



**World Council  
of Churches**



**The Relationship between Religion and the Public Square:  
Freedom of Religion in the Public Space**

*By Dr Clare Amos*

*Programme executive for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation*

The title I was asked to speak to is: *The Relationship between Religion and the Public Square: Freedom of Religion in the Public Space*. I found it quite challenging, for it seems to be raising two distinct though related issues.

The first is as it suggests: what is the relationship between religion and the public square – in other words does and should religion as a phenomenon and religious institutions as an expression of it, have a role to play in the public civil and political life of a society? It might be considered the debate between religion and secularism. But then what is meant by *Freedom of Religion in the Public Space* – how does it relate to the first half of the sentence? Should I explore ways in which control of the public space can guarantee or suppress freedom of religion? And how far does any guarantee need to go – to enable adherents of religions to live freely and to follow their religious beliefs as individuals, or are we speaking of the right of religious communities, perhaps particularly minority religious communities, to have the freedom to influence law making and governmental processes: in other words to have space themselves within the public space? And how do both of these threads fit within the overall framework of this meeting exploring the theme of religion and violence? In some contexts does dominance of the public space by one religion lead to apparently state-sanctioned violence?

I speak as a British Anglican Christian currently working for the World Council of Churches in Switzerland in the field of interreligious dialogue. So I bring to the table my own context in which in England my church, the Church of England, has the position of being the ‘established’ church in the country, with a structural relationship with the state which means, for example, that 26 bishops still sit by right in the Upper House of Parliament, and whose Head of State has, up to the present queen, assumed their role in a ceremony in which the Archbishop of Canterbury has played the key part. Within continental Europe where I now live, in a number of countries there is a privileged role for a particular historic church or churches even if the word ‘establishment’ is not necessarily used. In Germany or parts of Switzerland for example Christian clergy or particular denominations are funded by the public purse, even though they do not necessarily have a constitutional or governmental role.

Of course the situation is very different here in the USA, though I learned recently that in the earliest days of the European settlement in North America in several of the individual states there was in fact a religion or rather denomination (for they were all Christian) which was formally established.

The other context I bring to this discussion is my work in interreligious dialogue for the World Council of Churches, in particular our relationships with Jews and Muslims: the question of the relationship between religion and the public square and a place for the religious other in political and social life is an essential part of our dialogue with representatives of these religions.

There is certainly no lack of contemporary examples to illustrate the complexities of the topic. Here are just five – the point however being that they are all taken from media reports which have appeared in the last ten days, suggesting the ‘liveness’ of the issue.

- The New York City school system has just announced that in future school holidays will include one linked to the Muslim faith, and one marking Chinese New Year. The news site includes the

comment by the children's book author *Fawzia Gilani-Williams* "By leaving out some children's heritage while others are visible, presents youngsters with an image of being undervalued or unimportant." It went on to suggest that "By enacting these school holiday closings, we help our schools to create safe spaces for our children to ask questions and learn from one another, and counter the stereotypes perpetuated by the media; we give our teachers tools to create a nurturing environment where Arab, Muslim and South Asian students feel safe, and to teach all children to stand against intolerance. These holidays are teachable moments that can help turn curious children into thoughtful, respectful adults."

- Last week between 25 - 27 January there was a very significant conference in Marrakesh organised by the King of Morocco. It brought together over 200 Muslim religious leaders, largely Sunni, but from a wide spectrum of the Muslim world, as well as about 50 leaders from other faith traditions. It produced a declaration on the 'Rights of Religious Minorities in predominantly Muslim Majority Communities.' To date, as far as I can see, only an Executive Summary of the final declaration has been published, but it is striking stuff. Commenting on the current gravity of the situation in various parts of the Muslim world, which as the declaration puts it, 'has allowed criminal groups to issue edicts attributed to Islam but which in fact alarmingly distort its fundamental principles and goals', and taking the historic Charter of Medina as a fundamental principle, it suggests inter alia that 'Muslim scholars and intellectuals around the world' need to develop 'a jurisprudence of the concept of citizenship which is inclusive of diverse groups,' that it is important to 'support all formulations and initiatives that aim to fortify relations and understanding among the various religious groups in the Muslim World... and that it is unconscionable to employ religion for the purpose of aggressing upon the rights of religious minorities in Muslim countries.' I have over the years read a number of well-meaning declarations about religion and peace which have not necessarily had much impact, but on the face of it, this particular one does have at least some potential to make a difference.
- A recently published interview with the American Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf about his book *Defining Islamic Statehood* offers some intriguing insights. Two in particular are relevant to our discussion: first his comment that it is important to differentiate between the separation of church and state on the one hand and religion and politics on the other. Taking the United Kingdom as an example he suggests that because of the role of the monarch as governor of the Church of England we don't have separation of church and state in England, but we do have separation of religion and politics. Conversely in India there is an official separation between church and state or temple and state, but there is, at least currently, in reality no separation between religion and politics. His implicit argument is that whatever the exact nature of a Muslim majority country, whether or not it seeks to define itself as a Muslim state, the real and key question is 'the right institutional role and involvement between religion and politics'. His other comment which I found fascinating is that until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the key question in the Muslim world was not about state and religion, but about the role and competencies of the Islamic ruler, and the need for such a ruler to abide by the divine laws. It is as he hints, perhaps one of the areas where Sunni and Shia Islam today have differing emphases.
- Moving from what feels like the sublime to the slightly ridiculous there is the news that during the recent visit of President Rouhani to France the official banquet originally proposed was substituted by a low key event of orange juice and nibbles, due to the Iranian President's refusal to participate in a formal meal at which wine was served. Conversely there was the covering up of the naked classical statues to spare the President's blushes during his visit to Rome.

- Back to my own country of the UK there have been two linked news items that have provoked extensive media coverage and comment over the last few days: the first was Prime Minister Cameron's comment that women living in Muslim communities in Britain needed to have strong encouragement, perhaps reinforced by financial or legal sanctions, to learn English. The second was the comment by Trevor Phillips the former chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and himself a black Briton, that Muslims are 'not like us' and that it is a mistake and insulting to think that they are ever going to integrate.

All of these examples in some way or other interface with our question of religion and the public square or space, and the theme of the freedom of religion. It is telling that most of these have some connection with Islam and Christianity, or at least the so called Christian and so called Muslim world.

To spread my net a bit wider there are a two earlier media reports I want to refer to which also offer interesting perspectives. One is an article published by the *Washington Post* on December 21 2015 by two American Muslim women Asra Q. Nomani and Hala Arafa speaking out against the practice in some interfaith circles here in the United States of non-Muslim women wearing the so-called hijab for a public event as a gesture of solidarity with Muslim women. Their opposition was on various grounds but particularly because the widespread use of head scarves was a recent phenomenon in Islam which was being imposed upon Muslim women in a number of countries in a way that could be oppressive.

Secondly there is the fascinating research by Hossein Askari, an Iranian-born professor of International Business and International Affairs at George Washington University which was publicised in 2014 which argues that the Qur'an's teachings are better represented in Western societies than in Islamic countries. Looking at an index of what he calls Economic Islamicity, or how closely the policies and achievements of countries reflect Islamic economic teachings, he came to the conclusion that Ireland led the world in Islamic values. The highest rated Muslim majority nation was Malaysia at No. 33.

And one other topic that at least from my European perspective cannot be dissociated from our wider concern – that of the migrant and refugee crisis in Europe at the moment, which has taken on an even more difficult nature in the last few weeks. There was a high level meeting held at the World Council of Churches in Geneva, in partnership with various UN agencies, on this topic exactly two weeks ago. From my perspective what was fascinating and quite telling was how the conference almost skated around the interreligious dimension, largely afraid to name the question of religion and the public space, and the tension between Muslims and Christians as a contributory aspect of the crisis both in the Middle East and in Europe – although this did eventually get in a fairly oblique reference in the final communique. Perhaps tellingly it was a Sikh speaker at the conference, as far as I am aware the only speaker present overtly from a non-Christian faith tradition, who was most explicitly prepared to focus on the need to address this aspect.

What are some key underlying themes in relation to these and similar concrete stories?

The first is the question of identity, and in particular how religious identity interfaces with ethnic and national identity. Do these different facets of our identity complement or challenge or compete with each other? One of the profound reasons for the founding of the WCC after the Second World War was the determination of a number of Christian leaders of that time to give substance to their belief that their common identity as Christians overrode their differing national identities which must never be allowed to compete with each other in such a destructive way ever again. The implication of this is that my identity as a Christian needs to take precedence over my identity as British.

There is the line from Paul's letter to the Philippians which is often drawn on to reinforce such a view: our citizenship is in heaven. But I suspect that the issue is not quite as neat as many western Christians would like to make out.

I remember my shock when some colleagues and I visited a group of Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem back in 2011 and we were told forcefully by one of them, 'I am a Palestinian first and a Christian second.'

My highminded reaction then was to feel that this was heresy. Now though I wouldn't totally disown that earlier view, I would be prepared to acknowledge that the situation is considerably more complicated.

Indeed religious and other identities do overlap: what for example is the relationship between 'Jewish' as a religious identity and 'Jewish' as an ethnic or even national identity? And in spite of my reaction to my Palestinian acquaintance it is not an issue that Christianity itself can avoid, for we can take the case of a number of Orthodox churches, in which the identities overlap. Is being an Armenian Christian an ethnic identity or a religious one, or these days a political one for example?

And back to my Palestinian Christian interlocuter: perhaps I was wanting her to say, 'I am a Christian first and a Palestinian second,' but would I also be wanting a British Muslim to say, 'I am a Muslim first and a Briton second.?' Fairness dictates that I should, but I suspect that the bulk of my British Christian co-religionists would be quite uncomfortable if or when British Muslims were to make such an assertion.

I would suggest to you that a very considerable proportion of the difficult issues about religion and the public space, and even religion and violence in our wider world are linked in some way to the ambiguous relationship between religious identity and national or ethnic identity – but that this is an issue that we find it very difficult to name and therefore confront.

Kenneth Cragg, a great Christian Islamicist, who lived long enough to become unfashionable, produced at the age of 90, an extraordinary book 'Faith in their Pronouns: websites of identity.' He comments in it how the pronouns 'we' and 'us' can become quite dangerous, and that as he puts it the urgent need for those insistent pronouns is to distinguish firmly their religious use from their tribal, ethnic, racial or national currency, but that for many religions this is a difficult or highly uncongenial task, but necessary if the claims of human rights are to override the exclusives of territorial religion.

Inevitably this leads into the question of the appropriate relationship between religion and political power, which impinges also on the place given to religious minorities within the state. This is an area when Christianity and Islam have traditionally traded sharp and pithy comments between each other, Those of Kenneth Cragg included, 'Islam is a religion continually in the process of becoming a state', and 'Muhammad was his own Constantine'.

Conversely there is a telling critique of so-called Christian views on the relationship between religion and power by a Muslim writer: Christianity wishes to leave unto Caesar what is Caesar's. In the absence of Christian guidance, a Christian ruler will follow not Christ but Machiavelli, whereas Islamic guidance to a ruler is as imperative as it is to one who prays and fasts.

It is perhaps interesting to recall Machiavelli on the day of the Iowa Primary elections. All these comments have some half-truths about them. However one of the results of the way that some Muslim understandings about religion and power played out during the Ottoman era is that it created in the Middle East a patchwork of religious communities held together ultimately under the power of a Sunni Muslim ruler but with each minority holding an element of quasi-political power.

This so-called millet system, linked in to the classical concept of the dhimma has been reflected in the modern era in a settlement in which voting and political representation is allotted on a religious basis, so that for example in Lebanon the President is always a Maronite Christian and the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, or the fact that in Jordan there are reserved seats in the Parliament for the Christian minority. One of the hopes and aspirations of many Middle Eastern Christians when the Arab Spring began in 2011 was that there would be what was called a 'common citizenship' in which religion would not play a part in political structures: five years on we now seem to be very far from that aspiration, although the Marrakesh Declaration referred to earlier does talk about the need to develop a jurisprudence of the concept of citizenship which is inclusive of diverse groups.

Two other brief comments – almost as an aside at this point – one wonders what the increasing stress in Israeli politics on Israel as a Jewish state is going to mean for religious minorities in that country; and secondly as a Briton, even if currently an expatriate one, I am fascinated by the fact that the current front

runner to be the next mayor of London is Sadiq Khan who identifies as a Muslim, but that so far at least there has not that much been made of his religious background in the run up to the May elections.

One of the important things to remember in this discussion about freedom of religion and the public space, is that religions don't have human rights, it is human beings that do so. It is noticeable that some leaders of religious minorities, particularly in the Middle East, are often more interested the right of the religious community which they lead to exist and carry out its official religious practices than they are in the rights of particular individuals to profess any religious faith – or none.

However ultimately freedom of religion in a country such as Egypt is not about the power and security of the Coptic Church, but about the rights of all Egyptians to profess as individuals the faith that they choose, or even to profess no faith at all. What often seems to happen in the case of minority religious communities, and this is true in the Western world as well as the Middle East and Asia, is that they carve out for themselves some space within the wider state in which they control or seek to control the personal lives of their followers in regard to issues such as marriage, family life and inheritance issues.

Some of you will remember the hysteria that exploded in Britain in 2008 when the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, made a comment about the possibility of recognising Sharia courts in Britain. Although the hysteria was misplaced and malicious – there was no way that Dr Williams was advocating a widespread introduction of Sharia throughout British society – he was rather reflecting on the possible use of Sharia courts by Muslim families and communities to settle personal or family issues, I still think that Dr Williams was wrong. He is someone I deeply respect but as a male church leader I don't think he fully grasped how vulnerable women, particularly young women, can be made to feel when religious tradition and religious leadership conspire to control their lives. It can be a denial of freedom and a sort of religiously inspired violence, or at least oppression.

I speak here from personal experience. As a young married woman in Lebanon and working alongside my husband for a Anglican church related organisation called the Church Mission Society I recall how my husband was treated very differently from me: looking back at the experience thirty years or so on, I think the examples of discrimination I was subjected to on the grounds of my sex were unbelievable. Yet it was not the discrimination itself which now still makes me angry, it was the fact that when I protested about them to the leadership of the organisation they sought to justify them on the grounds that they believed in and sought to uphold Christian marriage. The implication of course was that if I did not agree with them – and I didn't – then I and my understanding of marriage were not really Christian. It was a sort of spiritual and emotional blackmail. If anyone said anything like that to me these days I would respond forcefully, but then I was much younger, newly married and comparatively insecure.

My fear about the use of religious courts by other faith traditions to deal with family issues is coloured by my experience; I suspect that they could be used by largely male religious leadership to browbeat women, not physically of course, but spiritually and emotionally. If you don't allow the Imam to adjudicate in relation to family difficulties, then you are not really a proper Muslim, are you?

My experience in Lebanon, where I lived during the days of its civil war, which I do believe had a religious aspect to it, has also coloured the final point I want to make – that there is within religion, all religion, a propensity to violence, which needs to be genuinely acknowledged if it is to be overcome. It is linked in some way to the absolute claims that most religions make about themselves. It is often also linked to an ability or desire to control the public space.

There is a saying that I first heard about 15 years ago, 'Unless religion is prepared to acknowledge that it is part of the problem as far as violence is concerned, it cannot also become part of the solution.' Incidentally I first heard that remark made in relation to the intra-Christian violence that characterised the so-called Troubles in Northern Ireland.

I was on a work related visit to Ireland, north and south, last December, and I noticed how many of those I met still spoke in the same terms. Was it in fact the realization by significant elements of the religious

leadership in the island of Ireland of the truth of that statement that has contributed to enabling the comparative peace that has been experienced for the last decade or so?

But on the interreligious plane, I would respectfully suggest that not all religious traditions find it easy at the moment to acknowledge that their own religion could be complicit in violence. There is a tendency to try and protect the religion itself from such an accusation by suggesting that those who commit acts of violence are not really authentic representatives of that particular faith tradition.

Over my years of involvement in interreligious dialogue I have been involved in too many meetings, mainly, though not exclusively Christian and Muslim, in which our topic of conversation has been the role of religious leaders in promoting peace, but in which the religious leaders who are the participants have generally refused to acknowledge the darker side of their own faith.

It takes courage to do so; it is in fact a question of spirituality. As Rowan Williams suggests, the political realm is a place of spiritual decision where souls are made and lost. Is it by their dealing with the political realm that not only souls but religions themselves are made and lost?