Between Religious Xenophobia, Tolerance and Dialogue

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Opening Remarks:
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Hasan Abu Nimah, Director, Regional Human Security Center, Jordan
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Surendra Munshi: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the panel: Between religious xenophobia, tolerance and dialogue. I think I can say on my behalf and on behalf of the panelists here that we're grateful to Forum 2000 for inviting us to this 14th conference and for promoting global unity, for assuming responsibility for our collective future, for holding out hope.

I think the theme of the conference can also be stated in generational terms: doing justice to the heritage which we have inherited from the preceding generations and assuming responsibility for the generations which we are going to leave behind. This theme includes concern in terms of what we don't want. The title itself suggests what we don't want and I think we could address these issues: what we want, what we don't want, how to promote what we want, how to hinder what we don't want.

We live in an interconnected world but, unfortunately, in a world that is divided by different considerations. How do we live together in an interconnected world? And the questions that we can pose to the panelists are: What are the roots of contemporary religious intolerance? Are they genuinely religious or do they reflect other concerns and interests? In what way does secularization promote or prevent religious intolerance? How can we promote dialogue and what kind of dialogue?

I would remind you of Swami Vivekananda, an Indian monk who spoke at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and he already saw then that the only hope for humanity was the recognition that all religions lead to a single goal. There are different paths, but the goal is the same. He emphasized that we are all children of God and there is one God for all religions. In this context, we don't necessarily need to have a religious mooring in order to reach a humanistic conclusion which looks upon us as members of the same family. I have something more to say on this, but I will resist the temptation of doing so and not stand between you and the distinguished panelists who are sitting here. It's my privilege to invite Rabbi Michael Melchior to make the opening remarks. Rabbi Melchior became one of Israel's leading legislators initiating and completing major legislative reforms in the areas of education, children's rights, environment and social justice. Rabbi Melchior, we greatly look forward to listening to you.

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Michael Melchior: Thank you very much. I thought a lot about what I was to say this morning and then I heard President Havel´s speech at the opening and I changed my speech. I decided to relate, instead, to what he said. He said: "We know that we are behaving in a suicidal manner and yet we go on doing it. How is that possible?" He also said: "We are living in the first atheistic civilization. In other words, a civilization that has lost its connection with the infinite and eternity. For that reason, it prefers short-term profit to long-term profit." We should apparently have the solution. If President Havel is talking about short-term atheistic civilization, then of course the solution to all the problems of the world and how we can stop acting in a suicidal manner is religion. And then we look around the world and we see that this is not exactly so. I would not dare to disagree with President Havel, but I think that when he talks about the atheistic civilization, he is talking about a very limited part of the world. Maybe this is true somewhere in Western or Central Europe but the rest of the world is not at all an atheistic civilization. Any aspirations to the end of civilization and history and so on have been proven wrong. In 2000, I said here that I believe that the 21st century is the century of religion. You may like it or not, but anybody who looks at the world must admit that there is something to this.

Does that mean that the world looks any better or has any better prospects? Not really. Even the contrary, I would say. If you look at the conflicts of the world of today, every single conflict has religion either as one of its main dimensions or as the main dimension. That seems to indicate that even when you connect to the eternal and the infinite, you don't necessarily solve the problems of humanity.

During Mr. Havel´s speech, I was thinking of a story we read in the synagogues this week. It's quite a universal story so I'll dare to share it with you. Every year we start by reading the five books of Moses. We are at the beginning of the year now, so this week we read the story of Noah and the Ark. I have always been bewildered by his story. Noah spent many years building the Ark. According to the biblical story, it took him up to 120 years to build it. And nothing happened throughout this time when everybody was told that a disaster would happen. There is something technical; the Bible says that he was a righteous man, but I would say that his was a very relative righteousness. He did nothing to change fate. He built his own Ark, yes, but that was to save him and his family and some of his animals. But that was it! The story in a rabbinical tradition says that after he emerged from the Ark, everything was finished. He emerged and he saw all the destruction in the world which had once been. And he was devastated. He went to God and according to rabbinical tradition he said to Him: "God, you who are merciful and you who are gracious, how could you turn your hand to all this destruction?" And according to tradition, God answered him: "Noah, now you ask? Now you plea? Where were you all the time when you could have acted or at least prayed?" Nothing, nothing came from him. I've been trying to understand why. Why didn't he do anything? I mean he was, even if relatively, a righteous man. I think he was afraid that if he were to work and plea for the more wicked people of his generation, then something of his righteousness might be affected. I think that this is also, in many ways, the fate of faith today.

Applying this to some of the problems as I see them in our faith today: first of all, the mistrust and the fear and the distorted perceptions exist in our world today no less than in the past. It is very easy, using the religious card, to turn that distrust and fear into hatred. Hatred is the cancer of all human relations. Hatred disguised as religious superiority jeopardizes any noble aspiration in whatever religion. I think that we can say that religion becomes heresy. Wiping out the image of God in the other eliminates the humanity of the other and invites humiliation, persecution, violence and death. The surprise is that this kind of religion attracts countless people. Although apparently a lot of these people lack the talent even for hatred, it turns out that it doesn't require much. A lot of morally weak, intellectually lazy people are incapable of thinking for themselves so they become easy to work with. Life becomes meaningful when there is some kind of religious leader to take responsibility. You have no responsibility and all the guilt is on the other side. It is us against them. What has happened in recent years is that God himself, has in a way, been hijacked into a totalitarian, utopian messianism. We say that God is on my totalitarian side; at least he would be if he knew all the facts. Now what has happened as a result of this is that the beautiful messianistic dream, the utopian dream of a world peace, of the wolf grazing with the lamb, this great vision, has become a major threat to pragmatic but

moral long-term and short-term settlements and agreements. What has happened today is that the very delicate balance between the particular and the universal has broken down. That balance is very problematic. The moment you break it down and you become all particular, then religion becomes an act of ego, of self-centered ego, and can lead to the worst catastrophes of human kind.

I do, however, believe that what we need to do is bring back the balance. Particularism has a place. It has a place because if you know how to care about your own tribe, about your own memory and your own narrative, if you know how to build the future based on tradition and the past, but not become a hostage of the past, then, sometimes, you can contribute more than some universal humanitarians who really do not care even about their closest surroundings. What we can do and what we need to do is to find the vehicles with which we should disarm the haters, and restore this balance between particularism and universalism.

We're a global world that doesn't really have the advantages, or hardly any advantages, of globalism at all. We take all the worst things from the global community with us. We know less about each other than we did before. We know nothing about the holiness of the other; we know nothing of the prophet of the other. Even when we talk about our prophets, we take the narrowest of messages, missing the universal message of justice and mercy with which the prophets spoke truth to power and to kings. They were not very popular in their time, and we're still reading their texts without learning from them. That however should be central to the kind of religion we should empower today.

I believe it's possible. That's the good news. Just to give you an example: some months ago, I was at Windsor Castle. It was just before the Copenhagen conference on the environment. The Director-General of the UN brought the main speakers of all the religions together in the beautiful surroundings of Windsor Castle outside London. What happened there was very interesting. Every religion was supposed to present not a global vision, but a vision of responsibility and an undertaking of what their religion will do to ensure the future of the environment. Something really dynamic happened at this conference. I was sitting with the grand Mufti of Cairo (who I hadn't met before) and we discovered that in the seam between our religions we can build something unbelievable, exciting, and I would even dare to use the word romantic. We can build something new but not give up who we are and where we are and what our borders are, but build in that seam something which is unbelievable. I talked later to the Director-General of the UN and said to him: "Something interesting happened at this conference. At the Copenhagen conference all the heads of states came together in the shadow of great universal threats in order to say what everybody else has to do for the environment. But what happened at this religious conference was that everybody came together to say: "What I will do; what we will do; what my community will do." Suddenly, we saw that we can do a lot of things together and that a lot of things are developing from that idea. Just as we can create a religious agenda in the issue of the environment, we can do so in the issue of social justice and the issue of education and we can also do so in the realm of politics and peace. Peace in the Middle East, peace in Jeursalem and peace in the world. I believe it's possible and I believe that there are courageous religious thinkers and leaders and teachers out there. Their voices are not heard very distinctly today, they're being blurred by the totalitarian haters, but they are there. If we can really have that voice and that responsibility as the main voice, then we can answer the challenge of President Havel last night and we can really transform and achieve a paradigm shift which will make this world a world we will want to live in. Thank you very much.

Surendra Munshi: Rabbi Melchior, I must say your words have been like music to my ears. I also think that if we can create a balance between particularism and universalism, that's the way to go. If there are such religious voices, which we don't hear very often, in different religions, then there is still hope for all of us. Thank you indeed for a very inspiring and insightful presentation. And I am sure we will follow it up with discussion. Now it is my privilege to invite Professor Casanova to speak.

José Casanova: Thank you very much. Professor Roger Scruton talked at the panel: "The World We Live in" about Europe and how great our European civilization is and how great are the achievements of European civilization. When we – Europeans – talk about the rest of the world, the things we

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brought to the rest of the world, it seems that we don't need to learn much about the rest of the world. It is remarkable how we Europeans are convinced that indeed religion is, if not the main source, one of the main sources of intolerance and xenophobia.

We know from the results of the European public opinion polls from 1996 that the majority of the population in practically every European country believes that religion is intolerant and that religion creates conflict. Not one particular religion or particular religious group or particular religious ideas, but religion itself. That religion is the source of intolerance and conflict. Now this is surprising. Nobody likes to recognize their own intolerance. If we Europeans think that religion is the source of intolerance, it means we know nothing about what is in and out of ourselves. When we are still religious, we think of the religion we have fortunately left behind. We are so tolerant now because we don't have religion any more. Or we think of the religion of the other within our midst. Islam, we heard, is a big problem for European civilization. Muslims bring these notions of Sharia and these foreign things to our shores.

Even more surprising is the notion that religion creates conflict. The 20th century in Europe, this war century from 1914 to 1989, was the bloodiest, the most genocidal, the most catastrophic century in the history of humanity. Millions of European youths slaughtered in World War I, in the Bolshevik Revolution and the great famine in Ukraine and the Gulag and the Armenian genocide and then of course the Nazi Holocaust and you could go on and on and end with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Now, none of these conflicts had anything to do with religion. They were all related to other ideas, other hubris. Yet today, when we Europeans see conflicts around the world, we see the hand of religion everywhere. Rather than remembering our recent conflicts, we have a memory filled with our old religious wars of three or four hundred years ago. That explains why we created our secularist structures and because of that we don't have the problems that the rest of the world has. We forget how much the conflicts that we see around the world are related to state formation, nationalism, problems that are also the causes of conflict in Europe, not necessarily religion. I don't want to say that some forms of religion, religious ideas, this "totalitarian hijacking of God" for our purposes, that this may not be the cause. But somehow, when we Europeans look around the world, we think that we – because we are so secular and we have freed ourselves from religion – have the solution to the problems of the world.

There is an event in Salzburg, where Europeans bring together people from the Middle East - Christians, Jews and Muslims - and tell them the story of the foundational myth of secular Europe: Once upon a time, we merged religion and politics, we hadn't learned to separate them. Then we had these terrible wars and thanks to these terrible wars we learned to separate religion and politics. And now, look at us. We can be the model for the rest of you.

No, this is not what the Westphalian system created. What it created was the system "*cuius regio, eius religio":* The homogenous state will control and will get rid of religious minorities. We in Europe created very nicely structured homogenous national states and we got rid of the others. It began not with the Peace of Westphalia, it began in 1492 in Spain. First, we got rid of Jews and Muslims to create a Catholic state and then every European state was either Lutheran, or Calvinist or Anglican. We got rid of the religious minorities. Only now in Europe are we learning to live with religious pluralism again. We have no idea how to structure societies that are religiously and culturally pluralistic. The world – and I am thinking of India for example – has a lot to teach us. They lived for centuries with great diversity.

My message is: the world we want to live in is one in which we indeed accept this tremendous diversity and we learn how to live together. Whichever solution we are going to find will have to be a solution to which all of us bring our traditions, our myths, our gods and are able to live together. The notion that somehow a cosmopolitan universalism is the solution to the globe is part of our problem. We will need to learn that there are many competing universalisms out there. That each of them is particularistic. And the task is how all particularistic universalisms can contribute to solutions for our world. Thank you.

Surendra Munshi: I'd like to highlight how important it is to live in diversity and recognize diversity as a legitimate human condition even when we talk about globalization and uniformity. This is one issue.

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The second is hubris. Here I would, as an Indian, like to present one point of view. Hubris comes to us in different forms. It's not only western hubris. It's also eastern hubris that we should be wary of and together, in terms of what Rabbi Mechior has told us, we should hear voices from different cultures which are not heard. There are loud voices which are heard and which are not necessarily in our best interests. With these few comments I invite Professor Maïla to speak to us. Professor Maïla is a specialist in Islamic studies and international mediation.

Joseph Maïla: Thank you very much. How can we avoid what we have to avoid; and how can we promote what we have to promote? First of all, there is an increasing trend towards interfaith dialogue. We have never spoken so much about civilization dialogue, religious encounters. All these issues are very high on the agenda. On the other hand we are witnessing minorities being persecuted in the world. We are speaking about defamations of religion, about cartoons, about caricatures and everything happens as if we have the two faces of Janus. On one hand, religion is a very good thing; it's about tolerance, about peace, about dialogue. On the other hand, it's a tool and the means to wage war against others.

Look at what's happening on the earth today: we are witnessing many conflicts in which religion is involved. The first question would be: What is it we don't want to see today when it comes to religions being instrumentalized and used as a tool for war? First, we want to avoid religion taking the place of ideologies. In fact, ideologies are no longer the main driving beliefs, feelings or convictions that determine the behavior of human beings today. Rather, religion has come to play a more important role in providing a vision of the world and being a source of values. We have to preserve religion and not allow religion to be a tool or a means of solving political problems. We have to avoid the politicization of religion.

The second thing we have to oppose is the idea that religion could be the response and answer to our frustrations today. The resurgence of religion in the world is obviously one (but not the only) response that we have been given to the process of secularization that began in the 18th century. Now, we feel like we lack something transcendent and we immediately turn to religion, which is a very good thing. Except that we expect all the people all over the world to follow the same pattern. But in the third world, it's not the same. And it has been said that in Europe we may be the only part that has a very atheistic trend at the moment, while other countries and other people are following another trend which is to focus and to build on religious values.

The third thing that we have to avoid is – especially in conflicts – making religion a kind of definer of communal loyalties. We are witnessing a lot of conflicts in the world in which religions play an important role. But we know that these wars are not waged for religious purposes. These are wars in which religion has become a substitute for an absent identity. When we witness what's happening or what happened in Lebanon, in Yugoslavia, we know that religion has come to replace the lack of citizenship. There they don't ask themselves: "Are you Yugoslavian?" They say: "Are you Christian? Are you Bosnian? Are you a Christian Maronite? Are you a Greek patriot? Are you a Turkish patriot?" Religion is a particular identity. It is the identity of the self when it comes to what he believes. It is not a political identity considered with regard to pluralism and to living among other people that don't believe in the same religion.

Having said what we don't want to see, we can go very quickly to what we would like to promote through interfaith dialogue. We have three basic needs to address: the need to understand each other. Interfaith dialogue is about understanding the values, the identity, the rituals, the religion of the others in order to avoid negative stereotyping, misperceptions of the religion and of the other - making us able to enter into discussion in order to know about the identity of the others. We also have to go through interfaith dialogue in order to cooperate on the very material and worldly issues. On social issues, competing poverty, sustainable development, human rights… We have to go through interfaith dialogue in order to build up a shared vision and values that we can have for the world of tomorrow.

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Surendra Munshi: Thank you indeed. What we have heard from Joseph Maïla are two points that need to be kept in mind: politicization of religion and the manner in which religion can be a positive force. The manner in which religion can be a positive force is something that we have heard from all the speakers so far. Let's keep this in mind. Now it's my pleasure to invite Doctor Hasan Abu Nimah to speak.

Hasan Abu Nimah: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Listening to the distinguished speakers, I was hoping to find some answers to the many questions I have. I was involved with interfaith dialogues for five years; I attended hundreds of meetings and conferences. These were attended by Muslim, Jewish, Christian leaders who were always very understanding, who conducted themselves very well in the conversations and expressed the best sentiments imaginable in such meetings. But what did they achieve? And the answer is: very little. I cannot come to you with a convincing report that this amount of interfaith dialogue in which I was involved, the many conferences and symposia, have succeeded in improving the situation in our region.

Is religion the problem or the solution? Do we understand our religions? I'm not talking about us as simple individuals. Even when you attend a discussion between highly qualified scholars and clergymen you can see a great deal of difference regardless of whether it is amongst Muslims or amongst other religions. Among Muslims themselves you would see a lot of discord, a lot of disagreement on the meaning of religion and the mission and the message of religion. Are we sincere in our conversations? We meet and we show the best of intentions and emotions. We agree that the values of our religions are similar, that it's always a message of peace and understanding. We come up with great prescriptions for our future relationships, for controlling and resolving our political difficulties and differences through the means of being loyal to our faiths and beliefs. But still, when we face the reality we find a totally different reality. Is emphasizing principles enough? Now, the answer is no. It's not been enough, so far. Do we strictly abide by the recommendations and the proposals we come up with when we meet for a day or two or three days and we reach complete understanding on many issues? The answer again is no.

I will tell you something about my own experience in this field. I was raised in a small village near Jerusalem. During my childhood I learned as much about Judaism and Christianity as I did about Islam. In our tradition in that part of the world we used to attend all celebrations of other religions. I was dragged around by my mother for Moses Day or for Christmas. The day before yesterday we were walking around Prague and the young lady who was showing me around explained Easter eggs to me. I told her we have Easter eggs in our house. She was a bit confused that as a Muslim I do that. We share the traditions of other religions. We share the traditions of the Jews and the Christians as we did in former days in Palestine. Religion at that point was truly a unifying factor.

Now, why did religion become divisive? Why did religion become a tool of violence? The simple answer is politics. Many people don't agree with me. Was it politics that spoiled religion or was it religion that spoiled politics? I would say it goes both ways and I would say in the absence of resolving our serious political problems it is very difficult for any amount of sincere and meaningful dialogue to overcome the serious problems created by politics. At the moment, Jordan has a very full-fledged peace treaty with Israel which was signed in 1994. It created normal relations between the two countries, but would I be honest if I said to you that it is really normal? No.

Now, we were hoping at one point that a blend of political treatment and religious treatment would work fine but the balance has not always been right. Sometimes politics takes over religion. Thank you.

Surendra Munshi: Thank you indeed. I would like to highlight the politicization of religion. It relates to the point which was made earlier as well. I think we need to have a focused discussion in the second round on this. With this, may I quickly come to Professor Grace Davie, the last speaker on the panel, but certainly not the least important. Professor Davie, we are privileged to have you here.

Grace Davie: What I want to be is very pragmatic, very grassroots, and very British, but in doing so I'm probably speaking of the situation in West Europe. What I want to point out in West Europe is that two rather contradictory things are happening at the same time. On the one hand, we see a marked and continuing secularization. Saying that a rather shorthand God is back does not capture the situation at all. We are becoming increasingly secular and this has a marked effect on religious knowledge and it's this question of religious literacy that worries me most. Juxtaposed with that is that religion is now back in public debate, all over the world, but in Europe for particular reasons. The main reason is immigration. This immigration was not caused by religion nor did it come about for religious reasons. There are a few exceptions to that statement but largely it is an economic shift. European societies were looking for new sources of labor from their former colonies and we now have substantial religious minorities, notably Islamic, which challenge European norms. The problem is that we meet this challenge on the basis of ignorance. There's one thing that depresses me markedly in my own situation which is the quality of public debate about religion, even if you look at responsible arguments in good newspapers. We are now exposed in almost all our journalism to the phenomenon of blogs and responses to articles. If you look at the responses, say, to a good piece in The Guardian, it is deeply, deeply depressing. It is nothing but mutual contempt and a slanging match. There is very, very little informed comment at the grassroots level in Britain or, I believe in Europe either.

What can be done? What is the role of the state in this process? What is the role of religious institutions? A very clear role of the state is to improve the quality of religious education and by this I don't mean any form of indoctrination or confessional teaching. I mean simply that an educated person is able to speak in an informed and articulate way about religion. If that were so, we would better counteract religious stereotypes and the distortions that we hear about every single world faith. We would also be able to counteract the distortions of what I call fundamentalist secularists, which are equally unhelpful. What we need is an informed, good-tempered debate about religion. I think in a modest way we can achieve quite a lot. It is not helpful when there is a culture, particularly amongst academics in Europe, that to be religiously ignorant is somehow valued rather than challenged.

All sorts of questions of course follow from this. We have to remember that out of this European situation came the origins of social science and the philosophies that underpin this. These are deeply secular and are now very much exposed as they have to come to terms with a very changed religious situation both in Europe and in the rest of the world. My own discipline is found wanting. As a teacher I find this deeply challenging. I teach bright, intelligent students who are very well-intentioned and want to be better citizens. However, I am dismayed when I have to come to terms with their religious ignorance. They want to take a course in Sociology of Religion but we have to mutually work extremely hard to get them to be able to play a part in public debate. That is my challenge as a teacher and I believe it belongs to all of us. Thank you.

Surendra Munshi: Professor Davie, thank you for bringing in the challenge for teaching from the perspective of a teacher when you are handling bright students.

I would suggest that we take up the issue of politicization of religion as a key issue and I would request each panelist to comment in the light of what he or she has heard from the other panelists.

Michael Melchior: I would like to agree, but for the sake of debate I think I will disagree with what Professor Maïla said. You cannot say that we need a total separation of religion and state. Ideally it may be a good thing. But religion has to be involved with human rights and social justice and so on and what is politics exactly? Is it not human rights and social justice and environment and peace? Is that not politics? What we need to realize today is that in the real world there is no differentiation. We need to deal together in the seam between religions to create those ideals and values which we can strengthen and reinforce in order that religion becomes that positive and redeeming force that we're talking about.

One more word on the interfaith dialogue which everybody here's talked very nicely about: it's a bluff. It doesn't exist. It exists in a few rooms around the world where the same people come together. I stopped going to those ten years ago when I saw that they have no influence whatsoever

on any of our communities and on any of our societies. There is no point whatsoever unless the dialogue becomes a dialogue of communities on education, identity and so on, which it doesn't. It's a bunch of either ignorant leaders – because leaders or elected leaders don't necessarily have any knowledge – or of people who play the game like actors coming together saying good things and then going back to hating and killing each other.

What they're saying is that we all serve the same God, you in your way and I in mine. That is more or less what I learned from these conferences. I think we need to take away this bluff. It's a bluff; it doesn't influence the real world.

José Casanova: I have to admit I don't know what is pure politics without religion and what is pure religion without politics. The question is not a problem of politicization of religion but of which kind of politics, which kind of religion? We cannot avoid the politicization of religion. The question is: what kind of politics are we going to have and what kind of religions are we going to have? It is not talking about politics as this thing and religion the other.

I mentioned the religious wars because if we were to call them the wars of state formation, or of nation building – because that's what they were – then perhaps we would not attribute the problems to religion. Western Europeans exported the model to the rest of the world and whenever national states were established, we had this ethno-religious cleansing. It happened when the Ottoman Empire dissolved; it happened when the British Empire dissolved. Now, was religion the problem? Before the nation state emerged those religions were able to live together. It was the emergence of the modern nation state everywhere, – in Israel as well – that has produced all of these problems that are attributed to the politicization of religion.

It's a very complex structure, very complex processes, and to attribute it to religion as a thing separate from others is problematic. I'm not saying that religion is not the problem, is not the solution. It's one of the things which is mixed up with every other thing in the world.

Joseph Maïla: So I have to defend myself and maybe put forward the point that I come from France and defend the secular point of view. First of all, I would like to agree with Michael Melchior when he says that we have to separate the state and religion. You can envisage that in a very constitutional way. You cannot separate religion and politics when it comes down to it because in day-to-day life things are intertwined. I agree with you on that.

Politicizing religion is when you approach a worldly fact, a political issue, by putting it in terms of religious issues and religious stakes. Then you make it impossible to find solutions and compromises to these problems. Religion is not about compromise. You cannot compromise on your beliefs, on your ideas, on your conviction. When you give a religious answer to a political issue; yes, you are politicizing religion.

The second point was about interfaith dialogue. Of course interfaith dialogue is very limited. It has to do with religious leaders. When I spoke about interfaith dialogue I was speaking about religious leaders taking responsibility, discussing and trying to diffuse violence in the world and seeing and stating that religion cannot be used as a means and a tool of violence. Mr. Melchior, this is their responsibility. Speaking on behalf of the French state of course I don't want, as a secular person, as a responsible politician or as a civil servant enter into a religious dialogue. It is not my problem. It is the problem of the world's religious leaders. They have to share the burden of diffusing the violence by saying that they're not part of this violence that is claimed to be in the name of God. Thank you.

Surendra Munshi: Do I understand you right that you're making a distinction between religion and society on one hand and of scoring political points with the help of religion?

Joseph Maïla: Yes.

Surendra Munshi: Doctor Nimah, what do you have to say on this?

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Hasan Abu Nimah: I agree that it may be possible to separate the state from religion but practically, in a democracy, it depends on how people feel. If we are talking about religious communities, it's hard to separate religion from politics within the same individual, who is part of a community. If I'm a religious person and I also have political sentiments, you cannot tell me to be either religious or political. I have to be both and it is my privilege in a democracy to mix my religious sentiment with my political affiliations. This is what's happening now in many countries in the world. In our region there is a very strong rising tide of religiousness and religious parties are becoming very strong. Their political influence is proportionally strong as well. We have the Turkish model where a moderate religious party in a secular state is shaping up the politics of the country quite positively, quite wisely, but still within a well-calculated blend of religion and politics.

It's not a question of whether we like it or not. The inevitability of the democratic practice dictates a situation which we probably cannot control. One day we will have states which are overwhelmingly religious or overwhelmingly secular. It depends on the situation, on the factors which create this kind of composition. Thank you.

Surendra Munshi: Thank you. I think we have now reached in my eyes a very exciting point of discussion, namely the need to mix political sentiment with religious faith in a democratic context and the necessity of it on the one hand. On the other hand, the point has been made: can religion be turned into a political instrument? I think this is a point which needs to be discussed. Religion as a political instrument is one thing. Having as a devout religious person a civic political role on the one hand and religious faith on the other hand can be another thing. Does democracy dictate it? Democracy must also entertain the demands of a plural society. Professor Davie, what do you have to say on this?

Grace Davie: We face this issue in a specific or particular historical context. We each have to deal with these problems in the place where we live. We cannot unpick our history and wish it were different. Across the Channel – I've worked in France quite a bit – the normal way of thinking and working in France is recourse to the principle of *laicité* which I admire and respect but it is French. In Britain, we do it differently. We look for a solution to a problem. Principles are usually not part of our debate. I will be honest: I used to think that the British way was better than the French. I now think that that there are good and bad versions of both. Some principles can be excluding and exclusive and rigid. Some can be very positive if properly applied. In Britain, if you are simply finding a solution to a problem on a pragmatic basis, you can have a situation where, simply, the strongest win and the loudest shout louder.

Because of the influence of Europe, we are now in Britain moving towards a human rights debate. One of the things that dismays me in this debate in my country is a crude and rather simplistic debate about competing human rights. I stand very firmly for the rights of gay and bisexual people and for gender. But they should not necessarily compete with the rights of those who take their religion seriously. To balance those two very strongly held principles, ideas and ways of life is not easy. To pretend it is easy is to start on the wrong track.

Surendra Munshi: Thank you indeed. I would make a suggestion here: that we focus on the point of making religion an instrument of politics on one hand, and religion as a democratic right on the other. These two points have been most forcefully represented by two people sitting at opposite ends of the spectrum, Professor Maïla on the one hand and Doctor Nimah on the other. I would be very happy to hear the views of other panelists on this.

My second comment is that we need not necessarily confine ourselves to Britain versus France. We need not confine ourselves to Europe; the world exists beyond Britain and France and the world exists beyond Europe. With these few comments I would now invite Mr. Melchior.

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Michael Melchior: First of all, hatred in religion is not only a question of politicizing. In our tradition, Cain killed his brother Abel because, although there were only these two people around, they couldn't agree on where the temple should be. I use it as a code.

I wanted to say to Doctor Nimah that I agree that Europe has to start learning that there are models outside Europe. Although we in Israel have a little problem with Turkey these days, the Turkish model is very interesting and very important. It shows that you can have a secular state, a secular constitution, a very strong religious party and religious influence in many areas and how that functions. I think it's something that many need to learn about.

The last point I want to make is to Professor Maïla again. I disagree totally, and now I'm talking as somebody religious, with what you said that religion cannot be about compromise. It's true that there is a totalitarian element and we don't compromise on God, but when conflicting values come up against each other, compromise is the essence. When pluralism is the essence of religion then we can build something together which creates totally new and necessary ideas. Therefore, please don't take as your assumption that religion cannot be about compromise because then we are really playing into the hands of the totalitarian utopian maniacs. Thank you.

José Casanova: Three brief points: freedom of religion, religious compromise and non-religious xenophobia. First, freedom of religion is the key principle of democracy. Of the two principles of secularism; no establishment and free exercise of religion, it is free exercise which is really the necessary condition. You can't have secular states without freedom of religion; they would not be democratic states. You can have established states in Europe. Every branch of Christianity is established in European democracies: Lutheranism in all the Scandinavian countries, the Church of England in England, the Church of Scotland, the Orthodox Church in Greece. We still have establishments all over the place but only as long as we have freedom of religion. This is the real issue. However, freedom of religion means very different things around the world. If Americans were to try to push for their individualist freedom of religion, it would not work in India; it would not work in many other places. We have to understand that even the principle of freedom of religion means very different things in different places.

Religious compromise. France and Germany and Spain… eight years at war which had nothing to do with religion. It was Christian Democrats on both sides, French and German, who were the leaders of a reconciliation that made the European Union possible and got rid of the nationalist wars that had been fought in Europe for centuries and had nothing to do with religion.

On xenophobia. I see a lot of xenophobia in Europe, whether it is against Roma people, whether it is xenophobic parties in Denmark, in Holland and so on. These barely have anything to do with religion. My point is that religion is neither the problem nor the solution. Let's look at the problems, find out exactly why those problems are there and have a solution depending on this.

Joseph Maïla: First, yes, pluralism is fundamental, it is essential. Yes, human rights are very important and all of us share a belief in human rights. When it comes to religion, human rights are the right to believe and not to believe. We agree on that.

Doctor Davie, I totally agree with the point that you made on education. The French philosopher Régis Debray has published a study on young French people who are unable to understand paintings in the Louvre because they don't have the keys, the clues, the register and all that information about the Virgin Mary or Jesus and the Saints.

Mr. Melchior, when it comes to interfaith dialogue, maybe I've not made myself very clear about that. You cannot compromise on theological issues. When it comes to interfaith it is not about theology. Interfaith is never about theology. It's not discussing theology; it is discussing social and ethical issues from a religious point of view. That's the experience I've gone through. Maybe if I were a cleric and discussed with Anglicans or with Protestants, or all of us being Catholics we might bridge the gap. But are you going to compromise on Moses? Am I going to compromise on Jesus? Is someone else going to compromise on the prophecy of Mohamed being a prophet? I mean these are inner, deeper feelings that we have to keep for ourselves! I hate to speak about myself, but although I

was a former president of the Catholic University of Paris, I still believe in what I believe and I must stick to *laicité*.

The third point and very quickly: I don't agree with the idea that the English system is better. I think the French system is better. I'll tell you why, Dr. Davie. We in France hate to see any signal that we are shifting towards a communitarian model. You put it the right way. This is the heritage of the French revolution. We are sticking to that because it's history, because it's a principle stemming from the specific history of France.

Hasan Abu Nimah: My first comment is about compromise. Yes, compromise should certainly be possible. Otherwise what's the point of getting together? To try to find the common ground on which we agree to deal with our differences and problems. From my short experience in this field, it is easier to conduct interfaith dialogue amongst scholars of religious affiliations than amongst the clergy. The clergy has a duty to protect their texts and their religion, not to compromise on them. This is an observation.

The next point is: Do we understand our religions? When we talk about religion, are we talking about a defined entity? The answer is definitely: No! If you had two or three Muslims sitting on this panel they would not agree on what it means to be a Muslim or what the message of Islam is. I don't know if this applies to other religions. It probably does.

The third point, very quickly, is democracy and religion. If we are talking about the abstract form of democracy, then each individual should be given the right to think the way he wants and to adopt whatever belief he wants. If we come to a point where the majority of any society in any country is religious then they should have the right to run the country accordingly. In many countries around the world, religious parties are banned. Is that democratic or not? I don't know. I mean I'm not a religious person, with all due respect, but I don't think we should undermine or underestimate the feelings of people who are religious, regardless of how much we agree or disagree with them.

Grace Davie: My last comment will be a quick contrast between Europe and the United States. Europe constructs the Enlightenment as a freedom from belief which is a generalization, but which is, broadly speaking, true whereas in the United States, the Enlightenment is seen much more as a freedom to believe. That gives an entirely different spin.

What I would like to say about the part of the world in which I live is that we should have freedom to take religion seriously and those who are serious about their religion should be given a space in our democratic societies. If not, they are not democracies. We know from the opinion polls that José Casanova mentioned that if you look at evidence of tolerance and intolerance, church-going active Christians are more tolerant of immigrants and people of other faiths and other cultures than nominal believers. And it is the latter nominal believers who tend to merge their religious sentiment with national identity and see the incomer as a threat, whereas the believing Christian and the active Christian see Muslims as fellow believers. Thank you.

Surendra Munshi: As the moderator I had the option to make a proposal, namely, rather than politicization of religion, I had the option of proposing that we take up the issue of particularism and universalism. Then I thought quickly and I decided to raise the issue of politicization of religion for the following reason. You will agree with me that the deliberation of a practical problem called politicization of religion has thrown up a deeper philosophical or deeply religious issue, if you like, namely particularism and universalism. Now, if I had asked them to talk about particularism and universalism you would perhaps not feel as convinced as you maybe feel now that unless we address the problem of particularism and universalism, we cannot handle the issue of religion and there is a good deal that needs to be done in that respect.

This was something which I said sincerely when I told Rabbi Melchior that his words were music to my ears when he reported on the Windsor Conference. My own belief is that unless we sit down together and discover that we can create together, unless we do that, we will only be repeating

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our conservative or fundamentalist or whatever statements and there cannot be a dialogue between deaf people. We need to open our ears, listen to each other and thereby create something together.

A point that came up again and again: do we understand our own religion? I think the second question is: do we understand other people's religion? And if we neither understand our religion nor other people's religion, could it be possible for other people to hold a mirror to us, help us to see them and ourselves? Could it be? And perhaps if we did believe in that possibility, perhaps there is still some hope for us. With these comments, ladies and gentleman, join me please in a thank you to our panelists for the intelectual feast that they have provided us.

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