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Overview paper

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## **INTERFAITH OUTREACH OF THE MUSLIM WORLD LEAGUE: TRENDS, CAUSES, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

### **Abstract**

The Muslim World League is a nominally non-governmental Islamic organisation based in Saudi Arabia. From its founding in 1962 until relatively recently, it mainly focused on promulgating the archetypal Islamic fundamentals and practices across the Muslim world in line with the vision of the Saudi state. An early indicator that this mission was giving way to a more dynamic and, relatively, liberal position was an interfaith initiative by the league in 2008 that resulted in the Makkah Appeal; a landmark document that advocated, and set appropriate terms for, Islamic initiatives in interfaith dialogue. The league's new interfaith programme was then introduced to the world ten days later when it convened the Madrid Conference, bringing together prominent figures from all major faith traditions. But it was not until 2016 / 2017 with the coming to office of its present secretary-general, Dr. Al-Issa, and the Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, that the league radically expanded and diversified its interfaith dialogue initiatives. This article examines a mixed sample of these initiatives to give a sense of how the league's interfaith programme has evolved in recent years. It then gives an analysis of the factors likely to be driving these changes, the aims they seem oriented to achieve, and what directions they might take in future. Special attention is paid to the league's function and significance within the larger discourse of Saudi international relations and diplomatic interests on the world stage.

**Keywords:** Muslim World League, Saudi Arabia, Interfaith Dialogue, Islamic Reforms

### **Introduction**

The Muslim World League (MWL) was founded in 1962 by pan-Islamic scholars reacting to the growing influence of socialist and secularist forces across the Muslim world.<sup>2</sup> Its founding ideals center on the establishment of pan-Islamic unity among all Muslims. This recognises shared Islamic faith as superordinate to the national, ethnic, and ideological differences that continue to divide the transnational Islamic community. From this core mission, the activities of the MWL have since ramified

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2 Reinhard Schulze and Gabriele Tecchiato, "The Muslim World League", in: *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, John L., Esposito (ed.), Islamic Studies Online Oxford, 2009. Available at: <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/print/opr/t236/e0570> (accessed 5.12.2020).

into many areas of political, cultural, social, and religious import. In broadening its focus, the MWL has founded a number of affiliate institutions, including but not limited to the Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence) Council, International Islamic Organization for Education, International Islamic Relief Organization, and the World Organisation for Presenting Islam.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps as a natural consequence of its originating ambition to unite Muslims around what many consider to be a conservative interpretation of Islam, the MWL has been subject to suspicion by Western governments who have seen the organisation as a potential vehicle for promoting religious extremism.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the substance of these suspicions, the MWL has responded by adopting a rhetoric that places the values of peace, tolerance, and love at its forefront.<sup>5</sup> In keeping with this shift in emphasis, the MWL has in recent years scaled back its pan-Islamic programme by affirming Muslims' national identities and prioritising state law over religious law.<sup>6</sup> It has also more vigorously condemned Islamist ideologies that sow the seeds of terrorism.

A major element of this change in direction has been the reaching out to other world communities through initiatives in interfaith dialogue.<sup>7</sup> These initiatives have focused on tackling issues that have strained relations between Muslims and non-Muslims and fuelled negative attitudes towards Islam, particularly in the West. Central to these dialogues has been the promotion of religious tolerance, deradicalization of Muslim youth, and peaceful coexistence between Muslim majority and Muslim minority countries.

In a globalised, interconnected world, the importance of such interfaith dialogues has arguably never been greater. Putative interpretations of Islam that encourage discord between Muslims and non-Muslims – or even between Muslims themselves – can now be disseminated more widely than ever before.<sup>8</sup> This, in combination with the prominence of extremist groups who claim to represent Islam (e.g., Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State), has fed into a widespread perception that Islam is an intolerant, even violent, religion (Pew Research Center 2017).<sup>9</sup> Among

3 Ibidem.

4 Gary Catwright, "Saudi Arabia Boosting Extremism In Europe," *EU Today*, October 7, 2017. Available at: <https://eutoday.net/news/security-defence/2017/saudi-arabia-boosting-extremism-in-europe> (accessed 5.12.2020).

5 Mohammad Al-Issa, "Geneva hosts global Muslim World League gathering," *Arab News*, November 12, 2017. Available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1192091/saudi-arabia> (accessed 5.12.2020).

6 Sarah Feuer, "Course Correction: The Muslim World League, Saudi Arabia's Export of Islam, and Opportunities for Washington," The Washington Institute, 2019. Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/course-correction-muslim-world-league-saudi-arabias-export-islam-and-opportunities>, (accessed 5.12.2020).

7 Ibidem.

8 See, for example: Imran Awan, Cyber-Extremism: Isis and the Power of social media, *Society*, Vol. 54, No. 2, 2017, pp. 138–149.

9 Pew Research Center, "U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, July 26, 2017. Available at: <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/>, (accessed 5.12.2020).

other aims, it is this perception that the MWL has sought to reverse through its recent ventures in interfaith dialogue.<sup>10</sup> While by no means the only religious organisation spearheading such initiatives, the size, reach and international prominence of the MWL means that much depends on how its own efforts play out.

This article assesses the MWL's interfaith efforts to 5.12.2020. It first reviews the broader literature around the tradition of interfaith dialogue, as well as some of the major world initiatives in this direction. It then reviews a sample of MWL's own initiatives before analysing how these have evolved over time, what has driven these changes, and what future directions their dialogue initiatives might take and to what end.

### **Conceptualising Interfaith dialogue**

With the continuous redrawing of political and ethnic boundaries, people of different religious traditions have coexisted with varying degrees of proximity over the ages. Informal interfaith discourse between individuals must have occurred with some regularity. Nevertheless, the conciliatory, large-scale, organised initiatives in interfaith dialogue seen in modern times would have been difficult to conceive in a historic context where interfaith relations were mostly hostile. Muslims, for instance, have historically condemned Christians as polytheists, while Christians have charged Islam of being inspired by the devil.<sup>11</sup>

Interfaith relations have come a long way since these inauspicious beginnings. Globalisation has ushered in an era of unprecedented interconnection between the adherents of different faiths, who now live, learn, and work together at a scale never before seen. The growth of internationalism has also created more interactions between states that are aligned, whether culturally or officially, with different religious traditions.

These shifts have accelerated the need for religious communities to better understand one another. The prosperous functioning of religiously plural societies and the international community at large rests on mutual respect being extended across religious boundaries. It is in response to this exigency, among others, that a tradition of interfaith dialogue has flourished.<sup>12</sup>

Though the particular aims of different interfaith initiatives may differ, their contemporary forms generally share the goals of promoting mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect.<sup>13</sup> Interfaith dialogue is thus commonly understood as being

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10 MWLLO, "Role of Islamic Centres in Correcting Misconceptions", 2013. Available at: <https://www.mwlllo.org.uk/role-of-islamic-centres-in-correcting-misconceptions/>, (accessed 5.12.2020).

11 Mahmoud Ayoub, Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Goals and Obstacles, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 94, No. 3, 2004, pp. 313–314.

12 See: Ryan Urbano, Levinas and interfaith dialogue, *The Heythrop Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 1, 2012, pp. 151-155.

13 See: Andrew Orton, Interfaith dialogue: seven key questions for theory, policy and practice, *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2016, pp. 349-355.

cooperative, positive, and constructive, rather than a medium for conducting power plays, as might be the case in the dialogues that take place between oppositional factions.

The first formal, large-scale initiative in interfaith dialogue is widely recognised to have been the convening of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, 1893.<sup>14</sup> This Christian led initiative saw representatives from all major world religions meet to identify what teachings their various traditions had in common, promote solidarity among people of different faiths, and affirm a shared commitment to theism and human immortality in the face of a countervailing scientific materialism.

While the conference was broadly considered successful, internal disagreements among Christians over the proper goals of interfaith dialogue, how it should be reconciled with the evangelical mission, and concerns that it risked theological syncretism stopped interfaith dialogue being widely embraced by mainstream denominations.<sup>15</sup> This began to change in the 1960s with two landmark events. First, 1964 saw the Roman Catholic Church form what is now called the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, tasked with advancing interfaith discourse and exploring the theological issues it raises. Second, the World Council of Churches (an ecumenical inter-church organisation) established a sub-unit in 1968 with a similar remit, helping to catapult interfaith dialogue into the Christian mainstream.

These events sparked a series of developments in the practice and thinking around interfaith discourse that have contributed greatly to the tradition as it exists today.<sup>16</sup> There are now numerous forms of dialogue, structured around various goals, that are conducted at the local, national, and international levels. While no consensus exists on how these are best categorised, some of the most common models are distinguished below. It should be borne in mind that specific interfaith initiatives may blend these models in a variety of ways.

The *theological exchange model* describes a dialogic approach for addressing theological differences.<sup>17</sup> For those engaging in such dialogue, the aim is not to argue over points of disagreement but to eluci5.12.2020 where theologies converge and diverge in the spirit of finding areas of commonality and fostering mutual understanding. Theological exchange can also assume political dimensions when used to construct interfaith ideology that can help coordinate political action across

14 George D. Bond, Anagarika Dharmapala and the 1893 parliament of the world's religions, *Vidyodaya Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 6, 1992, pp. 19-21.

15 For a comprehensive discussion see: Wesley S., Ariarajah, Interfaith Dialogue: Milestones of the Past and Prospects for the Future, *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 71, No. 5, 2019, pp. 614–627.

16 Ibidem, pp. 614–616.

17 Jane I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008, pp. 63-83. See also: Charles A. Kimball, "Muslim-Christian Dialogue", in: *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, John L., Esposito (ed.), Islamic Studies Online Oxford, 2009. Available at: <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0567> (accessed 5.12.2020).

religious divides.<sup>18</sup> It is a model of dialogue that has been embraced by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Islamic Society of North American, who conduct annual theological exchanges with one another through various local groups they have set up (e.g. USCCB<sup>19</sup>).

While the theological exchange model enjoys a long pedigree, it is difficult for those without theological or philosophical training to participate. A related but more inclusive form of interfaith engagement follows the dialogue about spirituality model<sup>20</sup>, or spiritual dialogue<sup>21</sup>. The focus here is on the distinct and shared religious experiences of people of different faiths. As such, no specialist knowledge or qualification is required of participants who simply share their own experiences of spirituality in their religious practice. Taken further, spiritual “dialogue” might involve more experiential forms of interfaith engagement, such as observing the worship of those of other faiths, or even participating in interfaith prayers.<sup>22</sup>

Outside of dialogue concerning the theological and spiritual dimensions of religion, an especially popular mode of interfaith dialogue follows the “*get to know you model*”:<sup>23</sup> This is purposed towards building greater understanding of, and familiarity between, adherents of different faiths. It aims to challenge the misconceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices that often mar interfaith relations. This model has been especially popular in the wake of 9/11 as a way to improve Western-Islamic relations internationally,<sup>24</sup> as well as the tensions that have grown between non-Muslim majorities and Muslim minorities in many Western countries (e.g. The Near Neighbours programme in the UK).<sup>25</sup>

Interfaith dialogue can also be structured to facilitate action on areas of common concern. This “*cooperative model for addressing pragmatic concerns*” might focus on achieving interfaith solutions<sup>26</sup> to contentious issues such as interreligious marriage, integration of religious minorities, and the role of religious values in public education.<sup>27</sup> It has been the model of choice for religious groups wanting to tackle radicalisation in their communities, which has been a concern for Muslim organisa-

18 Jane I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*. . . pp. 65-68.

19 Unite States Conference of Catholic Bishops, available at: <https://www.usccb.org/committees/ecumenical-interreligious-affairs>, (accessed December 22, 2020).

20 Jane I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*. . . p. 79.

21 Sallie B. King, “Interreligious Dialogue”, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, Chad Meister (ed.), Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 101-114.

22 Donal O’Sullivan, Interfaith Prayer: A Sample and Some Comments, *The Furrow*, Vol. 37, No. 7, 1986, pp. 467-471. Also see: “Islamic Network Groups,” available at: <https://ing.org/about-ing/> (accessed December 23, 2020).

23 Jane I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*. . . p. 67.

24 Turan Kayaoglu, “Preachers of Dialogue: International Relations and Interfaith Theology”, in: *Islam and Peacebuilding: Gülen Movement Initiatives*, John Esposito and Ihsan Yilmaz (eds.), Blue Dome Press, New York, 2010, pp. 147-148.

25 See: Philip Lewis and Charlotte Dando, *The Interfaith Movement*, William Temple Foundation, Rochdale, 2015.

26 Jane I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*. . . pp. 63-83.

27 Charles A. Kimball, “Muslim-Christian Dialogue” . . .

tions in particular.<sup>28</sup>

Interfaith initiatives were traditionally Christian led. With few exceptions, the Muslim world first responded to Christian invitations to dialogue with mistrust.<sup>29</sup> At best, many viewed the framework of dialogue as an unwanted Western export, and at worst a covert approach to the Christian mission of conversion.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, by the 1990s, an increasing number of Muslim groups began to embrace what they had once viewed with suspicion. The governments of several Muslim majority countries instituted interfaith organisations, and interfaith initiatives were launched by many transnational non-governmental Muslim organisations.<sup>31</sup>

The imperative for interfaith dialogue was intensified by the events of 9/11,<sup>32</sup> which prompted a proliferation of interfaith efforts by Muslim and Christian organisations wanting to diffuse tensions arising from the attack and subsequent invasions of Middle Eastern countries by Western coalitions.<sup>33</sup>

The political urgency of improving Western-Islamic relations can be seen in a series of resolutions passed by the United Nations (2004; 2005) in the years following 9/11, including the promotion of interfaith dialogue and “the promotion of interreligious dialogue and cooperation for peace. These exhorted member states to make efforts in interfaith dialogue to increase tolerance and defuse conflict; a clear example of interfaith dialogue being utilised to promote international peace-making.

It is against this backdrop of worsening Western-Islamic relations, as well as rising intranational tensions between Muslims and members of other faiths, that Muslim organisations became much more proactive in launching their own interfaith dialogue initiatives.<sup>34</sup> Broadly speaking, they have also shifted their focus from conversion, or *da'wah*, pre-9/11, to conversation post-9/11.<sup>35</sup> The forms and goals of these initiatives, it is argued, vary according to the theological commitments of their founding organisations, as well as the relationships of these organisations to the political authorities of the state form which they operate.<sup>36</sup> This can be seen in the analysis of three contrasting programmes of interfaith dialogue by Muslim organisations

28 Anna Halafoff, “The Multifaith Movement, Global Risks and Cosmopolitan Solutions”, in: *The Multifaith Movement: Global Risks and Cosmopolitan Solutions*, Springer, 2013, pp. 1–8.

29 Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, New Amsterdam Books, 2000, pp. 3-7.

30 Rogers Gaikwad, “Reconceptualizing Religion, Dialogue, Theology and Mission in Pluralistic Society: The Contribution of S.J. Samartha”, in: *Interfaith Relations after One Hundred Years: Christian Mission among Other Faiths*, Marina Ngursanzeli Behera (ed.), Regnum Studies in Mission, Oxford, 2011, p. 278.

31 Turan Kayaoglu, “Preachers of Dialogue: International Relations and Interfaith Theology” . . . pp. 51-52.

32 John Fahy and Jeffery Haynes, Introduction: Interfaith on the World Stage, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, Vol. 16, 2018, pp. 1-2.

33 Philip Lewis and Charlotte Dando, *The Interfaith Movement*. . . pp. 12-13.

34 Douglas Pratt, “Secular Government and Interfaith Dialogue”, *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2010, pp. 42-46.

35 Liyakatali Takim, From Conversion to Conversation: Interfaith Dialogue in Post 9-11 America, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 94, No. 3, 2004, pp. 343-345.

36 Turan Kayaoglu, “Preachers of Dialogue: International Relations and Interfaith Theology” . . . pp. 151-154.

that differ along these two dimensions.

The Turkey-based Gülen Movement led by Futhullah Gülen has launched many grassroots interfaith dialogue initiatives around the world. Grounded in a Sunni-Sufi Islamic tradition, it espouses a highly accommodating interfaith theology that stresses the commonality of different faiths, the spiritual unity between religions, and the legitimization of interfaith dialogue in the Qur'an.<sup>37</sup> As a civil-society group independent from the Turkish state, the Gülen Movement is characterised by decentralised, grassroots activism that fosters greater familiarity between people of different faiths, making liberal use of the "get to know you" model of interfaith dialogue. Its open support for secularism and democracy may in part explain why the group has fallen out of favour with the Turkish government of Recep Erdoğan, earning it the designation of a terrorist organisation by the Turkish state in 2016.<sup>38</sup>

A Common World is an interfaith dialogue project advanced by the Aman-based Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute of Islamic Thought (RABITT); a semi-official organisation with strong links to the Jordanian government.<sup>39</sup> A Common World recognises a limited plurality of eight legitimate schools of Islamic thought. Invitations for interfaith dialogue were initially only extended to Christians based on two shared principles: love of God and love of neighbour. Love of God was later said to encapsulate all faith traditions as A Common World vied for greater international recognition. A feature distinguishing A Common World from the Gülen Movement is its claim to represent true Islam and to speak on behalf of all Muslims.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, it has favoured international forums over grassroots activism for conducting its interfaith engagements, arguably seeking to further the diplomatic interests of the Jordanian government by advertising to Western nations its commitment to countering religious extremism.

The MWL was a relative latecomer to the interfaith movement. Officially, it is a non-governmental organisation comprised of individuals and Islamic associations from several countries. Nevertheless, the league was founded by the Saudi government, which is also its largest donor. Moreover, its statute stipulates that its secretary-general must be a Saudi citizen, and the Saudi government maintains close ties with it. For these reasons, many see it as a de facto organ of the Saudi state.<sup>41</sup>

The MWL has traditionally been animated by a fairly standard and puritanical version of Islamic theology, which perhaps explains its initial reluctance to engage in interfaith dialogue even as other prominent Muslim organisations started to do

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37 Ibidem, pp. 152-157.

38 "Country Policy and Information Note Turkey: Gülenist movement", Version 2.0, UK, 2018. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/turkey-country-policy-and-information-notes> (accessed 5.12.2020).

39 Turan Kayaoglu, Explaining Interfaith Dialogue in the Muslim World, *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2015, p. 11.

40 Ibidem, pp. 11-13.

41 See: Johannes Reissner and Tom Lampert, International Islamic organizations, *Islam in the world today*, 2010, pp. 743-751.

so. This mirrored the stance of the Saudi authorities, some of whom, including the Board of Senior Ulama, issued *fatwas* against interfaith dialogue. Indeed, prior to 2008, the position of the Saudi establishment was that interfaith dialogue with Christians and Jews must be advanced with due diligence and within certain limitations.<sup>42</sup>

Speaking in terms of the chronology of social and political reforms in Saudi Arabia, the period of the late King Abdallah is considered to be a prelude to all that is worth striving for in a modern-day state. The late King's manifold reforms, credentialled by social and political markers ensured that the Kingdom was legitimately prepared for streamlining Islamic thought as a pivotal force for coexistence with the modern world civilisations.<sup>43</sup> In 2008, therefore, the Saudi authorities requested the MWL to convene the International Conference for Dialogue. This conference yielded the Makkah Appeal for Interfaith Dialogue, marking a turning point in the league's attitude towards interfaith engagement. The document declared that Islam advocates dialogue, for which it stipulated appropriate goals, arguing that the diversity of faiths is God's will.<sup>44</sup> Though this marked a major leap in the league's stance towards other faiths, it stopped short of identifying a vast array of commonalities they might share with Islam, making it somewhat restricted in scope and outreach.<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, there are signs that the social reforms of the Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman have propelled a more fundamental shift in the ideology guiding the MWL interfaith engagement, which appears to be moving away from its earlier, more conservative roots.<sup>46</sup> These changes will doubtless go a long way to defining the future of interfaith dialogue between large swathes of the Muslim world and other faith communities, as well as the constantly evolving relationship between Islamic and Western civilisation.

In view of better understanding these past and future developments, the next section summarises a selection of prominent initiatives by MWL since the drafting of the Makkah Appeal, providing an overview of how these have progressed over time. An analysis is then made of the factors driving these changes and the implications they carry—not only for Saudi-Western relations, but Islamic-Western relations more broadly.

42 For a detailed discussion see: Muhammad Al-Atawneh, Wahhabi Self-Examination Post-9/11: Rethinking the 'Other', 'Otherness' and Tolerance, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 2011, pp. 255-271.

43 Joseph Kechichian, *Legal and Political Reforms in Saudi Arabia*, Routledge, London, 2013, pp. 71-106.

44 The Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, "Initiative for Interfaith Dialogue", The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, January 1, 2011. Available at: <https://www.saudiembassy.net/reports/initiative-interfaith-dialogue> (accessed 5.12.2020).

45 Turan Kayaoglu, "Preachers of Dialogue: International Relations and Interfaith Theology" . . . pp. 155-58.

46 Sarah Feuer, "Course Corrections" . . .

## **Interfaith dialogue initiatives by the Muslim World League**

*World Conference on Dialogue, Madrid, June 16-18, 2008*

In carrying forward the interfaith mission laid out by the Makkah Appeal, the first interfaith dialogue initiative organised by MWL was the World Conference on Dialogue held in Madrid.<sup>47</sup> This began on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2008, just 10 days after the Makkah Appeal was written, and served to introduce to the world Saudi Arabia's new approach to interfaith engagement. It was attended by leaders from a diverse mix of religions and belief systems, including Christianity, Hinduism, and Confucianism.

In setting the agenda for the conference, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, the then head of the Saudi state, opened with a speech (which was largely echoed by the later address of the MWL secretary-general) containing several elements instructive of how Saudi Arabia saw its role within the broader interfaith movement. He assured, for instance, to be delivering his address on behalf of the entire Islamic world (Ummah), hence representing an authoritative position of Islam on the world stage. In asserting this further, he referred to the diversity of Muslim scholars that had contributed to the Makkah Appeal, as well as the site of its creation as the house of God, Al-Haram Mosque in Makkah, the holiest in Islam. He implicitly impugned previous efforts at interfaith dialogue, claiming most had mostly failed because they had deteriorated into mutual recrimination... that exacerbated rather than mitigated tensions, before casting the current meeting as a historic turning point in interfaith engagement. Among the aims of interfaith dialogue touted were the creation of a united approach to redressing social phenomena likely to be of mutual concern to everyone, such as terrorism and racism, and those likely to be of particular concern to the leaders of other faiths, such as lack of belief, moral degeneration, and the disintegration of the traditional family unit.

The conference resulted in the Madrid Declaration; a document that affirms the goals of interfaith dialogue set forth by King Abdullah and the MWL. It also committed participants to certain actions in service of these goals. For example, establishing a working group for facilitating dialogue, organising interfaith meetings, and communicating the results of the conference to the United Nations General Assembly.

*International forum on the Role of Followers of Religions in Promoting Peace and Harmony, Geneva, November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

The Muslim World League organised an international forum in Geneva in 2017 attended by leading figures and diplomats from different countries and religions, including representatives from the Vatican and the World Council of Churches (WW-C).<sup>48</sup> The theme of the forum was promoting interfaith unity to realise peace and

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47 The Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, "Initiative for Interfaith Dialogue"...

48 "Geneva host Muslim World League gathering", *The Muslim World League Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2017, pp. 4-5.

harmony. This importance of this goal was stressed in the opening address of the MWL general secretary, Dr. Mohammed bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa, who extolled the ideals of peace, security, and tolerance of diversity. He decried Islamophobia, which he said fuels extremism and terrorism. He also exposed the theological distortions used by extremists to advance their political agendas.

At its close, the forum called for faith communities to promote justice, freedom, tolerance and coexistence among all religions and cultures. In service of this, recommendations were issued to increase meetings between scholars of different faiths in service of overcoming barriers presented by historical conflicts and persistent misunderstandings between faiths.

*Cooperation Agreement with Italy's Uffizi Gallery to Promote Islamic Civilization and Enhance Intercultural Initiatives*

As part of its interfaith engagement strategy, the MWL has reached out to educational institutions to seek collaboration in advancing interfaith dialogue. For example, the MWL reached an agreement with Uffizi Gallery in Italy which aims to increase awareness of Islamic civilisation through cooperation in organising relevant educational and cultural initiatives, such as seminars and training courses that promote cultural exchange (Muslim World League 2018).<sup>49</sup> This goes beyond the remit of interfaith, reaching further into the realm of broader intercultural dialogue that includes secular society.

*Introduction to Islam & the Muslim Culture Course Organised by the MWL London Office, London, July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019*

In 2019, the league's London office hosted a free course on Islam and Muslim culture.<sup>50</sup> This single day event was both interfaith and intercultural, with people of all faiths and none invited to attend. It consisted of presentations designed to educate attendees on precisely those aspects of Islam that have become most controversial in the West. These included presentations that sought to distance Islam from the actions of terrorists that claim to act in its name, explain Shari'ah law and what it means for the status of women in Islam, shed light on LGBT issues in Islam, and give information about the true meaning of Jihad, presumably elevating contemporary understandings without military connotations. The event also involved a trip to a local mosque where participants observed Muslims praying. It can thus be seen as following the get to know you model of interfaith discourse with elements of spiritual dialogue incorporated.

49 "Muslim World League Signs Cooperation Agreement With Italy's Uffizi Gallery to Promote Islamic Civilization and Enhance Intercultural Initiatives", *PR Newswire*, October 23, 2018. Available at: <https://www.prnewswire.co.uk/news-releases/muslim-world-league-signs-cooperation-agreement-with-italy-s-uffizi-gallery-to-promote-islamic-civilization-and-enhance-intercultural-initiatives-861286469.html> (accessed 5.12.2020).

50 "MWL holds 'Peace and Solidarity' conference for Abrahamic Family", *The Muslim World League Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2019, pp. 4-9.

Engaging with people of other faiths and cultures in the format of a course implies that the understanding of Islam promoted by the MWL is authoritative, with course facilitators described as authentic sources in promotional material. This accords with the goal of interfaith dialogue sanctioned by the Makkah Appeal to “rectify the distorted images of Islam”.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike many of the international interfaith initiatives by the MWL, this course was organised by a national office and delivered at the local level. And while open to everyone, it was targeted at public sector employees working at the ground level, not politicians or faith leaders of diplomatic significance.

*International Conference for Peace and Solidarity, Paris, September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019*

In September 2019, the MWL organised the International Conference for Peace and Solidarity in France.<sup>52</sup> This attracted attendees from 40 different countries, specifically bringing together Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faith leaders. The theme of peace and solidarity was chosen in response to growing tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in Muslim minority countries, particularly pertinent to the host country of France which had suffered numerous terrorist attacks over the preceding years by individuals claiming to act in the name of Islam.

In his address, secretary-general of the MWL Dr. Al-Issa appealed to the values of peace and harmony shared by the three Abrahamic religions in calling for interfaith cooperation in tackling the radicalisation of religious youth. He said that the MWL endorsed the contents of a speech by the leader of the Secular government of France, Emmanuel Macron, in which certain terrorist attacks in France were blamed on political Islam. Dr. Al-Issa was nevertheless clear in distinguishing Islam as a religion from those who undermine the great meaning of Islam by twisting it to achieve political goals.

In a dramatic break from the pan-Islamic theology upon which the MWL was founded, Dr. Al-Issa also stated that Muslims in Europe must respect the laws and constitution of the countries in which they live and not to accept the issuance of Fatwas to them. This prioritising of state law over religious law is consistent with the position of the overwhelmingly secular countries of Europe, signalling the allyship of the MWL and the government of Saudi Arabia.

The conference resulted in the Paris Agreement for the Abrahamic Family, a cooperation agreement committing Muslim, Christian, and Jewish signatories to enhancing inter-relations between their respective faiths. According to the MWL, it is the first Islamic organisation to unite representatives of the three Abrahamic religions in tackling hatred, extremism, and racism, positioning itself as a world leader in Islamic multifaith engagement.

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51 The Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, “Initiative for Interfaith Dialogue”...

52 “MWL holds ‘Peace and Solidarity’ conference”... pp. 6-8.

*Interfaith Delegation to Auschwitz, January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020*

In a gesture of interfaith solidarity and outreach, a high-level delegation of Muslim scholars, brought together by the MWL, visited the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp in Poland four days before the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the camp's liberation.<sup>53</sup> A chief instrument of the Holocaust, the camp was the location of the industrialised killing of nearly a million Jews between 1942 and 1944.<sup>54</sup> The MWL delegation issued a statement from the camp in which the secretary general affirmed that Islam values peace and that the MWL opposes violence, hatred, and extremism. The visit served to dissociate the MWL from Holocaust denialism, a popular anti-Semitic conspiracy theory that has been widely promoted in Muslim media and mainstream publications.<sup>55</sup> The initiative therefore represented a major step in Islamic-Jewish relations.

### **Analysing the Implications of the Interfaith Initiatives of the Muslim World League**

While the Makkah Appeal paved the way for the MWL's programme of interfaith engagement, its efforts in this direction were rather restricted until the current secretary-general, Dr. Al-Issa, assumed office in 2016. Since this time, but particularly since coming to power of the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in 2017, the interfaith initiatives of the MWL have proliferated in a number of directions. As can be seen in the previous section, these initiatives have included numerous high-level international conferences but also more local initiatives, such as those conducted by the MWLLO, as well as symbolic gestures, such as issuing condemnations of Holocaust denial from the Auschwitz concentration camp.

The extent and variety of these interfaith efforts belie a narrow interpretation of these activities as simply a means of advancing Saudi diplomatic interests on the world stage.<sup>56</sup> While many features of the MWL's interfaith initiatives suggest that they sometimes may be significant in this direction, others point to a sincere desire to work with other faith communities and cultures addressing common problems.

To take the diplomatic significance first, this is evidenced in a few ways. One is the MWL's common claim that its dialogue initiatives are historic world firsts, despite a number of other Muslim organisations being more proactive in launching similar initiatives previously (e.g., the interfaith efforts of A Common World). The MWL has also worked to cultivate the perception that they represent Islam as a whole by, for

53 Ismaeel I. Naar, "High-Level Muslim World League Delegation Pays Interfaith Visit to Auschwitz", *Al Arabiya English*, May 20, 2020. Available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/01/23/High-level-Muslim-World-League-delegation-pays-interfaith-visit-to-Auschwitz> (accessed 5.12.2020).

54 See: *Auschwitz, 1940-1945: Central Issues in the History of the Camp*, Vol. 5, Wackaw Długoborski and Franciszek Piper (eds.), Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2000, pp. 23-44.

55 Hamza Yusuf, "Holocaust Denial Undermines Islam", in: *The Theory and Practice of Islamic Terrorism*, Perry M. and Negrin H.E. (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008, pp. 239-240.

56 Kayaoglu T., "Preachers of Dialogue: International Relations and Interfaith Theology"... pp. 72-75.

example, appealing to the national diversity of Islamic scholars that sit on its council, and the patronage it enjoys from the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, the Saudi King. These pretensions to being the ultimate Islamic authority can be traced back to the founding of the organisation, and there is little indication it will abandon its play for this status any time soon. This stands in some contrast to the more equal relationship seen between the Vatican and WWC, for example, neither of whom claims to speak for Christianity as a whole in deference to the other.<sup>57</sup>

Another reason for appreciating the diplomatic prominence of the MWL is its focus on organising international conferences that bring together world leaders and diplomats. The values extolled in the rhetoric of the MWL speakers at these events consistently mirrors those celebrated in the West, such as tolerance, diversity, and human rights. Given the broader context of the Saudi international relations with the West,<sup>58</sup> it is hard not to see this new rhetoric as a remarkable overture by Saudi Arabia to be seen as a credible member of the world community.

It is also noteworthy that certain aspects of the interfaith mission laid down in the Makkah Appeal have featured much less prominently than others in the MWL's subsequent dialogue initiatives. The document, for example, urged working together with other faiths to promote the religiously conservative values they share; a goal initially honoured in the Madrid Conference, where the MWL called for interfaith efforts to tackle issues like lack of belief and moral degeneration. In their more recent initiatives, however, mention of such concerns have been conspicuous by their absence. In practice, the MWL's recent interfaith efforts have focused on much more inclusive goals, such as promoting tolerance and tackling extremism. This consciously adopted interfaith mission and rhetoric on the part of the MWL has proved to be more palatable not only to the leaders of other faiths, but to potential allies among secular politicians and other influential figures.

Nevertheless, there are also reasons to attribute less cynical motives to the MWL's interfaith dialogue initiatives. Certain of its local initiatives, including courses it has run in Muslim minority countries to tackle misperceptions about Islam and prejudice towards Muslims,<sup>59</sup> seem sincerely motivated to help ease the integration of Muslim minorities into those countries. That local initiatives have even incorporated elements of spiritual dialogue (e.g., inviting non-Muslims to observe Muslim worship) further suggests the MLW's desire to improve interfaith and intercultural relations at the ground level.

Indeed, many of MWL's dialogue initiatives in recent years have transcended the remit of interfaith by adopting a wider intercultural approach. This is evident in the foregoing example of the Islamic awareness courses it has run aimed equally for non-believers and followers of other faiths. It can also be seen in initiatives expressly targeted to promoting intercultural exchange, such as the cooperation agreement

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57 Ariarajah S. Wesley, "Interfaith Dialogue"... pp. 617-620.

58 "Annual Report 2020", The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), available at: <https://www.uscirf.gov/annual-reports?country=65> (accessed 5.12.2020).

59 "MWL holds 'Peace and Solidarity' conference"... pp. 5-9.

reached between MWL and Uffizi Gallery.<sup>60</sup>

Evidence of this growing intercultural agenda is also found in some of the MWL's more recent publications. One of these, for example, features an essay celebrating the Barenboim-Said Foundation, founded by two humanists: the late Palestinian Scholar, Edward Said, and the Israeli conductor, Daniel Barenboim.<sup>61</sup> The foundation fosters intercultural understanding by bringing together young musicians from different ethnicities and religious traditions across the Middle East and North Africa. In praising this humanist initiative, the MWL seems to be signalling an openness to mutually respectful dialogue, not only with those of other faiths, but with people of no faith. This fits with the concept of pluralism popular in the West, representing a major departure from the commitment made by the MWL in the Madrid Declaration to work with other faiths to tackle the issue of lack of belief.<sup>62</sup>

What might account for this shift? One possibility connects to the frequent theme of tackling Islamophobia prominent in many of the MWL's dialogue initiatives in recent years. Anti-Muslim bigotry and negative perceptions of Islam are not only prevalent in other faith communities. The problem exists at an intercultural, rather than at an interfaith level, and as such it requires an intercultural solution. It is perhaps in recognition of this that the MWL has reached beyond faith communities in seeking partners for dialogue. A second possibility comes back to the diplomatic role that the MWL could play, and quite justifiably so. It may well be that in extending invitations to dialogue to non-believers, the MWL, intentionally or unintentionally, seeks to improve the international reputation of Saudi Arabia on the pressing issue of religious tolerance. A third possibility is that as increasing numbers of Muslims around the world now live in largely secular Muslim-minority countries, the need for dialogue at an intercultural level can no longer be ignored. Issues around integration, religious freedom, secularism, and extremism can only be resolved by working with leaders outside of faith communities, as well as those within. In a globalised world, dialogue that goes beyond interfaith might be necessary for making progress on issues that have come to affect Muslim minorities most acutely. In any case, it seems imminent that pragmatic concerns in addition to the theological revolutions, are the main drivers of the MWL's move towards greater intercultural engagement.

## Conclusion

The MWL's pivot to the West marks a closing of Western-Islamic relations arguably facilitated by greater concession on the Saudi side. This is all the more notable considering that until relatively recently, the MWL had promoted a more typical theology not necessarily welcoming enough to the liberal worldview of the West. While this may largely reflect the reforms initiated by the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the immense influence of Saudi Arabia on Islamic thought

60 "Muslim World League Signs Cooperation Agreement" ...

61 "Making History, Making Peace: The MWL in Europe", *The Muslim World League Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 1, 2020, pp. 35-37.

62 The Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, "Initiative for Interfaith Dialogue" ...

globally means that the interfaith dialogue initiatives of the MWL will continue to have a profound influence on the relationship between Islamic civilisation and the rest of the world in the years to come.

Similarly, whatever motives underpin the evolution of the MWL's interfaith dialogue strategy since the creation of the Makkah Appeal, there is little doubt it has greatly improved its reputation among other faiths and world leaders over the past decade. The more progressive interfaith initiatives it has aggressively pushed since the coming to power of Dr. Al-Issa and the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has earned particular praise from the West (Feuer 2019).<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, many sincerely hope that the ideals of tolerance and human rights lauded by the league will be translated to consonant legislative changes within the Islamic world at large.<sup>64</sup> This may yet happen. The success of the MWL's progressive interfaith initiatives, propelled by the reforms of the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, have set expectations among Western audiences that warrant a consistent growth of the MWL's relations with world religions. The syncretising effects of the MWL's interfaith initiatives further asserts that they are not unidirectional at all. That is, there is a clear indication that other faiths and cultures are duly reciprocating the Islamic values advanced through these efforts.

How far the MWL can or will want to take its progressive interfaith mission remains to be explored further. Sustaining its current momentum and continuing to win plaudits among Western audiences, however, will probably depend on whether its rhetoric is sincerely and wholeheartedly received and acted upon by the Muslim world at large. What does seem certain is that the dialogue initiatives of the MWL will have a decisive role to play towards redefining the Muslim Non-Muslim dynamics internationally for a very long time to come.

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63 Sarah Feuer, "Course Correction". . . .

64 "Annual Report 2020", UN. . .

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## МЕЂУРЕЛИГИЈСКИ РАД СВЕТСКЕ МУСЛИМАНСКЕ ЛИГЕ: ТРЕНДОВИ, УЗРОЦИ И БУДУЋА УСМЕРЕЊА

### Сажетак

Светска муслиманска лига је номинално не-владина исламска организација чији је центар у Саудијској Арабији. Од свог оснивања 1962. године па све до скоро, њен главни фокус био је на ширењу идеју исламских фундамената и пракси широм муслиманског света, усклађених са званичном визијом Саудијске Арабије. Први индикатор мисије према више либералним и међурелигијским иницијативама био је 2008. године, када је усвојен Мекански документ који заговара исламске иницијативе усмерене према међурелигијском дијалогу. Десет дана касније Лига је усвојила програм који је представила на конференцији у Мадриду, на којој су учествовали актери из свих већих светских религија. Али радикалнији заокрет према међурелигијским иницијативама није се десио све до 2016/2017, када је на место генералног секретара Лиге дошао др Ал-Иса и саудијски принц Мухамед бин Салман. Овај чланак се бави еволуцијом међурелигијских иницијатива лиге. Анализира факторе који су утицали на ове промене, циљеве и усмерења у будућности. Рад се посебно бави функцијама Лиге и њеном значају у односима Саудијске Арабије са светом.

**Кључне речи:** Светска муслиманска лига, Саудијска Арабија, међурелигијски дијалог, исламска реформа