these people in their respective states.

These voices are supported by communities with similar experiences from Central Asia.

The Berlin Forum made efforts to build upon elements of European Islam identity and the Document on Human Fraternity to try and create a better environment for interreligious dialogue.

4 The Berlin Forum resolution – 10.12.2019 and some closing remarks

The XV MIF ended with a Resolution. I consider it important to quote two points from The Berlin Resolution of 10.12.2020 of The XV Muslim International Forum:

Point 2 of the Resolution:

In the modern world religious doctrines as well as spiritual leaders and religious figures representing them should not proceed from the position of mobilising believers for a particular conflict that has an interracial interreligious or interethnic basis. The religious factor should be used as a means of humanising international relations and relationships within communities, while religious leaders should play the role of peacekeepers. (MIF 2019c)

Point 3 of the Resolution:

At the same time participants of the 15th International Muslim Forum urge modern secular societies to overcome prejudices and to a certain extent the neglect of religious morality and of the religious view of the universe, but to discern and to see the true value in the moral foundations of religious doctrines and the role in the ethical development of mankind. Recognising



that the hard shell and non –compromising execution of the ritual part of religious doctrines and their normative component will lose their relevance for many believers of different traditions over time, transform and adapt to modern conditions, the Forum participants are convinced of the enduring role of the moral foundations of the world religions and their decisive importance for the ethical and psychological well-being of individuals, families and the society as a whole. (MIF 2019c)

These quotes echo the views expressed by Pakistani judges in their “Munir Report” of 1954: “Nothing but a bold reorientation of Islam to separate the vital from the lifeless can preserve it a World Idea and convert the Musalman into a citizen of the present and the future world” (*Report of The Court of Inquiry* 1954, 232).

These words of wisdom from South Asia were written in 1954 but were not accepted as guidelines by many Muslim states and communities in South Asia, Middle East, or Africa.

Traditional European Muslims, with centuries of being European, have all the qualifications needed to pursue their experience and use their heritage to be the strongest voice of Islam, both morally and spiritually to strengthen the 21st century. The 15th Muslim International Forum may be seen as yet another event where moderate Muslim reiterate the “vital” and leave “the lifeless” aside.

Mufti Ravil Gainutdin, in the closing speech again quoted the Holy Quran. From sura 13, ayat 11: “Verily God does not change the state of a people till they change themselves” (*Al Quran* 1987, 212).

In my opinion the proceedings and conclusion of the Berlin Forum on October 10, 2019 was succinctly summarized in the Resolution, and may be further debated and popularised in academic circles.



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