

G20 Interfaith Summit, 16th-18th November 2015, Istanbul – Turkey

Young Scholars Panel (16th November)

“Equality, Inclusiveness and Non-Discrimination”

Once upon a time, there was a man who possessed a ring of a great value. The ring hid the power to make its wearer beloved of God and man. The man had three sons but could not decide, to whom he would pass on the ring to. So he asked a jeweler to make two copies of the ring that would look precisely the same as the original one. But, after his death, the sons ended up in a dispute over the authenticity of their respective rings. To settle their conflict, they went to a judge. After assessing the situation and knowing the ring’s miraculous value, the judge pronounced his conclusion:

"(...)You tell me that the real ring
Enjoys the hidden power to make the wearer
Of God and man beloved; let that decide.
Which of you - do two brothers love the best?
You're silent. Do these love-exciting rings
Act inward only, not without? Does each
Love but himself? Ye're all deceived deceivers,
None of your rings is true. The real ring
perhaps is gone. To hide or to supply
its loss, your father ordered three for one.

If each of you
Has had a ring presented by his father,
let each believe his own the real ring.
'Tis possible the father chose no longer
To tolerate the one ring's tyranny;
And certainly, as he much loved you all,
And loved you all alike, it could not please him
By favouring one, to be of two the oppressor.
Let each feel honoured by this free affection.
Unwarped of prejudice; let each endeavour
To vie with both his brothers in displaying
The virtue of his ring; assist its might
With gentleness, benevolence, forbearance,
With inward resignation to the godhead,
And if the virtues of the ring continue
To show themselves among your children's children,
After a thousand thousand years, appear
Before this judgment-seat--a greater one
Than I shall sit upon it, and decide.”

The story of the three rings is part of a play *Nathan the Wise*, written in the 18th century by the German playwright, and Enlightenment philosopher, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing¹. The story is set in the 12th century Jerusalem, which then, and still after almost a millennium, serves as a setting for the struggles between the three biggest monotheistic religions of the world.

What does the story tell us? It contains crucial points for the topic of our panel that we can derive from the judge's words. As the Islamic Studies professor, Sayyed Hossein Nasr (2009:16) has pointed out in his book "The Heart of Islam", "the multiplicity of races, nations and tribes necessitates the diversity of revelations"². Therefore, the Divine will that we have to consider is by way of example demonstrated in the Quranic verse "If Allah had willed, He would have made you one nation, but that He may test you in what He has given you; so compete in good deeds."³

Thus, apart from religious relativism, the story tells us also to consider God's command to us – and the judge's command to the brothers – to embed our co-existence in good deeds and virtues that we share. Some interpret the three rings in terms of religious tolerance. But I want to rather emphasize the relationship between the three brothers, and thus approach our topic of equality, inclusiveness and non-discrimination by critically discussing and critically some aspects of our societal lives. As I seek an answer to the question, what is it that drives us to disregard the mutual bonds we have with our fellow humans, but otherize them as our opposition, I will draw examples from the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, and also tackle issues of identity and culture.

Bishop Rowan D. Williams (2008: 2) noted in a speech "Christianity and Islam – and indeed Judaism as well, - are part of a long 'family quarrel' within the family of the children of Abraham. (...) it can be bitter at times, but as with family quarrels, there remains a great deal of territory in the house that you still occupy together."⁴

The essence of this common territory can in our everyday lives be defined by a sum of aspects that are in play when we are supposed to share a social space with those, of whom we – like the three brothers – perceive as the adversary "Other" or more drastically, the enemy we have to fight against. As my home country Finland, along with many other European countries is receiving an increased number of refugees from Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, the public discourse is in many cases characterized by the fear of Islamization of Finland by the refugees and other Muslim citizens. This

¹ *Nathan the Wise*, Act III. Translated by William Taylor.

² Nasr, Sayyed Hossein (2009). *The heart of Islam*. Zondervan.

³ Quran, 5:48. Translation by Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan.

⁴ Williams, Rowan (2008). *Islam, Christianity and Pluralism*. The Zaki Badawi Memorial Lecture Series I. Lambeth Palace, AMSS UK.

is embedded in the thought of a creeping sharia, which emerges from the idea of Islam as a manipulative religion, a feature of Islamophobia identified by the Runnymede Report already in the late 1990's.⁵

What strikes me the most, is not the level of this plain ignorance – which in my optimistic thinking that can be overcome by education –, but a deeper rooted attitude towards these refugees and Muslims in general, supported by the argument that “They” are too much different from “Us”. Surely there are socio-political factors that drive people to this modus of self-defense and to not welcome new-comers into the country when even the issues of its so far citizens are in trouble in terms of welfare and prosperity. Yet I want to point out, that it is the micro-level social interactions, which define much of what we perceive our vis-à-vis to be, that form the sources of these perceptions and we need to investigate them more in detail.

For this examination, I consider the German sociologist Alois Hahn's (1994: 140)⁶ explanation on how, *Fremdheit*, or Otherness, is no inherent quality of a human being but it is a definition of a relationship. It is a label, an operation of attribution that is carried out by the attributer him- or herself.⁷

We are dealing here with the social construction of the “Other”. Hahn notes, that the “Otherness” changes according to the circumstances⁸. This is clear, when we think about civil wars; over one night the person you used to consider your neighbor, one of “Us in the block” and maybe also a fellow player in the soccer team that you both swear loyalty to, can become the enemy, the Other opposed to whom you are mirroring yourself and your position. Alois Hahn maintains, that the social construction of the “Other” in this sense operates within a selection and variety of criteria that are based on commonalities and differences, taken as a source for Self-Identification,⁹ which functions in terms of juxtapositions.

Thus, each person embodies a sum of identities that we use in different settings to position ourselves in the social space we are located in. These identities are needed in many aspects of our lives. For example, my religious identity gives me an answer for existential questions. And as the liberal thinker

⁵ The report can be downloaded in scanned form from URL: <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/17/32.html> (Last visit 22.11.2015)

⁶ The German original article was published as *Die soziale Konstruktion des Fremden* and has then been translated in English as *The social construction of the Stranger*. As Hahn in the original German article uses the word *Fremd* to describe someone unknown, distanced, not sharing commonalities, I shall, for the purpose of my discussion though, extend the English equivalent “Stranger” to the notion of the “Other”.

⁷ Hahn, Alois (1994). “Die soziale Konstruktion des Fremden”. In: Walter M. Sprondel (Hrsg): *Die Objektivität der Ordnungen und ihre kommunikative Konstruktion. Für Thomas Luckmann*. Frankfurt a. M: Suhrkamp, S. 140-166.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*:141

Will Kymlicka (1995: 89) has argued in the case of multicultural citizenship, national identities serve as fundamental foci of identification, since they offer a strong sense of belonging.¹⁰ In these post-normal times we live in, surrounded by uncertainties, my national identity gives me a sense of stability.

Yet, the problem for the discussion about inclusiveness and non-discrimination of Muslims in European societies lies in the *modus operandi* in the social construction of the “Other”, or Self-Identification. This becomes detrimental, when its dynamics are inflexible and unidirectional: when only one component of a person’s identity is taken as determinant, when commonalities are being pushed aside as negligible, even though so far they have been functioning – or could do so – as strong aspect of unification.

When do we stick to the commonalities, and when do we let the differences dominate? If two people can feel unified by their profession (for instance in the setting of a worker association meeting), does the feeling of this solidarity have to disappear when they are sitting on the opposite sides of the stadium in a soccer game? Our example of the three brothers shows, how easily this can happen; their obsession with the authenticity of their rings drove them to disregard even one of the strongest bonds humans can have – brotherhood by blood.

Similarly, what happens in Finland and in other European countries at the moment regarding the relation in which Muslims are seen, can be analyzed in this framework. In public discourse, when Muslims are excluded from the societal “Us” they are being defined only through their religious affiliation, and thus the category of the “Other” is stamped on their foreheads like passports at a border control desk.

Muslim writers dealing with Islam in European societies, such as Navid Kermani¹¹ and Tariq Ramadan¹² have recognized the difficulties that this kind of forced reduction of our naturally hybrid identities brings along, when suddenly, a person is forced to problematize and think about an identity, she or he has so far taken for granted. Inclusiveness requires acknowledgment of a person as one of “Us”, and as Kermani (2015: 92) has argued, the price that we Muslims then pay when being pushed into dichotomies would be to belong only to that category one is ascribed to by an outside force and to dissociate with the other. So, definitions shape the world we live in but it is eminent to understand, that more dangerous than definitions, is the power to DEFINE. As I noted before, our identities are

¹⁰ Kymlicka, Will. (1995). *Multicultural citizenship: A liberal theory of minority rights*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

¹¹ Kermani, N. (2015). *Wer ist wir? Deutschland und seine Muslime* (1st edition in paperback). München: CH Beck.

¹² Ramadan, T. (2009). *What I believe*. Oxford University Press.

hybrid, and very rarely work isolated from each other. So if I was to be labeled as the “Other” only by my Muslimness, I object to that! I object firstly, because I will not do a favor for the attributers and be defined only by my Muslimness, because then it would be too easy to exclude me from the Finnish “Us” as being the “Other”.

Secondly, to define a person only in terms of single identity can and will not tell everything about a person. If anyone should see me only as a Muslim, he most probably would not find out or regard, that I am a fan of metal music; that I would describe myself as a nature lover and for example, that my family stems, as is the case with many other Finns, from the eastern part of Finland, Karelia. All of this and many other things, is for me, what makes me a Finn. And yes, at the same time, I am also a Muslim. Therefore, it is crucial to note, that different dimensions of my persona do not contradict the others.

When the discourse circulates around the question, whether or not Islam and Muslims are compatible with the Finnish culture, I then wonder, what kind of a Finnish culture are we talking about? Is it the citizenship as such – which is easily proven for the most – is it supporting the Finnish national teams in ski jumping and ice hockey, is it the black rye bread we miss when we are abroad, the midsummer night we celebrate, our grumpy mentality or is it maybe the Finnish sauna?¹³I also wonder, about which Islam and who “the Muslims” we would be talking about? Islam, as any other religion, is not a monolith or an isolated entity from its surroundings. It has been – and it is – constantly in contact with the local cultures. And Muslims? Well we just need to look at the many Muslim personalities we encounter in this conference and we can see, how diverse we are.

So, when it comes to the integration of the Muslims in the Finnish or other European societies, we can consider, what the former Grand Mufti of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mustafa Ceric (2008) in his speech about the Muslim Social Contract advocated about the integrative role of Muslims in Europe. The Muslims should not be passive by-standers and watch the world go by, but actively participate in the affairs of our respective societies. This is because we are firstly bound by God’s Covenant to balance and combine the transcendental and the present, but secondly we are also subjects of the society in the sense of a social contract.¹⁴

¹³ These are of course only examples of many other things that could be defined as Finnish, but for the purpose of my speech I want to highlight some of the cultural factors which are typically ascribed to “being a Finn” and thus can be embraced also by many, despite of their religion or ethnicity. In this way I want to underline the importance of not restricting identities in only one category / ascription, such as, “a Finn is someone who is/does XYZ”.

¹⁴ Ceric, Mustafa (2008). Toward a Muslim social contract in Europe. The Zaki Badawi Memorial Lecture Series II. Lambeth Palace, AMSS UK.

It is right, that in the realm of the Covenant, the fundamental pillars of our religion are non-negotiable. Yet, the confession, the prayer, the mandatory charity, the pilgrimage to Mecca and fasting in Ramadan, are hardly in conflict with being included when it comes to the matters of the society. And what remains of our religious practices to decide upon for ourselves, our inner faith, our relationship with the Creator, leaves room for individual choices and creates this diversity we witness.

So, while being Muslims, we participate in the society. For instance, we contribute to the intellect at universities, participate in politics, go to the military service and push the country's science forward, run restaurants serving international cuisine, pay taxes as we work as kindergarten teachers or nurses and so on and so forth. However, even though we try and we try hard, we are just not quite yet there. This is at least what the discourse lets us feel. We are not part of the societal or the cultural "Us". What else is there to do? When are we in that space and time, when the Muslim citizen is acknowledged as being equal to the non-Muslim one? When does the social construction of the "Other" in this respect finally end? For that I cannot provide an ultimate answer.

But, at least for the purpose of this G20 Interfaith summit, as we are gathered here with diversity in terms of our cultural and religious backgrounds, I challenge you, dear participants of this conference to encounter the people you will discuss here with, through an open-mind. Do not see each other based on oppositions, the difference you have in terms of your identities be it then your sex, your religion, ethnicity, academic position or something else. Rather go for a quest after the commonalities, the territory you share and what is important to you, that what brings you together, in mutual understanding of your interests, beliefs and goals and create a feeling of solidarity.

For this, let us, be "Us".
