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Keynote Speaker of the 2018 EASR Conference, Bern

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Reinhard Schulze is professor emeritus at the University of Bern and the current director of the Forum Islam and Middle East (FINO). He has published extensively on Muslim social and cultural history from early modernity to contemporary times, with a special emphasis on political dimensions of modern Islam. His research on Islam and enlightenment and on the genealogy of political Islam has led to important debates within Islamic studies. In his keynote speech, Professor Schulze addressed the conference topic of multiple religious identities in relation to the ambiguity of the religious in pre- and postnational social worlds.

1 *Professor Schulze, since this event has brought together researchers from all over Europe with a great variety of opinions, perspectives, methods, and theories regarding multiple religious identities, we would like to begin this interview by asking how you understand the concept of multiple religious identities and where you see the most important aspects of this concept, especially in your own research.*

2 As I tried to show in my presentation, the advantage of *multiple religious identities* lies in outlining differences to modern religious orders, which assume an unambiguous identity structure that makes a personality as a whole discernible and attributable from

the outside. Nowadays you can see a clear need to describe social situations where you can observe courses of actions that can no longer be classified unambiguously, where the taxonomies developed in modernity no longer work. Here, the concept of *multiple religious identities* certainly offers advantages. Whether these advantages are so significant that we can say we are dealing with a completely different form of realizing the religious than in modernity remains to be seen. But it is certainly an important plane of observation, and we are developing it today by looking at this category of the pluralization of identities.

3 Multiple religious identities *is primarily an academic concept that is supposed to establish and facilitate new approaches to familiar fields of research. How can the idea of multiple religious identities be of use when analyzing predominately Muslim communities?*

4 That is going to be difficult. I am convinced that this is a very modern concept and that we cannot ascribe this concept to previous historical epochs. We cannot assume that what we conceptualize today as multiple religious identities corresponds to a situation in late antiquity or premodernity. Rather, it is a form of identity politics that has obviously been formulated in the present moment, where different forms of situationally drawn identities are of importance. The individual as such is no longer confined to a politically discernable, fixed identity. Personality can be unfolded more freely than from one identity, and this has to be acknowledged. For Muslim communities, this is also a postmodern challenge and not an Islamic or pre-Islamic situation. However, we already have research that shows that in premodern Islamic traditions there was a »culture of ambiguity«, as Thomas Bauer calls it. It was so strong that the individual was never actually confined to one specific statement of validity. The famous Arabic saying »Allāhu aʿlam« (God knows best) ultimately results in an absolute relativization of identity claims. And this flexibility in validity claims and the attitude of statements such as »yes, my meaning is and was important now, but tomorrow it could look different« ultimately mean that such an absolute confinement of individuality did not exist. I would argue that this is not the same as what we have today with multiple religious identities. We know from research that the normative substance of identity and the concept of identity have only existed since around the late seventeenth century. Before the seventeenth century, it was never used to interpret a social or religious situation. This means that if we project the concept back into premodernity, we make a categorical mistake and that is the crucial point.

5 *So, in the end it also greatly depends on how one defines unambiguity or diversity within a religious denomination; where we set the limit of identity changes its meaning?*

6 Yes, and at the moment this question is being discussed intensively from Morocco to Pakistan, concerning developments in law and ethics. Solely venerating the one God is definite. Unambiguity thus defines the theological core of the Muslim cultural order. But to transfer this to the question of social cohabitation, of how identity emerges, or of how the person is shaped, or of how the subject is shaped—this is not ultimately possible. Instead, we have to recognize diversity, plurality, and manifold ways of living and forms of life, which even a single individual can practice. This is indeed a central debate nowadays.

7 *You have already mentioned this, but we would like to address it directly: how does the concept of multiple religious identities manifest itself in the academic discussion about the relation between theology and politics or society?*

8 The concept of multiple religious identities has especially become an important topic in discussions about Islamic law. These discussions are no longer about deciding unambiguous norms, for example, with regard to the classical *ayāt al-aḥkām*, the 500–550 verses of the Quran that describe the normativity of the cultic and social order. In the thirteenth or fourteenth century, it was assumed that certain verses contain an unambiguous normativity, and many other orders and regulations resulting from these *ayāt al-aḥkām* were discussed. But still there was no consensus about the normative factuality of these verses. Up to the seventeenth or eighteenth century, these norms were always considered ambiguous: »Could it be like this? Could it not also be like this?« We do not even know for certain if as a matter of fact the Quran was revealed with normative intentions. But then in modern times, these verses of the Quran have been interpreted unambiguously as part of a canonized statutory law. »These are the normative verses, and they say this is like this, and this is what applies!«

Now we come to the present, and today's discussions of law are less focused on the question of how this order, this legal order, is to be deduced from the Quran and more on the *maqāsid aš-šarīʿa*, the intentions that are linked to the legal order. It means that interpretations are focused on the *maqāsid aš-šarīʿa*, the intentions, which are recognized to be plural. Muhammad Khalid Masud in Pakistan and other jurists have said: »The only thing that is continuously apparent in the Quran is the interpretation of intention, and some sort of normativity can be deduced from that intention. But the form of what is deduced, the result, is ultimately determined exegetically.« This automatically pluralizes the norms. And this is now at the center of Muslim jurisprudence. It is emphasized in all the major research centers in this field, in Cairo, Pakistan, or Singapore.

In a way, when one reads a new research application regarding Islamic laws today, one yawns a little bit because, time and again, they propose discussing the *maqāsid aš-šarīʿa* of Islamic law. But consent has been reached in this debate: in its intentions, Islamic law is plural, and this consensus is very strong. The discussion asks how individuals shape their personalities in plural situations. And then there is the next debate that arises out of this: the unimpeded development of personality, the idea of Locke and Descartes, self-determination in the context of a plurality of legal orders. How does the individual decide then? So, ethical, moral, and personal questions are added to the question of the norm. There one can see the strong impact of this whole debate. But this is rarely conceptualized by Muslim theologians on the basis of plural identities. If I were to translate this into Arabic, in order to discuss this with an Arab Muslim jurist, then I would use *fardīya*, *aḥādīya*, or *shakhṣīya* for individuality, *ḥurrīya* for freedom, and maybe *taʿaddud* or *kathra* for plurality—but it hardly works. Plural identities are more of a matter of fact than an actually addressed strategy. I think this concept of multiple religious identities is really only identified at all from a position of secondary observation. Actors themselves would probably never say »Hey, I just discovered that I am plural in my identity.« I do not know anyone who would say that about himself.

9 *So could we ultimately say that the European individualization of religion and secularization are behind the idea of multiple religious identities, so this concept cannot be directly transferred to a predominately Muslim society? Instead we have to choose a different approach, for example, one that focuses on plurality within legal discussions rather than on the individual?*

10 This is a difficult point. First of all, I do not agree with what Grace Davie said [see the interview with Grace Davie in this special issue]. This distinction between a European

and a non-European world, especially in the context of secularization, is, to me, not traceable historically. But of course, there is a debate about this, and it unfolds along different lines. There are two historical models, either a process of divergence or a process of convergence. Divergence creates an indefinite number of pluralities, and Davie is largely referring to a model of divergence. But for about thirty or forty years, historical research has shown that we had overlooked forms of convergence in the way certain religious traditions are practiced. From the actors themselves, we can ascertain that they have adopted, more and more, the same understanding. Forms of practice have become more similar. Somebody that practiced Islamic traditions in the thirteenth or fourteenth century certainly had different practices than a thirteenth-century Christian like Thomas Aquinas. Today we have an extreme »family resemblance«, as Wittgenstein would call it, in the practices of religious traditions. This is so strong that one can have the impression that the differences between a Muslim theological practice and a Christian theological strategy are basically only in their material, in their religious language, and not so much in their content. This means that there is a large degree of convergence in modernity.

The degree of resemblance reached its peak in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, the traditions started to move apart again, so the resemblances diminished. Today, we are in a situation where certain Jewish scholars argue that Judaism greatly differs from the Christian tradition. This means that we live in a time when divergence and plurality are increasing. This plurality that we observe today is based on a consensus that religion has something to do with identity. Basically, this idea of personal identity emerged in the nineteenth century. With regard to people, there are classical concepts that define the religious field: piety, faith, and certainty. Faith is not attested in the concrete world but in a contrast between divinity and the world in general. This, then, is the core that formed in the nineteenth century in all religious traditions. Today, this core offers resources for differentiation. The multitude of identities and the concept of multiple religious identities derive from this individuality. I would therefore say that in the present we have, on the one hand, a convergence that allows us to observe similarities and, on the other, an increasing form of divergence, and we don't yet know where exactly it will lead us.

11 *In order to verbalize a person's or a society's concepts related to multiple religious identities, we have historically developed notions from different religious traditions, cultural areas, and even languages. How do you deal with this translation work in your research about Islam and Muslims in our local society?*

12 I have immense problems with this. Real problems. Take the term *self-determination*, which has been used to discuss an intellectual situation since the seventeenth century. Take the term *identity*, a term that was philosophically conceptualized by Descartes, and since then has structured the modern world. If I were to ask Arabic authors if they had ever translated Locke or his concept of self-determination into Arabic, I would realize that Locke's term has in fact been translated into Arabic using a political concept referring to self-determination: *taqrīr al-maṣīr*. But Locke would not have understood this Arabic concept, which came into use as part of political language after World War I. It is something very different. This means that it is not always possible to find an unambiguous, equivalent translation.

Autonomy is a hard one, *subject* in the Cartesian sense of a conscious mind is very hard to translate into Arabic. The Iranians use the Persianized term *subjeh*. In a translation of Descartes's *Meditationes* from 1940, we find the term *dhātī* (»self«). But do these terms

unambiguously mean the same as Decartes's, Leibniz's or Locke's concept of *subject*? If I were to ask an Arabic-speaking Muslim in English, »Tell me, do you understand yourself as a subject?« he or she would reply, »But of course!« But if I were to ask this in Arabic, I would have no idea how to articulate it. And what would make it even more difficult is that my dialogue partner would use a vocabulary that I, as a linguistic outsider, would not find fitting. In late antiquity, when this modern problem of linguistic difference was not as strong, a spontaneous form of transmission of terminologies was possible. But in the case of late antiquity, this was problematic, too. In the Quran, there are terms of Aramaic, Old Arabic, Greek, or Latin origin. There is a bit of everything. And now you have to imagine Meccans, who were suddenly confronted with a Greek term in the Quran. They did not admit »we do not understand this« but accepted it as a Quranic term with a Quranic meaning. In late antiquity, there was a plurality in the use of languages and terms that seems to have been communicable. And this should be the goal today. Such a communicative situation is what we should have. One that allows a multitude of traditions and languages to address a shared problem. But instead we are socialized in one language, in one tradition, such that we can hardly imagine this communicative situation. We are no longer used to it.

13 *Do you have a suggestion for how to change this? Many of us are familiar with English terms that are used in German, but we often realize that the meaning of words can shift across languages. How can we deal with this issue, especially with religious terms, which often have normative undertones?*

14 We just have to assume that a multitude of misunderstandings will exist for a long time until a term is established. We cannot do this overnight. When Leibniz first translated Locke's term *self-determination* as *Selbstbestimmung* around 1704, I am sure that nobody knew what he meant by it. But then, several authors started using and repeating the term, and so it became established. The more a term is repeated, the more important it becomes, and eventually a consensus about its use emerges. So we have to be patient. Over generations, we will reach a common understanding. Meanwhile, we need to dismantle many misunderstandings, a lot of which have been created in recent years. In this respect, Davie is correct. The general public knows nothing about Islam. One needs to inform the public and clarify what we are talking about. This is going to be a very long process because it used to be very easy and harmless not to have any idea about Islam. But today, such ignorance influences public judgments. For instance, the Swiss constitution bans the construction of minarets. It is sad, but that is how it is. Today, we have to enable processes of learning that consider a variety of experiences. This work is so important because it is through communication that you actually learn about a multireligious field. So if we want to integrate society, we need to enable communication. This is how societies succeed.

15 *In your theory of Islamic enlightenment, you argue that the French campaign in Egypt and Syria (1798/1801) hindered a development in the so-called Islamic world similar to the European Enlightenment. As a result, today enlightenment is regarded as a European accomplishment in which the Islamic world can only share in the sense of a »loan«. Could you elaborate on the contemporary impact of such constructions?*

16 Just as Edward Said, I think we live in a time that needs a new kind of humanism. Humanism means developing a common sense of our humanity, of our similarities, instead of our differences. And this humanistic approach means, in its core, coming to

know each other by searching for ourselves in the other instead of focusing on diversity and plurality. This idea should not be confused with tolerance. Goethe said that tolerating others is insulting, and he was completely right. So instead, my aim is to have as much communicative contact as possible. To conduct conversations that are not hegemonic. How does this work? Certainly not by othering people and framing them in their diversity, but rather by conceiving them as parts of my world. This also implies acknowledging the other in his or her present status. The idea that Islam has not undergone an enlightenment constitutes a deep insult because it actually says that Muslims have not been enlightened and, thus, that the Enlightenment values of personhood, responsibility, and dignity do not apply to them. But just look at the Arab spring in 2011: Muslims were shouting »*karāma, karāma, karāma*«: dignity, dignity, dignity—dignity was the core category of the protests. So how did they come up with that concept? The answer is that Muslims have obviously undergone an enlightenment; otherwise we would not be able to communicate and talk about these concepts.

But then we have to ask how Muslims have come to think in enlightened ways. In the Islamic world, we actually have two lines of enlightenment. One is the inner-Islamic debate; the other draws on resources from the European Enlightenment inspired by reading Montesquieu, Hume, Smith, Fichte, Hegel, and others. It is a hegemonic point of view to deny Muslims the possibility or capability of reading these sources in their own way, and it is the task of scholarship to criticize such a position. If Mohamad Assad says that he understands the Quran in a Kantian way, shouldn't he be considered enlightened? But it is possible to assign another genealogy to the Islamic enlightenment, and in the end we could ask if it is even necessary to talk about an Islamic enlightenment. If we look at Islamic history in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, we can perceive a strong historical process that obviously echoes the Enlightenment, just as the history of Catholicism in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries echoes the Enlightenment. However, I would never assert that there has been a *Catholic* enlightenment, just as I would never assert that there has been an *Islamic* enlightenment. I would rather say that there has been an enlightenment within the Islamic tradition, which led to radical changes in its practices, as you can see in some early eighteenth-century authors in the Ottoman Empire, Syria, or Egypt. These authors produced an interpretation of Islam that today seems quite odd and, in some ways, resembles late treaties by Hobbes or early work by Newton.

17 *In your keynote speech, you talked about Samuel Pallache (c. 1550–1616), a Jew who fled from Spain to Morocco during the Reconquista and then moved around Europe, using his knowledge of different denominations—Islam, Judaism, Catholicism, and Protestantism—to be able to act and communicate in different contexts as a merchant, spy, diplomat, and pirate. He basically used his knowledge of various religious identities as a resource, as a means to an end. How do we move from this contextual multiplicity to multiple religious identities?*

18 The biography of Pallache does not allow us to say much about his inner intentions since we cannot know his psyche. But we can assume that at the time the reference to multiple religions was primarily instrumental. The aim was to enable communication, especially in situations such as diplomacy and piracy where communication was crucial. It resembles to a large extent the situation in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Switzerland, where multilingualism was not taught in schools but was situational: a farmer in the mountains usually knew a single language, but somebody who lived in Geneva might have spoken four or five languages just because the

cosmopolitan context of the city required him to do so. This was not only true for language: in the symbolic space of communication, »mastering« a plurality of religious traditions was maybe even more important. Pallache certainly mastered Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and much more. Spinoza is another wonderful example: he operated like a virtuoso of different traditions. Indeed, I would compare these figures to virtuosos who know how to play music on various instruments—in this comparison, the music, and not the instrument, is the identity. This is the reason why I would not apply the term multiple identities to Pallache, but rather speak of a plural individuality. Just like a musician, Pallache was able to play plenty of instruments, but he was always playing his music. And his music was, »Let's earn some money.«
To understand today's situation, we would need to reverse the analogy. We might say of someone, »I consider you a trumpet player, and therefore you cannot play the violin.« One is not even allowed to play the violin in order to preserve our image of a trumpet player. But once we start to think that someone is a musician and therefore able to play various instruments, we can conceive of this plurality within a person as individuality.

19 *But do we not have to differentiate between the identity that a person uses to describe him- or herself and an identity that it is ascribed to the person by others? With Pallache, for example, we do not know if he would have stated that his identity is Jewish or if this was just how he was perceived in certain situations without him necessarily feeling Jewish or identifying as such. Could prioritizing religion as the source of identity lead us to draw a one-dimensional picture of a person?*

20 Definitely. This has to do with our contemporary understanding of identity. In the past, identity was produced by narratives, and a person's biography or history defined his or her individuality. Today, however, we have a different approach to identity, an approach that dispenses with history and shapes identity through definitions. As Nietzsche put it, »You can only define what has no history.« This leads to a paradox. On the one hand, a human being cannot exist without a history—it is always in a state of becoming. On the other hand, today we tend to devalue history when it comes to identity. We acknowledge the history of a person, but we do not consider it as fundamental to the person's identity. Somebody like Pallache would not understand this; he would say that you are nothing but your history.
There is a fitting story in *One Thousand and One Nights.* In it, someone meets a person without a name, and he asks this person, »Who are you?« The nameless person answers, »I am fossilized,« meaning he is a stone and, as a stone, he is nothing. Later, he is brought to life by some enchantment, and to come to life means to receive a history. Pallache is a typical example of someone who unfolds his identity historically, but today we have largely lost the ability to use this specific way of forming an identity. The reason is simply that we no longer think we need to know a person's history to know his or her identity. If we introduce ourselves to someone, we talk about what we do, our jobs or hobbies, but all these categories are modern inventions. Today your position or your gender is very important whereas in *One Thousand and One Nights* it does not matter if you are a man or a woman; it is just a secondary category. Here we can see how our social behavior is actually very modern.

21 *Professor Schulze, thank you very much for this interview and for your time. We very much enjoyed talking to you and wish you all the best with your research and your political engagement.*

22 The pleasure was mine.

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