CYBER-RELIGION: THE SPREAD OF EXTREMISM AND OF PEACE THROUGH THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA

HOSTED BY INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

PANEL
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MODERATION
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The Internet and social media play a central role in spreading religious and non-religious extremism globally. Both tools can also be used to cool down tensions and to develop peace among religious, ethnic and national groups. Individual people can make a difference by launching large social media campaigns.

The example of a former Christian pastor who had announced his plan to burn a copy of the Quran in May 2011, and the ensuing global media attention, was evaluated and contrasted with a discussion of how Christians and Muslims worldwide did better at the same time to calm down tensions between religious, ethnic and national groups, preventing any killing.

Hundreds of examples from the Internet and social media were screened by the experts, e.g. a campaign by Nigerians posting on a mass scale banners like “I like Christians” and “I like Muslims”. Most impressive was a campaign by Israelis, “I love Iranians”. Hundreds of thousands of Iranians posted back “I like Israelis”.

Christine Schirrmacher focused on the spreading of world views, religious and political opinions through the Internet. She explained the impact of this tool on the Muslim community since the Internet for the first time in history creates a worldwide "ummah" (Muslim community) and connects its members all the way from the island of Java/Indonesia to the mosques in Canada and the Sufi groups in Mali. She showed how Muslim extremists manipulate their followers by the Internet and how they use new media technology on a global scale to radicalize their audience. Major theologians like Qaradawi often work out of nowhere and influence immigrants all over the globe. Schirrmacher contrasted the influence of Qaradawi with the influence of Quran scholar Abduallah Saeed, who spoke at the 2011 workshop, propagating religious freedom in the name of Islam.

Joseph Yakubu introduced the participants into the world of Nigeria and its Internet use with calls to extremism as well as large campaigns promoting living together peacefully. Boko Haram was portrayed as an extremist group which recruits young people through the web and campaigns against the government. The Internet, social media and SMS are used to further “othering and stereotyping of enemies”. IT is used to spread rumors on allegedly planned attacks or secret goals of the enemy. At the same time, the Internet and social media are the greatest hope to overcoming conflicts, as millions of Nigerians fight for peacefully living together, e.g. the website MuslimsAgainstTerror.com.

Rainer Rothfuss argued that the world has entered the age of mass communication and modern media. Today, the world has 5,600,000,000 cell phone users, 2,267,233,742 Internet users and almost 1,000,000,000 Facebook users. He showed how powerful social media and the Internet are in religious and other conflicts. At the University of Vienna more than 6,000 Islamist hate-instigating web videos have been collected and analyzed within a “Jihadism online” project. Rothfuss stressed that the ongoing challenge to secure peaceful intercultural and interreligious coexistence on local and global levels calls for strict containment of cyber-extremism but also for transformation of intercultural communication to promote peace across “borders in minds”. Among the hard measures should be more effective monitoring to detect critical organizations and initiatives early enough to prevent later real terrorist attacks.

At the end, the moderator used the “Global Charter of Conscience” (charterofconscience.org), that had been launched in the European Parliament some days prior, and that gathered major signers from all over the world through the Internet, as a good example for religious and non-religious leaders to propagate peaceful engagement in the global civil public square.

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