

# UNITING for PEACE: Annual Conference : November 7 2013

House of Lords

6.00-8.30pm

## "RELIGION and CONFLICT"

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Uniting for Peace

**RELIGION AND THE WORLD SCENE:** On the global level, Western Europe is the 'odd place out' as the region where religion is in decline. Elsewhere across the world, this is not so:

almost everywhere, religion in its various faith traditions, remains strong and vibrant, is definitely resurgent in countries like China and Russia, and is especially so North Africa, the Middle East, and the regions of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Caucasus. Secular models of society such as Arab Socialism, Arab Nationalism and pan-Arabism, have become discredited, especially as 'secularism' and 'modernisation' are equated with the West. The remarkable, and by the West wholly unexpected, resurgence of Islam - fundamentally a spiritual revival but one with profound political repercussions - has transformed both the region itself and its relations with the rest of the global community. For these regions, the political solidarity of Socialist internationalism has been replaced by the faith-based solidarity of the *Umma*, the fellowship of all Muslims.

**RELIGION and CONFLICT:** It is manifestly clear from the events of the past decade that the resurgence of faith in this region has tragically been accompanied by the misuse of faith for power-struggles, community strife, civil war and inter-state rivalries. Given the social and economic deprivation of the region, the suffering and dislocation caused by recent Western invasions following a century of interference and exploitation, and the impact of globalisation, it is hardly surprising that faith-driven change can become perverted by violence. In the case of radical Islamic jihadism, this is clearly a violent response to the West as well as part of intra-Muslim struggles. The situation of the region is made more complex by the struggles between (culturally) pro-Western, pro-liberal, pro-democracy

minorities - "the internet generation" - and more traditional, conservative Muslim forces. EGYPT perfectly illustrates the latter divide: the Muslim Brotherhood government of President Mohamed Morsi was elected by popular vote, overwhelmingly supported by Egypt's conservative Muslim rural heartland, but against the will of the urban liberals (including moderate Muslims) who had driven the original anti-Mubarak revolt. In office, instead of pursuing a consensual approach (as in Tunisia under the Muslim-led Ennahda party of Rachid Ghannouchi), Morsi pushed an Islamisation of society unacceptable to the opposition and army, leading to his overthrow. However, as the first revolution had been to establish democracy, this coup-style overthrow was a negative precedent, and the subsequent banning of the Muslim Brotherhood has clearly disillusioned many traditional Muslims against the possibility of achieving power through the ballot box, thus encouraging violence. In Egypt, internal conflict is clearly religion-related. In TURKEY, premier Erdogan's limited steps towards Islamisation prompted a wave of rioting by pro-Western elements determined to maintain the country's secular foundations.

**SHIA-SUNNI RIVALRY:** In IRAQ, the legacy of US-UK violent intervention is *both* mass suffering, death, destruction and many thousands of refugees, *and* an ultra-violent insurgency by the Sunni minority against the Shia-dominated post-Saddam government: terrorist actions are now virtually a daily occurrence. The West's war had the utterly unintended consequence of this traditional division coming to the fore as Muslim forces became new power-centres: the destruction of the secular Baath party dramatically shifted power to the mosques. Weakening Iraq has caused the rise of Shia IRAN as the key regional power, in intense rivalry with Saudi Arabia, a Sunni state which uses oil finance to promote its ultra-conservative Wahabist and Salafist forms of Islam, and its military to suppress demonstrations by majority Shia against the minority Sunni rulers in BAHREIN. Gulf states generally back Saudi Arabia. Because Iran is a backer of the secular and Alawite Assad regime in SYRIA, Saudi Arabia has been arming Syrian rebel factions, among whom Al-Qaeda-style jihadists are now seen by some commentators as the main fighting forces. Such groups as Jabat-al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, are not only anti-Assad: they are also virulently anti-US and the West, and against women's rights and democracy. They are also anti-Christian, in a country where Christians and Muslims have lived in mutual tolerance and respect for centuries.

**ROLE OF RUSSIA [and the faith dimension]:** Russia is critical for the future

peace of Syria, as the Russia-US agreement over Syrian chemical weapons has shown. From the outset, the West condemned Putin for not backing the anti-Assad opposition, but his policy has been consistent: there must be an internationally negotiated solution. Russia has legitimate interests in Syria - naval access to a port; 30,000 Russians live there; arms deals and commercial links - but Putin has made clear Russia is not insisting Assad stay in power. *A significant faith-related factor also influences Putin's view of Syria and the region.* When he first became President in 2000, he believed the very territorial integrity of Russia was threatened by fundamentalist Islam and its jihadism, as evident in Chechnya and the Caucasus, and in terrorist outrages in Moscow and elsewhere. So he ruthlessly crushed the Chechen revolt (which involved international jihadist fighters), helps ex-Soviet central Asian states deal with jihadist threats, and is very concerned at the strength of Islamic extremism in Syria's opposition. Historically, Russia always claimed to be the 'protector' of Orthodox Christians in the Middle East; Putin personally is totally at one with Russia's post-Soviet identification as an Orthodox country; the plight of Christians in Syria is of deep concern to the Russian Orthodox Church.

**PERSECUTION of CHRISTIANS in SYRIA:** There is much evidence that anti-Assad jihadists are also involved in terrorist actions against Christian communities in areas they capture, and against priests and church leaders. Although politically repressive, Assad's regime was known as among the most religiously tolerant in the Middle East: Christians and other minorities felt protected. Now they feel threatened. The Greek Melkite Patriarch, Gregory III Laham, has stated that Syria's Christians do not fear Islam as such, but its extremists, mostly outsiders. In April 2003 Greek Orthodox archbishop Paul Yagizi and Syriac Orthodox archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim were seized near Aleppo while trying to secure release of kidnapped priests: both are presumed murdered. Jihadists have desecrated churches; the expulsion of Christians from the ancient village of Maaloula, renowned for its Christian holy places, is a particular outrage. This issue of deliberate targetting of Christian centres needs to become a important concern for the international community.

**CONCLUSION:** Syria is now the focus of the misuse of religion across the region in its power struggles, intra-Islamic rivalries and anti-Westernism. If peace is to come to the region, faith must become a source of healing rather than conflict. The responsibility we have in UK, is to press HM Government to support as strongly as possible, Russia-US efforts towards a fully inclusive international peace

conference on the Syrian crisis, with an effective cease-fire.

**Rev. Brian Cooper      UfP Churches & Inter-Faith Secretary**

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