

Religion, Democracy and Civil Society  
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I cannot claim that I am presenting a thorough research on the subject of the conference in this short paper of mine. My primary objective of participating in the conference is to listen to you, to enlighten myself with your thought and to walk along with you for the sake of the good of man. Finally, I will raise some ideas or questions that can contribute to shedding more light on the subject of the conference.

It seems from the first instance that these three terms which constitute the title of the conference are homogenous. Each one of them is a remarkable achievement and can be useful for the good of man and humanity. However, the truth of the matter is that each of these terms is like an iceberg beneath which there are conflicting trends. Modern Christian literature commends democracy. "Despite all its mistakes, democracy is the participation of all citizens in one way or another in the decision-making which affects their lives and future". There is agreement that religion and democracy are seeking to give momentum to the progress of man and to building the civil society.

Christian theology believes that Christianity is a religion that can serve mankind. It is the religion which professes that God descended from heaven for the sake of man. Christianity means that we should devote our work for the love of God and for the love of man. Man's happiness is the main goal of human societies. Democracy and religion are seeking to bring about man's happiness in a variety of ways. However, in the final analysis, these varieties are integrated, although differences and conflict might arise in the process of the application of this perception.

Throughout the ages, religion has played an important role in the formation of civil societies and political systems and has laid down the foundations of social relationships. Examples of this are Judaism and Islam and the impact of Christianity on the political system of the Roman State. Meanwhile, mankind has sought to organize itself, to regulate the relationships among its

individuals, and to lay down the foundations of civil society in a fashion that we cannot say that it was parallel with religious thought, but was at least supplementary, interlocked and integrated with it. From the historic standpoint, religion was never restricted to worship, religious rites or spiritual meditation, but has participated in and contributed to the building of the political systems.

Needless to say, there should be a balance in our present-day world between the inputs of the democratic thought and the output of the religious thought. This balance is the sounder and preferable option for today's world which cannot concede its democracy and the rule of the people by the people themselves while downsizing religion to pure rites and acts of worship. This balance is also necessary so as the formation of civil society is not left to parliaments and the secular thought. On this issue, we should not start from square one, all the more so because throughout the ages, mankind has gained numerous experiences on the relationship between religion and democracy, on the one hand, and civil society, on the other. The only thing which we have to do is to build on these experiences.

I would like to give some examples about the balance between religion and democracy, particularly that the aim of this balance, to start with, is to achieve the general good of the civil society.

1- Democracy might introduce laws and regulations that violate human nature and undercut the traditional formation of the family, which was formed, to start with, according to religious perceptions. The question here is: how far should religious people comply with these laws and regulations in their personal conscience and public stands?

2- Most states and societies are advocating the enforcement of democratic methods of government. Here a certain religion or its followers might step in to play their cards in the political game by utilizing the religious convictions of the people in the community and the historic religious assets of these communities to serve the cause of democracy. Thus by using democratic

techniques, they establish a government which is close to theocracy. God, religion or the religious establishment become the real governor of the people. The people might continue to be the source of power, but within inherited religious and transcendental frameworks. In other words, democratic techniques are used for theocratic purposes, or the will and aspirations of the people are expressed within the religious framework. The final result is a government that is religious in essence, but governed by a democratic framework.

3- Religious parties might access power through democratic instruments. These parties usually reassure the civil society about their goals. For example, Tunisian President Moncef El-Marzouky said in June 2012 at the Oasis Conference in Tunisia that: "We in Tunisia are seeking to establish a society of freedom, particularly the freedom of conscience and religious freedom; the Tunisian citizen is a citizen of this country regardless of his faith and he should not suffer because of his faith or beliefs; freedom is my goal, the goal of the revolution and the goal of all the Tunisians; We still have to travel on a long road, but we will work together for the achievement of this noble goal."

We will have to wait to see and evaluate the experiment of the El-Nahda Party which has a religious term reference. The question here is whether the El-Nahda Party can guarantee the freedom of expression and religious freedom against the intrusion of religious thought, or can religion, its institutions and parties guarantee the freedom of religion and conscience?

One of the writers said in the progress of his comments on the Arab Spring that there is a controversial relationship between religion and politics. He said in this regard that: "I wish that religion would reach the politicians, and that clerics would not access politics; if you are clerics, then you should not become involved in politics; and if you are politicians, it is my right not to choose you because of my religious beliefs." This statement affirms the likelihood of conflict among religion, politics and the formation of the civil society.

4- Religious faith has made a significant contribution to the resistance against the comprehensive atheist thought. Faith was the source of inspiration and the liberation of people. When these peoples liberated themselves from the totalitarian political systems, they entered into a materialistic consumer society, introducing a new form of freedom and democracy, which posed in one way or another a new challenge to religion.

5- The overall religious laws have the divine touch because they are inspired by God. Man is incapable of revoking, changing, replacing or amending them because they are emanating from his religious conscience. In the final analysis, they are binding to him because they come from God. Whatever is religious can be classified within the realm of the absolute. The question here is whether the absolute includes the religious beliefs in general or does it also include the religious details?

Meanwhile, there is the civil society which is entitled to enacting legislation in the name of the people by using democratic instruments. Whatever is democratic is a relative thing, while the presence of religion and religious and non-religious people in society is a fact. What is the solution then? Shall we propose that religion should upgrade its beliefs to become compatible with the democracy of the civil society? This option seems to be difficult because in this case, we would be trying to upgrade religion by human intervention that comes from outside the divine inspiration. Or shall we leave religion alone and then develop a parallel social thought? Or shall we propose that the ceiling of the civil and societal diligence should be the religious ceiling and tell democracy and its followers that you can elect your officials and enact laws for your people, but you are not allowed to go beyond the ceiling of religion?

Is the formula of coexistence the likely solution that can create a balance between religious law and civil law in the civil society which has a history of deeply-rooted religious culture? What is the formula of coexistence between the absolute and the relative from the historic and futuristic standpoints? In this issue, we are not proceeding from vacuum or from square one. All

peoples have their own experiments and conclusions and we can search and upgrade this relationship by working together.

6- Religion, democracy and the civil society!! These are three ingredients. However, there is a fourth ingredient upon which the former three concepts are standing. The fourth ingredient is the land. I am referring here to the problematical situation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Palestinians view this land as Palestinian while the Israelis view it as Israeli land. There is no doubt that the religious heritage of the two parties has given this land a special Islamic-Jewish characteristic. There is also the Christian dimension of this land. The question here is whether religion is part of the problem or part of the solution?

Israel has established, as it was said, a democratic state and the only democratic state in the Middle East, although there is now embryonic democracies that were created by the Arab Spring. Israeli democracy has built a wall separating it from the Palestinians and the Israelis have imprisoned the Palestinians behind the wall. But in the meantime, the Israelis have imprisoned themselves. How can we build a human society and a wall at the same time? We have the Palestinians and the Israelis: each one of them is sustaining pain and causing pain to the other. Can we at one day in the future reach a degree of spirituality and human maturity whereby the four components of Religion, democracy, civil society and land become the components of a society in which justice and love prevail, a society where human dignity and the dignity of each person is respected.

Finally, I do not believe that this conference of ours will find the magic ideal solutions for the relationships that should link religion, democracy and civil society. But it will surely reveal the enormity of the issue and the heavy responsibility which the conferees should shoulder. Perhaps we can make a joint effort to study the experiences of the people and religions as they apply to this conference of ours. We will undoubtedly reach some findings and diagnose some of the problems and difficulties and then make the proposals and constructive perceptions on this issue. I wish this conference good luck.

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