

## **Narratives of Islam-Christian and Gender violence in contemporary age. A plural perspective**

Friday, 6th October 2017

Organized by the project 'Religion and Civil Society' of the Institute for Culture and Society, University of Navarra

### **Majorities, Minorities and the Modern State in the Middle East. What role for diversity in contemporary Iraq?**

Dr. Paolo Maggiolini, Catholic University of Milan

Historically, diversity has represented one of the most important factors in both politics and culture. Its intellectual and cultural understanding has contributed to defining the paths, spheres and limits for associating and dividing as well as integrating or excluding people and communities dwelling within the same territory. Accordingly, diversity has not just been important *per se* or in terms of "quantity" and "numbers". What has made diversity politically relevant has been the way of interpreting and describing it within a precise territory or society as well as how different components and elements self-presented and imagined their identity, role and presence in shaping the "quality" of diversity in a specific context. This holds particularly true in regard to the contemporary history of the Middle East and how the political perception of the role of diversity has dramatically changed over the last century.

In this region, the way of approaching and dealing with diversity has produced controversial effects. It has been a positive resource, making Middle Eastern culture and societies flourish. At the same time, diversity has been a tool to rule and control from above and within different political spaces. In both cases, politics has never been able to ignore diversity. Its control and accommodation has been one of the most difficult issues and challenges for any political system in the region. This is particularly true reconsidering the history of the foundation and development of the modern state in the Middle East. Its vocation and claim to represent a given community, its identity, tradition and destiny has inevitably questioned the role of diversity, re-imagining it in terms of a "majority" - the part naturally associated with the state - and "minorities", the fragments only partially connected to the identity discourse embedded within the state and the "majority". Such a condition has not only been imposed from above, but sometimes has also been sought by the hierarchies or communal representatives of the various minorities in order to achieve special protection in defending their community boundaries and specificity. This condition has undermined the significance of the concept of citizenship, subduing it to the will of the regimes in power and imprisoning individuals within the narrow spheres of recognized and institutionalized minorities and majority.

The history of modern Iraq and its Christian presence is particularly significant to reconsidering such dynamics. Although demographically limited, the Christians of Iraq have been perceived as a "resource" for the state's power as well as a "challenge", even a menace in some periods, to its authority and existence. This occurred after the foundation of the kingdom in the 1930s and again during the Saddam Hussein era, becoming a sort of political scapegoat of intra-Muslim competition in the aftermath of the US' invasion in 2003.

First, the paper aims to reconsider the role of diversity in the contemporary Middle East through the lens of Christians' historical vicissitudes and their relationship with the Iraqi state power, focusing

on the Saddam era. Secondly, the analysis concentrates on the advent of the Islamic State (Da'ish) in 2014 and its fierce use of violence towards Iraqi minorities, especially the Yazidis and Christians. Without ignoring the differences between these two experiences and the exceptional cruelty of Da'ish, the analysis will show a subtle analogy in their ways of exploiting diversity for political purposes, assaulting, fragmenting and recomposing such "diversity" according to a specific idea of majority and minority considered functional to their respective rule and control. In this way, the paper will show how the antibodies for avoiding the exploitation of diversity do not just lie in the realm of security, or even in that of religion, but in the way of politically interpreting the role of the state and the content of citizenship in today's Middle Eastern societies as well as in those in the West.