

*The PACIS Project in Faith-Based Diplomacy
of
The Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution of
Pepperdine University School of Law
and
The International Center for Religion and Diplomacy*

**MIDDLE EAST MISSION #11
TRIP REPORT
April 24 – May 3, 2012**

Introduction

Brian Cox conducted a mission to the Middle East April 24 – May 3, 2012 under the auspices of the PACIS Project in Faith-Based Diplomacy of the Straus Institute For Dispute Resolution of Pepperdine University Law School of Southern California and the International Center For Religion and Diplomacy of Washington DC.

The PACIS Project, recipient of the 2011 Peacemaker Award from the National Association for Conflict Resolution, is a unique faith-based diplomatic initiative that brings a vital dimension to the Middle East region that promises a greater resonance with the Abrahamic faith communities of the Middle East.

Trip Results

First Stop: Beirut

In Beirut there were three objectives and three surprise developments. The first objective was to be present for the release of the newly published Arabic edition of Brian Cox's book "Faith-Based Reconciliation: A Moral Vision That Transforms People And Societies". The book was translated by Evlyn Messarra and published by the Lebanese Foundation For Permanent Civil Peace Press located in Beirut. The book, first published in the United States in 2007, focuses on Faith-Based Reconciliation as a powerful idea whose time has come and each chapter is devoted to an explanation of the eight core values.

The second objective was for Brian Cox to speak at the two day conference on "Pioneers in Dialogue" organized by a coalition of Lebanese civil society organizations. There were speakers from Lebanon, France, Italy, Spain and Switzerland. The conference was held at the University of Saint Joseph in Beirut. The prime organizer of the conference, Professor Antoine Messarra, positioned the presentation on **Faith-Based Reconciliation** as the last major speech of the conference so as to use the platform and context of interfaith dialogue to introduce the new idea of **Faith-Based Reconciliation** to Lebanese society. The speech was carried live on two major television stations in Lebanon. The speech, the only by an American, was warmly received by the participants and generated a number of new possibilities. During the

conference Brian Cox was interviewed by Al Nahar (Lebanon's leading daily newspaper) and a French language weekly magazine read by Lebanon's intellectuals.

The third objective was to give a speech on "The Practical Components of Faith-Based Reconciliation" to the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators of Lebanon and the Tripoli Bar Association. The speech provoked lively discussion and questions from judges, lawyers, mediators and arbitrators. This speech focused on the Faith-Based Reconciliation process which has been utilized in many identity-based conflicts as a unique and innovative methodology that brings together antagonists both to soften their hearts and to engage them in constructive joint problem solving.

The first surprise development was that a simple offer from a former Straus Institute student to find a translator for Brian Cox's book has led to a multitude of open doors in Lebanon for the work of the PACIS Project.

A second surprise development was the plethora of opportunities for the PACIS Project within Lebanon for utilizing the Faith-Based Reconciliation process in a variety of ways:

1. A national conference on collective memory and healing historical wounds from the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990)
2. A national conference on preserving the civil peace in Lebanon from outside influences.
3. Building on the years of interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon to move to the next step of developing a truly Abrahamic pluralistic theology of coexistence.

These opportunities were proposed to us by Professor Antoine Messarra from the Lebanese Foundation For Permanent Civil Peace and a member of the Constitutional Court in Lebanon and by Mohamed Alem, the Senior Managing Partner of Alem & Associates Law Firm in Beirut.

The third surprise development came in the form of an invitation to the PACIS Project team to come to Doha, Qatar to explore the possibility of establishing Qatar as a hub for Faith-Based Reconciliation in the Gulf including Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The invitation came from the managing partner of a multinational law firm based in Qatar. He was present and deeply moved by Brian Cox's speech at the Beirut conference.

Second Stop: Cairo

In Cairo Brian Cox and Bassam Ishak focused on the detailed arrangements for the upcoming conference on National Healing and Reconciliation in Syria. The conference will be at the Hotel Safir in Cairo May 18-20, 2012. We have invited 20 Syrian opposition leaders both from within Syria and Syrian exiles from Paris, Istanbul, Amman and Cairo. There will be five major groups represented at the conference:

- Liberals desiring a civil state
- Nationalists from within Syria
- Islamists
- Salafis
- Kurds

These representatives will come from all the significant people groups of Syria: Alawite, Christians, Muslim Brotherhood, Druze, secular Baathists and Kurds. This will be a unique opportunity for opposition leaders to focus on the sobering reality of a post Assad Syria and the need for national healing and reconciliation so that Syria does not follow the path of post – Tito Yugoslavia of the 1990’s.

The conference will utilize the unique Faith-Based Reconciliation Process to enable participants in the conference to consider the challenging task of national healing and reconciliation. Some of the issues/questions to be considered include:

- What is the place of God, faith and religion in Syrian politics and a future state?
- How do we create an intentional pluralistic community in Syria that is inclusive of all ethnic, political and religious groups?
- How do we heal the walls of hostility between groups in Syria?
- How do we create a political culture in Syria that is based on social justice which seeks the common good and that shares privilege and power among the various groups?
- How do we foster a spirit of personal and political forgiveness between those who served or benefited from the regime and those who suffered at the hands of the regime?
- How do we heal the wounds of history in Syria so that we can move from the past into the future?

From our conversations with Syrian opposition leaders in Cairo it became clear that one of the future possibilities for the PACIS Project will be to utilize the Faith-Based Reconciliation process to tackle the issue of the Kurds in the Province of Hassake of eastern Syria. Kurds make up approximately 45 – 60% of the population of the province. This could be the one of the greatest threats to the continuing viability of the state of Syria. We were told that at a recent conference of Syrian opposition leaders at the Dead Sea in Jordan, one Kurdish leader unfolded a map showing Hassake as Western Kurdistan. We have learned from various sources that Kurds from Syria,

Northern Iraq and Turkey are already actively dreaming and planning for a future Kurdistan rising from the ashes of ancient Mesopotamia.

Conclusion

Seven years of building a foundation by ICRD and the PACIS Project in the Middle East have brought us to the point where the idea and the opportunities for Faith-Based Reconciliation are beginning to gain traction and we are faced with a multitude of opportunities in Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Egypt. As a person of faith we see that the hand of God is working through the Arab Spring and the stalemated Middle East peace process to create space for people of faith and faith-based initiatives to take the lead in redefining the operant question in the Middle East to be:

“How does God ask me to live with my neighbor?”

As persons of faith we believe that the day is coming in the not too distant future when the leaders of the PACIS Project and our partners will gather with the leaders of the Middle East to explore the answer to that question together. It will require enemies to sit together and engage in constructive joint problem solving. It will even require historic enemies to work together to plan and implement such an occasion. It will require leaders to push back from the negotiation table and submit to the authority of God in their lives. This is what will make it a truly faith-based endeavor – that the answer to that question will not emerge from collective human wisdom but from the heart of God which will only come forth when Isaac and Ishmael can at long last be reconciled and Abraham can rest in peace.