ICCJ Consultation: Religious Fundamentalism

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The nature of religious fundamentalism and its impact on interreligious dialogue was the theme when ICCJ's Executive Board met with experts and guests in Heppenheim at the End of January. Who defines what characterizes a fundamentalist? Can we, and should we engage in dialogue with fundamentalists? And if we decide to engage in dialogue with fundamentalists, what is our goal?

Each year in January/February the ICCJ Executive Board gather for a series of internal meetings; adjacent to these meetings, the Executive Board invites guests for a consultation on a current topic of importance. The title of this year's consultation was "Religious Fundamentalism: Definition and Description of a Global Phenomenon and its Impact on Inner- and Inter-Religious Relations".

Preparations within the Executive Board included the creation of a session where board members shared their insights and thoughts on the topic of religious fundamentalism with the invited experts. Taking advantage of the diversity of the board, this session aimed at tapping into the board members' geographical, professional and confessional perspectives and knowledge.

The experts of this year's consultation are esteemed household names within the world of interreligious dialogue. Prof. Dr Reuven Firestone of Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion and newly appointed chair of ICCJ's International Abrahamic Forum (IAF), a committee for Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue, was the first speaker to give a keynote address. Dr Firestone spoke on "Fundamentalism – Terminology and Phenomenology in the Scriptural Monotheism". Possessing a deep knowledge of both Judaism and Islam, Dr Firestone initiated a fruitful discussion amongst the attendees of the consultation. It quickly became evident that it might not be sufficient to speak about "fundamentalism", but rather "fundamentalisms".

This was further elaborated on by the second speaker of the day, Mehmet Senel of the Goethe University in Frankfurt. Senel's address, entitled "Countering Violent Extremism: The Reasons for the Radicalization of Muslim Youth and the Strategies Against", provided an in-depth look at how social and economical factors may be both the soil in which fundamentalism grows and a way to combat it. Mehmet Senel argued that youth who grow up unaccustomed to the concept of democracy – or feel they live outside of mainstream society – tend to be more vulnerable to Islamist recruitment. Therefor, it is of utmost importance to work with prevention, reaching out to estranged youths in schools and during after-school activities.

In the second part of the consultation Rabbi Dr David Sandmel, Director of Interfaith Affairs for the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and a veteran of Jewish-Christian dialogue, delivered a keynote address entitled "Fundamentalism and Judaism". Rabbi Sandmel's vivid speech addressed Jewish fundamentalism in the past; some of which might be associated with martyrdom, and fundamentalism today, ranging from literal interpretations of holy texts to the desire to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The address kindled a discussion on active versus passive fundamentalism, and how those involved in interreligious dialogue must identify and may need to handle these fundamentalisms in different ways. The last speaker to provide a keynote address was Dr Clare Amos, who recently retired from her position as programme executive for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation at the World Council of Churches. She delivered her address entitled "For Zion's Sake I will Not Keep Silence (Isaiah 62:1): The Loud Noises of Christian Zionism" with both

passion and humour, providing the audience with numerous interesting and thought-provoking quotes from various sources. Following Dr Amos address, the audience discussed Zionism as a phenomenon, its historical implications and whether or not Zionism is innate in Judaism and Christianity respectively.

The final part of the consultation was held on Thursday morning, February 1st. Enriched by the various views presented by both the invited experts and the Executive Board members, discussions continued on the topic of "Religious Fundamentalism as a Challenge for Jewish-Christian Relations and Interfaith Dialogue". The aim of the yearly consultations is to provide the Executive Board and its liaisons and guests with up-to-date knowledge that may be beneficial to the international work of the ICCJ as well as to the local and regional work of our member organizations.

The question on whether or not the ICCJ should engage in dialogue with fundamentalists emerged as one of the key points, and stemming from that a second key point became evident: if the ICCJ and/or its member organizations engages in interreligious dialogue with fundamentalists – what should be the goal? A discussion on the nature and toolbox of dialogue itself had been brewing during the past days, and the participants of the consultation came to the conclusion that just as there is both active and passive fundamentalism, there may also be active and passive approaches to dialogue. The core of interreligious dialogue lies in sharing and listening to the perspectives of the other, and as a second step, questions may be introduced to further clarify the positions of the partners in dialogue. This form of dialogue may be seen as responsive or passive, in that there are no attempts to persuade the other of one's own views. However, when dealing with topics such as xenophobia, anti-Semitism and fundamentalism, we often feel a need to do more than simply listen and ask questions. A more active approach to interreligious dialogue seeks to combat such destructive tendencies, and this entails going beyond speaking and listening. Should the ICCJ initiate such a dialogue, and how should and could this be done practically? Is it feasible to assume that we may find fundamentalists who want to take part in our work, and which definition of fundamentalism should be applied when searching for such participants?

The consultation days were intense and we may not be ready to draw too many conclusions at this stage, before mulling over all the new input. However, the participants of the consultation reached consensus on the fact that fundamentalism needs to be addressed in plural form, and that we need to be clear about what we mean when speaking of Jewish, Christian and Muslim fundamentalism. Furthermore, there might lie an even bigger challenge within our faith communities, as the encounter with a fundamentalist of one's own religious affiliation may prove to be harder to handle than an encounter with a fundamentalist of another community. There is also a large discrepancy between the original meaning of "fundamentalism", introduced in a Christian, Protestant setting, and the definition used in media today. We often find that media, politicians and lobbyists use "fundamentalism" and "extremism" inter-changeably, which tends to tilt discussions in a direction we might not want to pursue. When getting fundamentalism and extremism mixed up, we risk losing the possibility to apply scriptural and liturgical perspectives on fundamentalism. The ICCJ, being an umbrella organization made up of tens of thousands of activists in 40 countries, clergy as well as lay people, theologians as well as grass-roots, may be well suited to take on the task of approaching fundamentalism through the study of texts. To further investigate this route, the theology committee of the ICCJ will work on compiling our findings from the consultation, and these will be presented in due time before our next international conference. Undoubtedly, ICCJ members across the world will have the same questions that we had prior to the consultation, and we aim to provide practical guidelines based on our findings and the knowledge provided by our experts. Hopefully, this will become part of our toolbox of dialogue and facilitate further discussions on the matter.

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