

# **Religious Education for the Praxis of Peace, Reconciliation and Democracy**

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**Abstract.** People are in the streets all over the world seeking change. This paper presents the case of Syrian revolution in the context of the general Middle Eastern and Global shift towards public demand of freedom and democracy. Ancient Mesopotamian model of democratic kingship and Galtung's peace proposal for Syria are presented. A praxis of peace, reconciliation and democracy that is informed by Paulo Freire's key concepts are discussed as they apply to the Syrian context.

Mid January 2011, right after my return from Syria, the Arab world became the center of the news. First in Tunisia when a poor fruit seller, Bu Azzizi, set himself on fire, then in Egypt in the famous Tahrir square where thousands came out to ask their long time president Mubarak to leave. This popular movement was branded as the Arab Awakening or the Arab Spring. The events were fascinating. Just few days ago, back in Aleppo, I was conversing with an Egyptian woman about Islam, Christianity and life. She said, "Life is different now; majority of the people are in poverty and new generations are hopelessness. It is un-dignifying and inhuman life for so many." Things should change we agreed. We could not have imagined how prophetic our conclusion was.

As I attempt to write this paper, events in the North Africa and Middle East change dramatically and take unexpected turns. People in the streets are changing the narrative of the revolution much faster than the world making sense of it. The issues are political, social and economic and the players are divided to various groups with significant religious affiliations. This paper is short from covering all those aspects. The important question for the religious educators, churches and educational institutions is; how to help in promoting peace, reconciliation and democracy in the time all these concepts are perused and questioned at the same time.

Through presenting the Syrian case, I will be exploring a different understanding of democracy that is authentic to the culture and conscious of the Middle Eastern people. Discuss reversed peace plan as suggested by Galtung-Institut for Syria. Apply Freire's concepts of oppressor/oppressed, limit-situation and dialogue to the Syrian situation. Finally, present home grown reconciliation initiatives as examples of religious oriented constructive steps of peaceful democracy.

## I- ARAB SPRING: Syria

I believe in people. For the first time I was witnessing people taking charge of their lives. People were out in the streets and were demanding freedom, to be treated as humans, to have a say in their own lives. They demanded democracy. Media was soon to be on the ground reporting the events. Slowly a general narrative started to emerge; one bad guy and a public demand of him to leave. The assumption was that as soon as this villain leaves, democracy will

reign. The western media started speculating; was it the revolution of the FaceBook and Twitter? Was it because of the Wikileaks? Or maybe it was because of the only democracy in the Middle East, the Israeli example.

Libya was next. With the help of the West Qaddafi was gone. Other revolutions were budding in Algeria, Yemen, Bahrian, Lebanon and Palestine. Speculations of Syria to be the next in line started to emerge. A dark knot formed in my throat. I knew better what this means; it was already decided.

The first incidents of Syrian revolution took place in March 19, 2011 at the bordering city of Darra. The claim is that Syrian security forces killed at least five protesters.<sup>1</sup> Early demonstrations were calling for reform, more freedom and democracy. Those claims soon changed to regime change. Nineteen months after, the opposition got more radical and armed with heavy weapons. Fictional governments and several opposition fronts and armies are formed and all failed to unite in one front. Countless UN and UN security meetings were called to justify military intervention, three vetoes from Russia and China, several peace plans and envois, to all Syrian government agreed to cooperate. More so called 'Friends of Syria' meetings gathered and came up with excuses to pay salaries, arm and equip the opposition with the best of western war gadgets; the regime did not change. Thousands died in the process and total chaos grips the country.

Keeping close eye on the events, I followed the main stream media and discussed them with my friends and family back home. News reports on major media hardly ever matched with those I heard from the insiders. The general narrative was that the Al-Assad's army was brutally killing and massacring the peaceful civilians and that he must go. For the majority of the population who refused to take part in this struggle, freedom and democracy became dirty words.<sup>2</sup> With the infiltration of mercenaries, extremist Islamists and mobs chaos and militia war rules. Syrian people's early cries of freedom and democracy are muted. Violence sweeps the streets, suicide bombs in all major cities and sectarian brigades with foreigner names and faces are spreading terror. Many discussions about the events ends with exclamations of, "Is this the democracy they wanted?"

## II- DEMOCRACY: An Ancient Practice

It is widely accepted that democracy was practiced as early as 507 BCE in Athens, where it was born. Yev Schemeil, a French politician specializing in global and comparative politics, has a different view. Schemeil, in his article "Democracy Before Democracy?" argues that our

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<sup>1</sup> According to more recent studies of the incident, there is no affirmative proof that those who fired were Syrian security officers. Tim Anderson, "How The Violence Began in Darraa," <http://hands-off-syria.jimdo.com/background-analysis/> (accessed September 8, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Syria has twenty two million populations. Vast majority of them refused to be part of the struggle for several reasons; the popularity of the president, the examples of war torn Lebanon and Iraq, Turkey's involvement, and rejection to Saudi-Qatari Islamist influence.

modern understanding of democracy is in fact closer to the ancient kingship in Mesopotamia rather than the classical Greek model which was partial and exclusive only to free males.

Through anthropological and sociological study Schemeil presents the intricate social and political structures that ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures created for governance. Although elections and voting are the cornerstones of modern practices of democracy, they were absent from the ancient Orient, where it was believed that voting does shorten the debate but not guarantee consent. Consent and unity were the values to be cherished. Decisions were taken after long deliberations in assemblies. By relying on a pyramid of councils they ensured having “channels of communication open between heaven and earth, private and public spheres, masses and elites, slaves and freemen, citizens and non-citizens.” They believed it was important not to confuse religious faith with governance, there were no councils with religious affiliations, or religiously inspired debates. Members of councils came from two major groups; family or tribal heads and the skilled individuals from the community. If the assembly failed to reach a consent, it will be open to junior aristocrats, women and teenagers; a practice which is unimaginable in the Greek model. They were champions of social rights; everyone had equal opportunity to climb the social ladder and social equality was the aim of every policy.<sup>3</sup>

Schemeil’s ancient Eastern culture’s practice of democracy is not that unfamiliar to the context of Middle East today. Easterners love arguing and value unity. Unity is cherished even on the expense of individual/personal rights. A pyramid of traditional councils composed of tribal heads and families is still part of the social texture in most of the Middle Eastern cultures. These unofficial councils co-habit with the modern organizational structure of the state. Actually, in a chaotic situation of a civil war, traditional councils prove to be more helpful and efficient, because they keep the social fabric of the community together as they did thousands years ago. They are more authentic, natural to the social texture and proven to be effective. The Arab world is not unfamiliar with democracy and is well-versed in it. It is a different version of democracy that fits and speaks to its social fabric.

### III- SOLUTION ORIENTED CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

John Galtung is a Norwegian sociologist and the founder of Galtung Institut for Peace Theory and Peace Practice. In the article “Solution Oriented Conflict Transformation: Syria” he presents the popular formula of the Arab Spring;

- a- Get rid of the dictator
- b- Cease fire
- c- Negotiation between the parties
- d- A compromised practical solution

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<sup>3</sup> Yves Schemeil, “Democracy Before Democracy?,” *International Political Science Review / Revue Internatinal De Sciebce Politique*, Vol. 21. No. 2 (Apr., 2000): 99-120.

Almost a year and half after the early Arab Spring it is clear that this formula is not effective.<sup>4</sup> Galtung suggests flipping this formula; keeping the dictator who might hold the key to the solution, while negotiating with opposition parties to reach a cease fire. If all three steps are implemented properly, the villain dictator would lose his legitimacy and getting rid of him would be easy.

Galtung argues that there is not one but multiple solutions. With the help of trained mediators and dialogue, groups could reach solutions. In the Syrian case, he counts seventeen outside and five inside parties.<sup>5</sup> Each of these twenty-two groups has its own solution and a vision of the new Syria.<sup>6</sup>

Galtung's upside down peace project that is built on dialogue has the potential to solve the Syrian problem. Galtung suggests that these dialogues should be monitored by the United Nations and trained moderators. As he makes it clear there are seventeen outside entities with conflicting agendas driving the action in the Syrian conflict. Not one of these sides, or Galtung himself realizes that the real power for change, democracy and peace is in the hand of the Syrian people themselves.<sup>7</sup>

#### IV-FREIRE: Praxis of Hope, Reconciliation and Democracy

Paulo Freire's oppressive versus oppressed dichotomy sounds rather simplistic and naïve considering the global context of the Syrian situation. Nevertheless Freire's key concepts are useful model.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In fact after today (September 11, 2012), the killing of the U.S.'s ambassador to Libya by the Islamist extremists, the same groups that the Mr. Ambassador helped to topple the Qaddafi regime, the main-stream media is wondering if the Arab Spring is undergoing a blow back.

<sup>5</sup> Outside parties are: Israel, United States of America, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, European Union, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi-Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Gulf States, The Arab League, Turkey and United nations. Inside parties are: The Alawis, the Shias, the Sunnis, the Christians and the Kurds.

<sup>6</sup> Johan Galtung, "Solution Oriented Conflict Transformation: Syria," Galtung-Institut For Peace Theory and Peace Practice (March 19, 2012) <http://www.galtung-institut.de/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Solving-the-crisis-in-SYRIA-Statement-by-Johan-Galtung.pdf> (accessed September 13, 2012).  
And "Part 2: Father of Peace Studies, Johan Galtung, on Occupy Wall Street, Failed U.N. Response in Syria." (April 17, 2012) [http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2012/4/17/part\\_2\\_father\\_of\\_peace\\_studies\\_johan\\_galtung\\_on\\_occupy\\_wall\\_street\\_failed\\_un\\_response\\_in\\_syria](http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2012/4/17/part_2_father_of_peace_studies_johan_galtung_on_occupy_wall_street_failed_un_response_in_syria) (accessed September 14, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> U.N. peace keepers started an initiative of dialogue which was interrupted by suspending their mission.

<sup>8</sup> Besides the twenty-two sides that Galtung presented, there are seven opposition groups fighting in Syria. The opposition groups as presented by Dr. Elias Akleh are: Syrian National Council, National Movement for Change, National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, Islamist Movement for the Fatherland, Bloc for Liberation and Development, Turkmen National Bloc, and Kurdish Movement for a New Life. Elias Akleh, Intifada Palestine, (September 12, 2012) <http://www.intifada-palestine.com/2012/09/the-terrorist-war-against-syria/> (accessed September 15, 2012).

The lines between the oppressor and the oppressed are blunt. President Al-Assad's party ruled with iron fist and minimal freedom for political opposition for more than forty years. Since coming to rule, he introduced political and economic reforms which made him popular with the majority of the Syrians. However, the early peaceful opposition was met with brutality, which angered the population and drove them to take arms against the regime. When other Western and Arab parities got involved, the violence escalated.

Freire describes prolonged oppression as the dehumanization of the oppressed. Dehumanization works both ways; it steals the humanity of the oppressed and the oppressors simultaneously. Because oppression is a distortion of humanity, the oppressed struggles to regain their humanity from the oppressors. Freire warns the oppressed to be conscious in their struggle for liberation. It should not lead them to embrace the image of the oppressor. Liberation should aim at restoring the humanity of both the oppressed and the oppressors. He argues that sometimes the oppressed take on the image of the oppressor because this how they are cultured, thus blaming the oppressor for the renewed aggression and excusing the oppressed. Doing this, in my opinion, reduces them to reactors and not active agents.<sup>9</sup> Syrian people's experience after eighteen months of revolution is that the oppressed who took arms against the oppressor turned out to be more violent and oppressive than the regime.<sup>10</sup> It is true that the genuine and home grown peaceful opposition still exists but bullets and bombs make a louder noise than peace.<sup>11</sup>

The vast majority of the Syrian people are trapped in an unimaginable situation. Not only are their friends and relatives killing each other, the economy is paralyzed, their houses are shelled and they are punished with sanctions from the democracy-advocating world. This limit-situation is so intense that people are not able to see what is beyond it. The overwhelming complexity of the situation does not help people to separate themselves from the problem. Freire continues, the problem is not in the limit-situation itself but in the way it is perceived by the people. When there are about thirty sides fighting under the same pretexts of democracy and freedom, perceiving yourself as an active agent and seeing beyond the limit-situation is not easy. People are driven into fatalism and hopelessness.

Freire believes that people are conscious beings and are able to separate historical moment from historical given. Limit-situation is a moment in history no matter how impossible it might feel. And because people are conscious beings they are able to bring in 'limit-acts' that can transform the limit-situation. "Only human beings are praxis-the praxis which, as the

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<sup>9</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Trans. Myra Romos. 30<sup>th</sup> ed. (U.S.A.: Continuum, 2009), 44-46.

<sup>10</sup> Mind that there are reports confirming that Syrian opposition is infiltrated by foreign sectarian mercenaries who are after creating an Islamic Khalifet in Syria. "Jihadist Join Aleppo Fight, Eye Islamic State Surgeon Says," Reuters, (September 8, 2012) <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/08/syria-crisis-jihad-idUSL6E8K80WG20120908> (accessed September 15, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Here is an interview with a Syrian opposition leader Fateh Jamous, who initially refused to be part of negotiations with the regime but now he is back to Russia to ask Russia's mediation to reestablish the peace negotiations. He claims that the armed opposition proved to be worse than the regime. "Syria How To End The Civil War," Russia Today, (September 6, 2012) <http://rt.com/programs/spotlight/syria-civil-war-opposition/> (accessed September 15, 2012).

reflection and action which truly transforms reality, is the source of knowledge and creation.”<sup>12</sup> It takes hope and courage to see beyond the limit-situation and initiate action-situation. Adapting Freire’s praxis terminology, a praxis of peace, reconciliation and democracy is the way to go for the Syrian people.

Dialogue is the building block for praxis of peace, reconciliation, and democracy. “If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity.”<sup>13</sup> Dialogue is in the heart of the Middle Eastern culture and practice of governance as Schemeil points out. It is the first and the most basic step to find a solution for the Syrian crisis. Because people lost their trust on the outside parties, contrary to Galtung’s suggestion of using U.N. moderators, this dialogue best comes from within.

### Challenges For Religious Education

In an interview with the Russia Today channel, Sister Agnes Mariam, who is the Mother Superior of the monastery of James the Mutilated, briefly describes a ‘third way’, which she calls *Al-Musalaha*, or reconciliation initiative. This initiative brought together more than thousand people who want to find a solution in a peaceful way. They were neutral parties, not siding with the regime or the opposition. “It comes from the silent majority of the Syrian people, from the leaders of families, tribes and clans. And also from religious leaders. They met together, and they were very active discussing challenges that nobody can solve but them.” She also tells how this group intervened to save the civilians who were trapped in a hot neighborhood in Homs. Having relatives in both groups, the Al-Musalaha members were able to hold secret negotiations and to rescued the civilians.<sup>14</sup>

This and similar testimonies<sup>15</sup> started to emerge lately. They come from the traditional fabric of the society. Churches being part of the fabric they join the efforts of reconciliation and peace. This is important to notice because from the beginning of the unrest religious communities were targeted to justify religious/sectarian civil war. It is also a hopeful testimony that Syrian people are taking charge of their lives and initiating praxis of peace, reconciliation and democracy from within.

It is still very early to analyze the impact of these events on the religious education, but it is clear that faith communities, instead of staying neutral, have to revision their approaches to

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<sup>12</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Trans. Myra Romos. 30<sup>th</sup> ed. (U.S.A.:Continuum, 2009), 99-101.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>14</sup> ““External Syrian Opposition Wants Military Intervention Due To Lack Of Popular Support,”” Russia Today, (September 4, 2012) <http://rt.com/news/syria-internal-opposition-intervention-174/> (accessed September 15, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately these attempts do not make it to the main stream media. This article talks about dialogue and rescue initiative by National Reconciliation Committee founded by Ali Haidar and Arab Tribes and Clans Assembly founded by Sheikh Saleh al-Naimi. Unfortunately I couldn’t find any other information about both organizations. “National Reconciliation Committee Liberates 19 Abductees in Homs,” Breaking NEWS, (September 15, 2012) <http://www.breakingnews.sy/en/article/6991.html> (accessed September 15, 2012).

religious education. It is not only important to teach religion but it is more important to teach critical thinking and building bridges between communities through dialogue and acceptance for each other. A critical religious education that focuses on what unites in faith and not what divides in religion is essential for dialogue in this new global context. “You are a believer!” phrase is repeated very often in the streets of Aleppo. It does not matter which community of faith a person belongs to, as long as he/she is a believer he and she have their faith in God to unite them. This should be a model for interfaith dialogue and praxis of peace, reconciliation and democracy.

### Conclusion

The world, the Arab world in particular, is experiencing unprecedented turn in the history. The old world order is shifting. People and nations are in the streets demanding change. As the rest of the world, churches and faith communities are trying to make sense out of the events. Only time would help in unpacking the future consequences of these events. As Freire says, “Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one.”<sup>16</sup> Syrian people are going through giving birth to their humanity. There are outsiders and insiders who are interfering with this process, but as it is in childbirth, the child will be born in its due time. The whole world is giving birth to new world order. This could bring destruction and world wars or could bring in new life which is built on peace, reconciliation and democracy, for each nation on its own time and dignified way.

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<sup>16</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Trans. Myra Romos. 30<sup>th</sup> ed. (U.S.A.:Continuum, 2009), 49.

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