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Introduction to Essays from the Conference on Religion, Politics, and Peacemaking

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As indicated in the Foreword by John Merkle, the following essays by Jon Armajani, Suha Naimy, Wilbert van Saane, Paul Haidostian, and Mary Dana Hinton were presented at the conference "Religion, Politics, and Peacemaking" that took place on the campus of Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota in October 2018. The conference's co-sponsors were the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning at Saint John's University, the Department of Peace Studies of the College of Saint Benedict / Saint John's University, and Haigazian University, with funding provided by the Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation of Minnesota.¹

The essays approach religion, politics, and peacemaking from several disciplinary perspectives including Arabic Language and Literature, Armenian Studies, Cultural Anthropology, Literary Studies, Middle East Studies, Peace Studies, Psychology, Religious Studies, Sociology, and Theology. The essays address their topics keeping in mind the causes, mitigating factors, and peaceful approaches to conflicts in the modern and contemporary periods. One commonality of these essays is the idea that Christianity can be a meaningful framework for understanding peace and engaging in peacemaking.

Jon Armajani's essay appears first because it sets forth theological foundations for interreligious dialogue and peace which were two of the conference's themes. Suha Naimy's essay appears next as it discusses theological themes of conflict, peace, and transcendence as articulated in Mikhail Naimy's works and their relationship to Christianity. Wilbert van Saane's essay is empirical and theological, in that his interviews with church leaders and his analysis of Syria's Civil War constitute the empirical aspects of that piece, while he reflects as a Christian theologian on that war's dilemmas. Paul Haidostian's and Mary Dana Hinton's essays constitute the capstones in that both reflect theologically as Christians on their experiences with peace and conflicts while suggesting pathways for understanding, mitigating, and potentially resolving conflicts.

Jon Armajani's essay discusses God, faith, and sacred texts (including the Bible, Quran, and Hadith), and some ways that they constitute foundations for peacemaking between Christians and Muslims. The essay presents his personal, ethnic, and religious background in order to contextualize the ideas which the essay analyzes, and then describes three Christian theological approaches to non-Christian religions. Those approaches are particularist (or exclusivist), inclusivist, and pluralist. The essay discusses the historical background and significance of Vatican Council II, which took place between 1962 and 1965, and that council's *Nostra Aetate*, published in 1965. The essay then analyzes three theological principles which undergird *Nostra Aetate*, and that document's description of Islam. The essay reflects on God, faith, and prayer in Christianity and Islam, concluding with some observations about the possibilities for peace between Christians and Muslims.

Suha Naimy's essay discusses the works of Mikhail Naimy who was a towering twentieth-century Lebanese author and philosopher whose writings verge towards the mystical and the

metaphysical. Mr. Naimy's philosophy was a synthesis of his own life conflicts and his built premises and drawn conclusions that trivialize materialism, following the steps of Christ. Ms. Naimy's essay examines Mr. Naimy's personal conflicts, experiences with war, and deep encounter with transcendence as he found the higher cause of existence, embodied in loving and expressed in writing. Ms. Naimy argues that Mr. Naimy viewed transcendence as the only remedy to life's ugliness, absurdity, and captivity. Finally, according to Ms. Naimy, Mr. Naimy perceived that conflicts are blessings and pave the way for peace through love, faith, and transcendence.

Wilbert van Saane's essay discusses the ways that Christian churches in the Middle East have responded to the Syrian Civil War that began in 2011. The essay elucidates practical and theological dilemmas that those churches have faced since that time. The essay's description of these dilemmas is largely based on interviews that van Saane conducted with church leaders across Christian denominations and religious bodies. The essay contains analyses of these dilemmas, shedding light on some ways churches of the Middle East have contributed to peaceful resolutions of the Syrian conflict, or have failed to do so. Before discussing the practical and theological dilemmas of the churches, the essay provides a short sketch of the socio-political situation in Syria prior to the Civil War. It also offers a brief overview of that war and the way it has impacted the Christian communities in the region.

Paul Haidostian's essay reflects on his life story as an Armenian-Lebanese, and analyzes his experiences with war and peace in terms of the Armenian Genocide, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Lebanon's civil war. In light of these experiences, Haidostian concluded that the message and example of peace, which he had learned at home, church, and school, were in severe contrast with each other, and difficult to reconcile. During the earlier periods in his life, he knew that providentially his disappointment was with human nature, and that the frame of peace had to be larger, and its reach had to be deeper than what he had witnessed. Within a Christian framework, he began to believe that humans' task was to reconstruct hope in life among one another. Rooted in these experiences and perspectives, Haidostian concludes his essay by offering practical advice for peacebuilding in educational institutions and beyond, while sharing a story from his childhood as an illustration for hope and bridgebuilding.

Mary Dana Hinton's essay states that leaders, educators, clergy and laypeople engaged in the work of peacemaking must acknowledge the powerful role religion can play in the peacebuilding effort. She believes that we cannot limit our peacebuilding conversation to religious communities. Educational institutions also have a uniquely compelling role to play in the work of peacebuilding. Her essay reviews why and how educational institutions must engage in this work, explores emerging best practices in this area, and concludes with a call to action. Importantly, the essay highlights the significance, power, and capacity of interfaith dialogue and education to support peacebuilding. For Hinton, interfaith education and dialogue is not a call to abandoning religious traditions' unique and powerful convictions. Rather, it is a call to utilizing one's religious convictions for the common good and the creation of positive peace.

References

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