

The Voice

INSERT

September, 2009

Christianity and Islam Beyond Conflict



Always Be Ready to Answer...with
Gentleness and Respect.

■ *by Dr. Paul Sanders*

Christian-Muslim Relations - Balance
Needed Today More than Ever Before.

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Peace ■ to those Far and Near

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Judaism, Christianity and Islam: The Three
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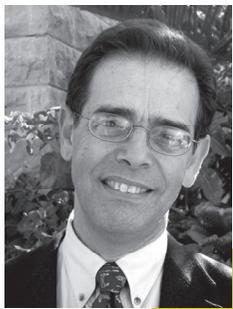
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[Arab evangelicals are put in the same “bag” with those Western preachers of imprecation who demonize ISLAM]

Islam or proclaim their unconditional support for the State of Israel against the “Arab usurpers and terrorists”. The prophets of fear are of course not a new phenomenon in the history of Christianity. These preachers are popular, because their message has the merit of being simple... but it is based on fear, not on fact. Their message does not create understanding, but only multiplies misunderstanding on both sides. Is this really the way forward?

Many Western Christians do not even know that there is an Arab Church, often a suffering Church, caught between a rock (religion) and a hard place (politics). In our region, we are in a very good position to understand that neither naïveté (denial of the challenge of Islam to Christianity) nor aggression (insults and polemics) constitute a biblical response to the theological, historical, ethical and cultural issues before us.

In this issue of the *Voice*, we want to present a third way - neither polemical nor naïve.

The words of the Apostle Peter (in 1 Peter 3:15-16 NIV), written over 20 centuries ago, can constitute a paradigm for witness to

Arabs and Muslims today. These words may seem to some like an exhortation to weakness in a culture of force, but I believe they are words to live by if we really take seriously the New Testament and the values of the Kingdom of God.

Peter was writing to Christians who lived as a minority in a hostile culture which tended to persecute them in a variety of ways and provoke many different forms of discouragement. Christians living in the Arab and Muslim world can identify easily with these exhortations:

[I | **SUBMIT TO CHRIST'S LORDSHIP (15A)**]

“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord”

Christian witness is prepared by the sanctification (setting apart) of the details of our lives to the Lordship of Christ. In other words, *effective mission is submission*. It is widely known that the meaning of “Islam” is “submission” - submission to God through a set of religious practices believed to have been revealed by God to Muhammad in the Qur'an and in other authoritative writings of Islam. However, Christian submission relates to Christ's claim as Lord of our lives

“ **ALWAYS READY TO ANSWER... WITH GENTLENESS AND RESPECT.** ”

In the complex question of the relationship between Christianity and Islam, we are not lacking today for preachers of confrontation! They shoot cannon balls at Islam, most often firing from a safe distance. However, it is often the Arab Christians (or Christians living in non-Arab Muslim countries), God's “light force” (Brother Andrew) on the front lines, who receive the consequences. Arab evangelicals are put in the same “bag” with those Western preachers of imprecation who demonize Islam or the prophet of

[Respect also means that we understand the other's viewpoint from within his or her own frame of reference. It does not mean that we must agree with their positions.]

- our decisions, our values, our behavior and our life mission. Anything or anyone that replaces Christ in our lives becomes an object of idolatry.

|2| PREPARE OURSELVES TO RESPOND EFFECTIVELY (15B)

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have ...”

To be prepared in this context involves readiness to respond (*apologia*) to objections to our faith, but, perhaps more importantly in an Islamic context, to share our personal life story of our encounter with Jesus. It seems that, in the final analysis, Muslims are not so much interested in Christianity perceived at best as a rival, at worst as an enemy. But they are often very interested in Jesus whose life, words and deeds are presented in the pages of the Gospels. Thus, in our witness to Muslims, we should ask ourselves the question: “How can we introduce them to Jesus?” not “how can we win an argument” about the veracity of the Christian or Islamic belief systems.

They will expect us to know *what* we believe and *why* we believe it and they will respect us for it. ABTS' annual Middle East Conference has as its major goal to help the church be a more effective witness to the love of Christ by creating greater understanding of Islam and of Muslims as people whom Christ loves and for whom He died.

|3| RESPOND TO OTHERS WITH SENSITIVITY (15c)

“But do this [respond] with gentleness and respect”

These words alone are sufficient to describe the kinds of witness relationships we are to have with Muslims, or anyone else with whom we have the opportunity to witness to Christ. If we are to be ready to respond to questions, we might wonder “why would they ask?” The questions asked by non-Christians come when they are encouraged by proper attitudes. Indeed, I believe that nothing of value in Christian witness to Muslims is ever accomplished without genuine, loving relationships that have “no strings attached”.

“Gentleness” (*prautés*) in greek is an attitude

that comes from our total dependency on God's sovereignty in our witness, from the courage to engage in relationship, to that of bringing Christ into the relationship, to trusting God for the results. When we consciously depend on God's grace in a witness situation, we can relax, listen and love the other.

“Respect” (*phobos*) leads us to revere God and take seriously our Muslim friends, to give them the right to value their own belief system and its accompanying traditions. It leads us away from anything resembling insult, caricature or sarcasm. We respect others and their beliefs as beings made in the image of God, greatly loved and valued by Him, whatever their behavior or convictions. Gentleness and respect are quickly detected and can lead to greater openness in dialogue, whereas aggressiveness and disrespect will quickly close the door to further relationship. Respect also means that we understand the other's viewpoint from within his or her own frame of reference. It does not mean that we must agree with their positions.

|4| LIVE WITH FULL INTEGRITY (16A)

“Keeping a clear conscience...”

How can we expect our lives to attract the attention and questions of Muslims if we are not living in integrity? If we are violating the ethical standards of our own faith, why should they listen to us? “Keeping a clear conscience” does not mean living a perfect life. Perfect people (even though they don’t exist) are inaccessible to human beings. However, when we do offend others, when we sin, when we violate our conscience - but have the humility to ask quickly forgiveness of God or people whom we have wronged - then no one can reproach us by saying, “this person committed an offense or sin and has not made it right”. Lack of a clear conscience, unconfessed sin, unresolved wrongs against others constitute one of the greatest hindrances to any form of effective witness.

Yes, it is important to understand Islam by seeing how Muslims understand their own religion. It is also fundamental to understand our own faith and hope and be ready to answer those who ask us about them. But the importance of submission to Christ, gentleness and respect toward others as well as integrity in every area of our lives cannot be overemphasized.

We hope that the following pages will be of help and encouragement to you wherever you may live to reach and touch the lives of Muslim friends. ■

[It is important to understand Islam by seeing how Muslims understand their own religion.]

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BY DR. MARTIN ACCAD



by others as a simplistic theory reducing our world to a children's playground where peoples are not able to live together because of the deep cultural differences between them. Whatever the opinions about this influential book, Huntington depicted the emergence of a post-Cold-War era where the world had now become divided not into two poles of power, as it was during the time of Communism, but into six or seven poles that are moving inevitably towards a clash. He pointed out to the importance that religions will take in that “new world” conflict, and controversially singled out Islam as the main religion that “the West”, and not least the United States, was going to have to contend with in this new era. He based his analysis on the observation that numerous wars and conflicts presently happening around the world actually involved Islam. Huntington wrote his book five years before the dramatic events of 9-11 that brought Islam to the world's centre stage and before “world politics” had begun to identify Islam as one of the core components of “global terrorism” and thus as the principal target of “war against terror”.

As a result of these developments in the realms of political theory and world events, perceptions about Islam everywhere have become largely polarised, not the least

within the Church. Correct information is therefore crucial, as Christians cannot remain bystanders amidst the humanitarian disasters that have engulfed our world as a result of large-scale wars in the last years and decades.

Islam in the Balance

What, then, is Islam? How do we understand and evaluate it between extreme voices that, on the one hand, invite us to see it either as a “religion of peace and tolerance” that has nothing to do with the acts of terrorism associated with it, or on the other hand the demonising accusation that Islam is at the heart of an “axis of evil” that threatens to destroy our modern societies?

Let me begin by saying that Islam is an extremely complex reality. As Evangelical Christians, we have a tendency to understand religion as a private affair, a choice of personal preference that guides us in our relationship with God and in our quest for salvation and eternal life with God. From this starting point and through a process of projection, we assume that Islam is the same, and therefore that if Islam leads some Muslims to violence it must therefore be a violent and intolerant religion. On the other hand, Muslims do the same in their attempts to comprehend Christianity.

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**CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS:
CHRISTIAN BALANCE NEEDED
TODAY MORE THAN EVER!**

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Ten years ago, in 1996, Samuel Huntington, professor of political science at Harvard University, published his best-selling book: *A Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. The book was hailed by some as the most insightful analysis of contemporary world events, and ridiculed

Muslims understand Islam as a whole system, involving not only their individual person, but also comprising an entire system of law, politics, social structures, ethical framework, family relations, language, culture, and much more. They thus tend to perceive anything coming from the “Christian West” as a reflection of Christianity as a whole. This includes factors

responsibility to seek a genuine, fair and balanced understanding of others in our effort to relate to them as witnesses to the Gospel. So how should we understand Islam? First, I would suggest that we give up our simplistic approach, encouraged unhelpfully by our politicians, media and sadly even by some of our evangelical religious leaders. These voices would have

[You will learn much more about Islam by talking to Muslims and asking them about their faith than by reading about them.]

as diverse and irrelevant to Christianity (from our point of view) as the moral framework promoted by the Hollywood film industry, and the perceived assault of western (so-called “Christian”) nations on Arab peoples through warfare. Equating Islam with “terrorism” is just as repulsive to Muslims as these latter associations are to us as Christians.

Though we are limited in the extent that we can change the perception of others about us, it is nevertheless our duty and

us choose between viewing Islam either as a “peaceful” or a “violent” religion. The reality is, however, that the complexity of Islam is a reflection of the complex nature of the Qur'an, which is the holy book that has guided Islamic peoples throughout history as it still does today. This complex nature of the Qur'an is itself a reflection of the complexity of the life of Islam's prophet. It is important to note that Muhammad's life and that of the early Muslim community have become a paradigm for Muslims to abide by at all times and in all ages.

The life of Muhammad is made up of two distinct periods, recognised by Muslims themselves, and separated by the dramatic event of the *Hijra*, the “migration” of Muhammad and his early followers from Mecca to Medina (two cities of Arabia) under persecution by Muhammad's own tribe, the pagan rulers of Mecca. In Medina, the host city of the “new community”, the new message was able to thrive in a largely sympathetic environment. However, it was in Medina as well that the Jewish tribes ruling over the city began to awaken to the threat that the budding new religion was beginning to pose to their continued control. During the *Meccan* period Muhammad perceived himself as a messenger from God and applied himself to the proclamation of a message of repentance and “submission” (literal meaning of “Islam”) of pagan Arabs to the One God of Abraham. During the *Medinan* period, however, Muhammad was gradually becoming the leader of a growing body of followers that needed political leadership.

In the Qur'an, the Meccan period expresses itself in a largely optimistic message, much in line with the Judeo-Christian tradition, where Muhammad shows clear signs of hope that Jews and Christians will recognise his message as authentic, that basically recasts

their own faiths in a clear Arabic language that will be relevant to his compatriots. The Medinan period, on the other hand - and more specifically the later Medinan period - expresses itself in the Qur'an through a message of disappointment with the Judeo-Christian rejection of his preaching. Furthermore, the reportedly more aggressive rejection of the early Muslim community by the Jewish ruling tribes of Medina provoked a violent reaction that led to violent acts against the Medinan Jews. The early Muslim community, with its pragmatic tribal approach to life, would not at any point separate between the new "divine" message that it had been called to follow and the new social communal realities in which it was beginning to organise itself. Thus, very quickly the Islamic community developed a system of legal precepts that all followers of Islam were to abide by as Law.

If we now understand that the life of Muhammad and the early Muslim community is to be followed and imitated as paradigm by all Muslims at all times, we can begin to understand why moderate Muslim leaders both East and West can claim that their religion is moderate and peaceful just as vehemently as Bin Laden is able to claim that his religion calls all "true Muslims" to Jihad against the "apostate crusader West". In a very real way, Moderate and Radical Muslims are both rightful heirs of Islam that draws its

inspiration and energy from a complex Qur'an. Each side is holding a rather different discourse, depending on whether it is inspired by the Meccan sections of the Qur'an or by the Medinan sections.

RESULTING PERCEPTIONS

The tendency of many non-Muslims today has been to be just as selective in their approach to Islam as Muslims have been in defining themselves to the world. Depending on whether their agenda is to advance an Islam that is moderate or radical, public voices today would have us hear either the Meccan or Medinan message of Islam. So radical leadership, both Christian and secular, has advocated that Islam is entirely violent, "terrorist" and "evil", the cause of today's world conflicts, and on this premise are seeking to deal a definitive blow to radical Islam through a "war against terror". More "liberal" (in political not theological terms) Christian and political leadership, on the other hand, advocates that Islam is a religion of peace and that violence is perpetrated only by those who, claiming to be Muslims, have distorted true Islam because of ulterior political motives. Those who accuse Islam of being altogether violent in nature advance that the more peaceful Meccan period of the Qur'an was entirely replaced by the violent Medinan period through the Muslim principle of "abrogation"

(*al-nâsikh wa al-mansûkh*). This principle states that verses received chronologically later replace earlier ones that stand in apparent contradiction to the earlier ones. Thus, it is claimed, authentic Islam is a radical and violent "Medinan Islam". These people, however, ignore the more moderate reading of the Qur'an by moderate Muslims who point out that violent Medinan verses are not universal, but limited in time and history through the other principle called "reasons for the revelation" (*asbâb al-nuzûl*). Thus, they claim, violent action that was required of the early Muslim community in Medina in order to safeguard young Islam's survival against those who wanted to destroy it does not authorise the use of violence by Muslims as a universal principle. This position advances that authentic Islam is therefore a moderate and tolerant "Meccan Islam".

A BALANCED APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

What, then, is our role as Christians approaching this complex reality that is Islam? Both the above-mentioned positions taken to an extreme will continue to be thoroughly unhelpful in our attempt to foster understanding between Christians and Muslims, and for that matter also between secularists and Muslims and between East and West. Simply put, if Islam genuinely contains any potential for violence, then there is no point in ignoring that

reality. By the same token, if Islam genuinely contains any potential for peace, it would be foolish to ignore that potential. The frustrating thing is that current wars causing immense suffering among Middle-Eastern peoples are doing nothing to encourage a moderate expression of Islam. On the contrary, the “war against terror”, by clearly singling out as its target Middle-Eastern peoples that are for the majority Muslims, is exacerbating radicalism, leading more Muslims to take up arms, and sadly preventing more moderate Muslim leadership from standing up for what they believe is authentic Islam. Indeed, if they were to do so, they would immediately be perceived by their own people as being pro-West and pro-Zionis.

As Arab Christians, we have a key role to play in the Middle East. We can stand by our moderate Muslim friends and be in constant dialogue with them. We can encourage moderate leadership to challenge the voices within Islam that are calling for retaliation and violence in the name of Islam and engage in continuous dialogue that is constructive on theological, social and political levels. On the other hand, Christians in the West also have a key role to play in today's Middle East and global conflicts. They can seek more genuinely to understand the complexity and diversity within Islam and attempt to translate this to their own leadership and call for a more humane approach to these conflicts on the part of Western nations. By doing this,

Christians in the West not only will be contributing to rescuing our world from disaster, but also will be standing in solidarity with their Christian Middle-Eastern brothers and sisters who are coming under increasing pressure by Muslim governments and leadership that tend to see us as being pro-West and unsympathetic to their causes.

The fact is that our world today cannot afford to ignore inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue. And dialogue, as a key tool for conflict resolution, requires that we begin by moving away from the simplistic view that divides the world into “heroes” and “villains”, “good guys” and “bad guys”. Reducing a “perceived enemy” to a caricature will do nothing to resolve the tension. We need, rather, to put a human face over against a caricatured version of Islam, and by doing so to present Muslims with a human face of Christianity.

Let me suggest three simple steps that any of us can do, whether we live in the East or in the West, whereby we can individually or even as churches begin to contribute in the salvation of a world on the brink of disaster:

|1| ENGAGE IN RELATIONSHIP:

We often think of Christian-Muslim relations in the context of an officially-organised event, staged in the form of a debate or dialogue exchange. But that is typical of our intellectualised thinking

about religious matters that reduces inter-faith relations to a rational exercise. I have learnt that engaging in personal relationship with Muslims is a much more fruitful path because it immediately puts a human face to an otherwise abstract reality. Relationship quickly brings down walls of fear that are usually erected and maintained by mutual ignorance.

|2| BE CANDID:

There is nothing more despicable to a person of sincere faith than the compromise of personal convictions to please the ears of others. Inter-faith dialogue has all-too-often been reduced to a magnanimous acquiescence to all the elements of another person's belief system in the name of open-mindedness. I remember a song from my more radical youth that said: “You're so open-minded that your brain leaks out!” I have also learnt that excessive compromise in relationship does not invite respect, and all-the-more so in inter-faith relationship. Muslims with whom you will care to talk about matters of faith will have much more respect for a person of genuine faith than for someone who will tell them what they think they want to hear. I have experienced this many times and heard the same from many who care to engage in meaningful inter-faith relationships. And the more radical a Muslim is, the more important it will be to them that you are candid about who you are and what you believe.

|3| BE INQUISITIVE:

I mention this as my third recommendation because you do not need to wait until you have got everything sorted out intellectually before engaging in relational dialogue. Inquisitiveness begins at the personal level. You will learn much more about Islam by talking to Muslims and asking them about their faith than by reading about them. And in the context of relationship there is no subject that remains a taboo. At the same time, it is our duty to inform ourselves about Islam through balanced writings on the topic. And in doing this it is advisable to avoid those books that quickly reveal their preconceived bias in their aggressive titles. Sadly, such writings are numerous on the Christian bookshelf today.

A FINAL CALL

The future of our world will depend to a large extent on our ability to process through all the conflicting voices and messages that are coming continuously our way. And the Church worldwide will bear no small responsibility in helping to shape tomorrow's realities both inside the Church and outside of it. As Christians we are called proactively to engage with our world and to behave and act as faithfully as we can in accordance with the motivations of the Gospel's compelling plea for reconciliation and justice. ■

Dr. Martin Accad (Oxford PhD), Academic Dean of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, and Director of ABTS' Institute of Middle East Studies, has done extensive research in the use of the Gospels in the Muslim and Christian writings from the 8th Century onward.

RECOMMENDED READINGS ON ISLAM

- > Colin Chapman, *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam*, 2nd revised edition, IVP, 2003.
- > Alfred Guillaume, *Islam*, Penguin Press (Reprint Edition), 1991.
- > Kenneth Cragg, *Call of the Minaret*, 3rd Edition, One World, 2000.
- > Christine Mallouhi, *Waging Peace on Islam*, IVP, 2002.
- > Fouad Accad, *Building Bridges: Christianity and Islam*, Navpress, 1997.
- > Michael Nazir Ali, *Frontiers in Muslim-Christian Encounter*, Regnum Books, 1987.
- > Badru D. Kateregga & David W. Shenk, *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*, Herald Press, 1980, 1997.

By Dr. Evelynne A. Reischer



the theme “Waging Peace from East to West.” During one week, we shared words and songs of peace between Lebanese churches and Christians visiting from North America, Europe and Asia. We also interacted serenely with Muslim communities and leaders during evening meetings where we had the opportunity to listen to one another and share our worldviews. Two weeks later

[...the world seems to have become divided between the “good people” and the “bad people” and Arabs are more often put in the category of “bad people”]

two greatest commandments: Love God and love your neighbor. Today, many Christians living west of the Middle East have a hard time figuring out how to be neighbors with Arabs. Since the war in Iraq and other conflicts in the Middle East, the world seems to have become divided between the “good people” and the “bad people” and Arabs are more often put in the category of “bad people” even if this is not always the intention of the speakers.

Dividing the world between good and bad creates several problems for Christians. First, because, it is not recommended to define a whole people group

as “bad” for this has often led to genocide in the past. Secondly, because the criteria used for singling out people in this way have no biblical ground. Furthermore, depending on where you are on the planet, some “bad” people may be labeled “good”. Thirdly, it is God, at the end of time, who will define who is good and who is bad. Fourthly, in the Bible, God sometimes shows that some “bad guys” maybe living closer to kingdom values than religious people.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of these examples. It has been widely used in Christian circles to underline the fact

bombs were falling on this beautiful country and now murmurs and hope of a cease-fire. What can the Church west of Lebanon do to express our “koinonia” to Lebanon? What is the impact of geo-political decisions on the relationships of churches East and West today? Here are a few thoughts that I hope will help us strengthen the bond between brothers and sisters from these regions.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

“Who is my neighbor?” is a question, asked millions of times in a myriad of contexts since Jesus reminded his disciples of the

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PEACE, PEACE, TO THOSE FAR AND NEAR”

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As I write this article, my heart is deeply hurting over the situation in the Middle East. I was in Lebanon two weeks before the war started mid-July, invited to speak at a conference organized by ABTS on

that people groups despised by others and looked down upon by religious people may embody more godly values than the ones who claim, “We have done no evil in God’s eyes.” The Good Samaritan models God’s embrace in Jesus of all those who are hurting (John 3:16) and shows us how we can be better neighbors to one another.

Today, Muslims in the Middle East are looking westward and asking in what way their Christian neighbors are loving them. They have stopped listening to what Christians say; they want to see their actions. Recently, I heard a Muslim leader talking about a Western leader: “Why does he say he follows Jesus and does not love and act like Jesus?” To Christians, who in times of war say that love should not mean being naïve and indiscriminately loving those who are dangerous and make the world an unsafe place, I reply that Jesus’ love for people was never naïve. He even loved sinners, deceivers, and evildoers and prayed for his enemies.

WHEN TERROR CREEPS INTO MISSION

Many people who had no prior exposure to the Arab world and watch the daily news where Arabs or Muslims are portrayed as terrorists have become very suspicious and afraid to interact with any Arab or Muslim.

It is appropriate to be fearful and cautious in times of danger. It is all right to be terrorized when facing trauma. It is right to try to protect oneself and work for a safer world. However the ongoing “war on terror” poses several problems for mission:

The ongoing exposure to “terror” language and pictures is very unsettling and confusing to people. We all know what fear can do and how one can become so hysteric and irrational that anything and anyone that moves becomes a target. If our behaviors, thoughts and actions toward Arabs or Muslims become essentially motivated by fear, we will either freeze, attack, or run from them. This certainly does not encourage the development of healthy relationships between people groups.

As Christians, we must of course strongly condemn terrorism. It is unacceptable that innocent people suffer and live in a constant state of terror and violence. At the same time, we must strive to end the cycle of violence.

Words can continue to fuel hatred and feelings of injustice. Recently, as I was driving on the freeway, I happened to hear a radio broadcast with upsetting comments toward Arabs, such as, “Why do they come to our

country to blow everything up; they should stay home.” My heart was saddened because of my Arab friends that hear these words daily. But then instead of letting my anger turn to bitterness, I started praying. I knew I could do something positive for those rejected. I cry out to God, asking him to shower them with blessings.

Christians can play a very important role in the current conflicts and tensions, as they create different attitudes and different utterances that bless people. They guard their tongues and thoughts from evil, even if around them, people despise and curse other people groups. Out of fear, entire people groups are mistakenly called “terrorists”, when in reality speakers are referring to organizations and systems. The Bible gives clear warning that we should not give false witness. To me, qualifying in blanket fashion Arabs and Muslims “terrorists” is bearing false witness because it does misrepresent their true identity as peoples.

We must also remember that terror can have more than one origin. The Bible talks about God “putting terror and fear on the whole land” (Deuteronomy 11:25). If you have the advantage of being multilingual and reading newspapers from different parts of the world, you will quickly see that the “terrorist” of one country is the “resistant”

[The clash that exists between God and humankind constitutes a greater divide than the clash between civilizations]

of another. Furthermore, terror lies not just in one, but in many camps. Wherever bombs are falling, whoever is making them fall is inflicting terror and trauma. People in Tyre, Haifa, Baghdad or New York are equally experiencing trauma when under bombing and violent attacks, whether the bomb is made in Israel, America, Lebanon or Iraq.

As Christians, we have to reflect on how reactions shaped by fear can stop us from doing God's work and loving people as he calls us to love. If terror interferes with our mission and we become paralyzed by it, we will not be able to engage with the needs of the people who are hurting most.

CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

Some believe that we are facing today a "clash of civilizations". Although regimes in various parts of the world may collide, I do not believe that the greatest divide today is the divide between East and West. As Christians, we know that the greatest clash is the one settled by Jesus when he died on the cross. The clash that exists between God and humankind constitutes a greater divide than the clash between civilizations. As we look at Jesus as our model, we learn how he overcame the walls of separation

between people with his message of peace and reconciliation.

In mission, we also bear a ministry of reconciliation, since we know that God loves not just our part of the world, but the whole world. We must spread this message on local levels and international levels. We live in a global world where walls of separation between people groups are increasingly erected, while on the other front many engage in dialogue between cultures and religions. Following in the footsteps of Jesus, we bring a message of peace to the world.

Not long ago, I read an article encouraging Christians to rejoice over the growing number of Christians in Iraq today. I always rejoice when I see lives touched by the grace of God. However, the way the article was written sounded like a justification of the war. Though the author of the article may not have intended it this way, I wonder how Muslims might perceive such a statement, when reading that Christians rejoice because the Iraq war leads to the growth of the Church. It may lead some to believe that Christians are engaged in a holy war, the very thing that they often accuse Muslims of doing.

Christians must be known as peacemakers and not as intensifiers of conflict. Today,

many Christians in the West take one-sided positions in the conflict between Israel and Arab countries. Trained peacemakers, who work toward reconciliation, know that all parties of a conflict must feel that they have an equal and fair voice and that their grievances are heard and taken into consideration. As Christians, waiting for the return of Jesus, we should be more concerned with sharing the Gospel to as many people as we can than to prepare a physical place for his return. Today, there are too many Christians who are more concerned about their own future, as they advocate for their own eschatological agenda, than about peace between Israel and Palestine.

GOD'S VALUES VERSUS GLOBAL VALUES

Some may think that by sharing global values our world will look better. This approach to resolving conflicts in the world poses several problems. First, values are not easily defined, and have to be shaped by context in order to be relevant. They are also difficult to measure and complex, with universal, cultural or individual elements.

Should global values become the standard by which one defines whether or not one country belongs to the global community? Some people are currently pointing the finger toward the Middle East, and more specifically toward specific Muslim groups saying that they don't share these global

values and therefore should not exist. There may be a danger in dividing the world between good values and bad values. It is to think that the “good” world has achieved perfection, whereas anthropologists know that cultures are constantly evolving and being transformed and that what culture perceives as good today may be detrimental tomorrow. There are not two sides of the world: one that has it all and the other that has none of it.

Lastly when, our Western values are “advertised” to other parts of the world, we must also remember that some of them may be good and others may not be relevant. If we want to develop strong bonds with countries east of us, we also must share our needs with them and learn from their own values. At the recent Middle East Conference at ABTS, we met people coming from different nations and experienced together the joy of sharing

wealth of experience that we need as we want to understand the Middle East. They can also increase our understanding of Muslim-Christian relations since the two communities have lived together for centuries. We can draw both positive and negative lessons from the various encounters from East to West and West to East throughout the centuries. In order to learn, we can of course read and study. However, there is nothing like meeting

[At the recent Middle East Conference at ABTS, we met people coming from different nations and experienced together the joy of sharing and receiving.]

Our cultures are always in need of evaluation until Jesus comes back. Furthermore, those who export their values must do it in a humble way, because as we point the finger to other cultures, we must always pay attention to the plank in our own eye (Matthew 7:3). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that those who will inherit the earth are not the arrogant but the meek (Matthew 5:5).

Unfortunately, although we strive for a better world, there will always be bad and good things in any culture, until Jesus comes back. Jesus reminds us not to be quick to judge, when he said, “While you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them.” (Matthew 13:29).

and receiving. We all felt this was an enriching experience that helped us be better servants of God.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

In our desire to strengthen the bond between brothers and sisters East and West, we must also draw resources from history. I believe that the history of the Church in the Middle East should be a required course for every Christian leader in the West. I remember one Christian who had never been to the Middle East stating that there has never been any missionary movement coming from that part of the world. He was wrong. Middle Eastern churches sent the first missionaries into the world. They have a

people face to face. The week I spent at ABTS this summer was so important for nurturing the bonds between believers from East and West. I hope that many Christians will visit Lebanon and many other Middle Eastern countries. Recently, I talked to a brother from Bethlehem, who said, “Fewer and fewer Christians are coming to visit us? Has the church to our west forgotten us?” Visiting believers who live in extremely difficult situations, isolated and alone, must also be part of our mission, following the incarnational model of Jesus who stepped down from the comfort of heaven to share our humanity.

In our desire to help churches in the Middle East, we must also remember the strengths

and weaknesses of a world that is so interconnected. What we say and write as Christians in North America or Europe, for example, resonates immediately in the Middle East, and those who bear the direct consequences of our positions are not those of us from the West but the Christians who live in the Middle East. One motto of globalization is that if a butterfly flaps its wings in Tokyo, there may be an earthquake in London. Our rhetoric about the Muslim world has direct implications for those who live as a minority in many Middle Eastern countries. Sometimes it is for the good. But more often it is to their detriment.

Weeping with those who weep

This morning, sitting in church, somewhere in North America, I could not sing, I could not dance and clap my hands during the praise songs. I was devastated by the pictures I had seen on the early news broadcast of people dying in violent conflicts in several countries of the Middle East. I had wept and prayed with Americans a few years ago when their buildings were under attack in New York and Washington in 2001, how should I not cry as loudly when people on the other end of the conflict are suffering and traumatized. It takes a wide heart to be a global Christian in the 21st Century. I believe that if we want to strengthen the bond between East and West, our hope comes from God's missionary model. He has always had a

heart for all the nations. From Genesis to Revelation, God is reaching out to the whole world through various people, families, or people groups who accept to faithfully carry out this task.

May we all pray "Peace, peace, to those far and near," (Isaiah 57:19; Ephesians 2:17) as we strengthen bonds from West to East and East to West. ■

[It takes a wide heart to be a global Christian in the 21st Century.]

B I O G R A P H Y

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BY DR. ISSA DIAB



“ **JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM: THE THREE ANTAGONISTIC SISTERS** ”

Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the three monotheistic religions, were born in the same place - the Near East - in the same cultural basin, and have many historical characteristics, ethical values and doctrinal beliefs in common. The three of them have Abraham as sacred ancestor. While they are sister religions by birth place, culture and history, and each one has an intrinsic respect towards the other, they

are antagonistic enemies in practice. Since most readers will be familiar with the principal stages in the development of Judaism and Christianity, after a brief exposition of their debuts, I will primarily focus on the historical formation of Islam, and then suggest a set of principles for peaceful and respectful relationships between the three monotheistic religions.

| I | The Formation

1• Judaism

Judaism is an offspring of the ancient Israelite religion. While we cannot speak of two distinct religions, we cannot say either that they are identical in everything. "Judaism" came to be used for "Israelite" during the Exile in Mesopotamia.

The history of the Israelite religion begins, according to the Bible, with the call of Abraham. During the second half of the eighteenth century BC, Abraham had a spiritual experience with God. According to this experience, Abraham committed himself to the worship of God alone, and obeyed his God's Order by leaving, with his wife Sarah, the land of his ancestors (Ur in Mesopotamia) and going to the Land of Canaan. There

in Canaan, Abraham had "Ishmael" (May God Hear me) from his wife's servant Hagar, according to a common custom, because his wife was too old to bear children. Abraham then also had Isaac from his wife Sarah. Through Isaac, Abraham was promised to have a blessed posterity. Because of family problems between Sarah and Hagar, Abraham banished Ishmael and his mother Hagar from his house. They went to the Desert of Paran located in the southern region of the Dead Sea (a location in Arabia). But God did not forsake Hagar and her son Ishmael, He gave her a promise of blessing: that Ishmael will live free and strong in the desert "like a wild donkey" (this is a title for praise in the Bible), (cf. Gn. 16: 11-12; 17: 19) and will be prosperous (cf. Gn 21: 13, 18). After Sarah's death, Abraham was married with Keturah. They had

[In Babylon, the people coming from Judah (Hebrew, "Yehudha"), became called Judeans (Hebrew, "Yehudim"), that is translated nowadays as "Jews".]

four sons, and the best known of them is Midan. Abraham and Keturah's sons, along with their off-springs lived in the land of the East (Arabia).

The seed of Ishmael, of Keturah's sons, and the descendants of Esau from Jacob, constitute traditionally the ancestors of the Arabs of the Peninsula where Mohammad and Islam came from. At the same period when the People of Israel, under the leadership of Joshua, settled in the Mountainous region of Canaan, another People, called the Sea People settled in the coastal region. These were the "*Philishtim*" where from the name "Palestine" came. Shortly after the settlement in Palestine, about 1000 BC, the Hebrews organized themselves into the Kingdom of Israel. Three kings ruled successively, Saul, David, and Salomon. David was faithful to the point

that the Lord promised him that the throne of Israel would always be ruled by a king from his posterity. Many of the Psalms are traditionally attributed to David. Salomon is known particularly for the Temple that he built in Jerusalem, the political and religious capital, and for his writings of many proverbs that are now in the Book of Proverbs of the Bible. The Temple became, at a certain time, the centre of the Israelite worship. At the end of Salomon's reign, the Kingdom broke in twain, Israel, in the North, with its capital at Samaria, and Judah, in the South, with its capital at Jerusalem. In time, both Israel and Judah integrated gradually the heathen religions of their neighbors into their own religious expressions. As a result of this, the people of Israel were taken into captivity, and after them the people of Judah were taken into the Babylonian Captivity by the Chaldean Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. In Babylon, the people coming from Judah (Hebrew, "Yehudha"), became called Judeans (Hebrew, "Yehudim"), that is translated nowadays as "Jews". ("Yehudim" means Judeans and Jews). It was during that period that the idea of the coming of the Messiah Savior from the Davidic seed - already prophesied by the Prophets - was highlighted. At the end of the fourth century BC, Palestine was overrun by Alexander the Great. After his death the two kingdoms ruled by the two dynasties constituted by

his Generals Ptolemy and Antiochus were in struggle. This is the struggle between the King of the North (Syria) and the King of the South (Egypt) written about in the book of Daniel. In 63 BC, the Romans invaded Palestine. Jesus Christ was born when the country was under Roman control. In 70 AD, because of a Jewish revolt, Romans destroyed Jerusalem and many of its citizens were dispersed. Finally, at about 135, came the final Diaspora, or dispersal when Bar Kochba led a revolutionary attack against the Roman authorities.

2• Christianity

The History of Christianity starts just about where the history of the formation of Judaism ends. But also the Greek cultural world was ready to bestow its contributions for the formation of Christianity. Jesus Christ was born about 4 BC, in Bethlehem of Judea, during the time of the Roman Emperor Augustus. The first thirty years of his life were spent in Nazareth, at the carpenter's bench of Joseph; hence the term "Nazarene" which is often applied to him. At the age of thirty, he inaugurated his public ministry in his baptism by John the Baptist, when people became aware that he is "the Son of God" and that he is called to teach, preach and prophesy. After his baptism, Jesus started his mission, and much of his teaching referred to rabbinical writings, bringing a

new form of homely metaphors and parables. Unlike the Pharisees, he was close to the poor and marginalized people. He spoke as one having authority not as an interpreter. Although he did not claim, in his beginnings, to be the Jewish promised Messiah, he was hailed by many as such. By his openness to all social classes and all religious national and ethnic groups, Jesus evoked the ire of the Jewish high classes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians and the Scribes, who felt that their privileges (religious and political) were threatened.

At the end of a series of conspiracies, the Jewish leaders succeeded in charging him with a political conspiracy attempt. They had Jesus tried before the Roman governor, and after having been crushed with moral mockery and bodily sufferings, he ended up being condemned as a dangerous and unlawful criminal, and was crucified. After his execution, his disciples were dispersed, but re-gathered upon the spread of news saying that he was resurrected from the dead. The resurrected Christ spent forty days manifesting himself to his disciples and teaching them the true meanings of his mission, life, death and resurrection. At the fortieth day of his resurrection, he went back to the Father; and ten days later, he (with the Father) sent the Holy Spirit to his small congregation on earth. Shortly after

[Despite very severe persecution, Christianity spread almost everywhere in the Roman Empire.]

this, his disciples, with Paul - a former Pharisee who became a follower of the risen Christ - were to establish the essence of Christianity: Jesus, the incarnate and everlasting Son of God, supernaturally conceived of the Virgin Mary, came to live with us; he accomplished the duties of the Law for us in his life; he died and was resurrected to redeem us; thus, he established the "Kingdom of God"; finally he is coming back to manifest this heavenly Kingdom. It was clear to them that Jesus Christ is a Redeemer, Savior and Lord through whom all mankind could attain personal salvation and relationship with God.

Despite very severe persecution, Christianity spread almost everywhere in the Roman Empire. At the beginning of the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine foresaw the benefits that he could draw from Christianity.

With the interventions of politics in the affairs of the Church, and the gradual emergence of the bishops as political officers, serious differences appeared in the Church, which the leadership attempted to resolve through Church Councils. But, unfortunately, these

differences led to divisions and birth of new Christian denominations.

Contemporary Arab Protestant Christianity started about the middle of the 17th century, when Anglican and Lutheran missions came from England and Germany, and in the beginning of the 19th century, missionaries from the Reformed Church in the USA, came from the USA, and established Churches, schools and other institutions in Palestine, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq and the Gulf, and established many religious, educational and humanitarian institutions. Finally, as of the beginning of the twentieth century, missionaries from Evangelical Churches came and established Evangelical churches in all the open countries of the Middle East. The largest of these churches today is the Baptist Church. Thus, it is against the background of a rich diversity of Eastern Christian traditions that the canvas of Christianity in the Middle East was completed.

3• Islam

Islam means submission (to the will of God); a Muslim, in turn, is one who has submitted himself to God and who

[We can say that in Medina, Muhammad formed the first Islamic state.]

acknowledges Muhammad as His prophet. Since the seventh century A.D., the culture of the Arab World has been dominated by the last of the three great monotheistic religions to have emerged from the region: Islam. Islam is more than just a religion; it is the focal point of Arab society for Muslims and, to some extent, for non-Muslims as well, permeating their culture at every level-political, social, economic, as well as private.

Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula, and was launched by Muhammad, from the city of Mecca and the tribe of Quraysh. He was born in Mecca about 570 to the merchant family of Ban_ H_shem, a reputable family of Quraysh. According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad used to go to a mountain, in the vicinity of Mecca, for long spiritual retreats: fasting, praying to Allah, and meditating. During one of his retreats, Muhammad received a revelation from God, by the angel Gabriel. God's revelations to him were repeated until finally Muhammad understood that God had chosen him to be his Envoyé and his Prophet to go and call all the Arabs to embrace his monotheistic ideas which were almost known to the Christians and Jews of the Peninsula. He came to believe that Allah had already revealed himself in part through Moses and Jesus - and thus through the Hebrew and Christian traditions. He believed, however

that the final revelations of Allah were now being given to him. Out of these revelations, which were, eventually written down, came the Qur'_n, the Holy Book of the religion of Islam. The Qur'_n contains the ethical guidelines and laws by which the followers of Allah are to live. Muhammad set out to convince the people of Mecca of the truth of his revelations. The Meccan chapters of the Qur'_n deal chiefly with the unity of God, the wickedness of idolatry, and the imminence of divine judgment. Their stated purpose is to bring an Arabic revelation to the Arabs such as had previously been vouchsafed to other peoples in their own languages. As Muhammad became more assertive and openly attacked the existing religion of Mecca, opposition to him and his followers hardened. Muhammad became discouraged by persecutions of his followers, as well as by the failure of the Meccans to accept his message. This caused Muhammad to seek success elsewhere. He moved to Med_na. The Journey of Muhammad and his followers to Med_na is known as the Hijrah. The year when the journey occurred, 622 AD, became year one in the official calendar of Islam. The oasis of Medina was inhabited predominantly by Jews, consisting, no doubt, both of refugees from Judea and Arabs converted to Judaism.

The migration of Muhammad from Mecca

to Medina was a turning point. Muhammad soon began to win support from the people of Medina, as well as from Bedouin tribes in the surrounding countryside. From these groups, he formed the first community of practicing Muslims. In Medina, Muhammad became, in fact, both a religious and a political leader. He assembled a military force to defend himself and his followers and began to attract large numbers of supporters. We can say that in Medina, Muhammad formed the first Islamic state. Muhammad had, it would seem, hoped to find a friendly welcome among the Jews, whose faith and scriptures would, so he thought, cause them to receive his claims with greater sympathy and understanding because, in his Meccan message, he recognized their Torah and other sacred books, and confirmed the message of their prophets. In order to attract them, he adopted a number of Jewish practices, including the fast of Kippur, the Friday prayer, and the prayer towards Jerusalem. The Jews, however, rejected the pretensions of the 'Gentile Prophet' and opposed him on precisely the religious level where he was most sensitive. Having realized that no support was to be expected from this quarter, later, he dropped the Jewish practices that he had adopted, substituted Mecca for Jerusalem as the qibla (direction) of prayer and generally gave a more strictly Arabian character to his faith. This tension between the Prophet and the Jews ended

with the slaughter of many Jews in Medina at the hand of the Muslims. The expeditions that Muhammad led against Meccan commerce served a double purpose; on the one hand they helped to maintain a blockade on the city which alone could ultimately reduce it to submission to the new faith. And secondly, they increased the power, wealth, and prestige of the 'Umma in Medina. After the victory of Muslims, the Medinese Revelations (Surahs) became very different from those of Mecca, dealing with the practical problems of government and the distribution of booty, including the persons of the conquered and their families. The victory made possible a reaction against the Jews and ultimately also the Christians, who were now accused of having falsified their own scriptures in order to conceal the prophecies of Muhammad's advent. Islam itself began to change. Muhammad was now quite clearly preaching a new religious dispensation, with himself as Seal of the Prophets. The new message was more explicitly Arab, and with the adoption of the Ka'ba in Mecca as a place of pilgrimage, the conquest of the city became a religious duty. Indeed, during a visit that Muhammad had paid to the Ka'ba, he declared it a sacred shrine of Islam. And pilgrimage (Haj) to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime (if possible) became one of the fundamental Islamic duties. In 630, Muhammad captured Mecca. With the capture of Mecca and the submission of Quraysh to the 'Umma of Islam, the mission of the Prophet during his

lifetime was virtually completed, and in the following year, he does not appear to have engaged in any military activity. Two years after the capture of Mecca, Muhammad died on the 8th of June, 632 AD, just as Islam was beginning to spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula and outside. The prophet Muhammad had achieved a great deal. To the pagan peoples, of western Arabia, he had brought a new religion which, with its monotheism and ethical doctrines, stood on an incomparably higher level than the paganism it replaced. He had provided a religion with a revelation which was to become in the centuries to follow the guide to thought and conduct of countless millions of believers. But he had done more than that; he had established a community and a well organized and armed state, the power and prestige of which made it a dominant factor in Arabia.

Islamic acts of devotion and worship are expressed in the 'Five Pillars of Islam'. These involve not only profession of faith, but also recognition of God in all aspects of human conduct. The Five Pillars are:

|1| The Profession of Faith, or *shahada* in Arabic, which requires the believer to profess the unity of God and the mission of Muhammad. This involves the repetition of the formula: "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." This assertion forms part of every prayer.

|2| Prayer, *salat*, is required five times a day: at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and dusk. It must be performed in a state of ritual purity and every word must be in Arabic. The worshipper has the choice of praying privately, in the open air or in a house; or with a group outdoors or in a mosque. Islam opposes the practice of withdrawing into ascetic life. For this reason, there is no monasticism, but only '*ulema*', learned men, who are well-versed in Islamic law and tradition.

|3| The third Pillar of Islam, Almsgiving, *zakat*, embodies the principle of social responsibility. This precept teaches that what belongs to the believer ultimately belongs to the community, and that only by donating a proportion of his or her wealth for public use does a person legitimize what he or she retains.

|4| The ancient Semitic institution of Fasting is the fourth Pillar of Islam, known as *sawm*. To a Muslim, it means observing *Ramadan*, the month during which, it is written, God sent the Qur'an to the lowest heaven where Gabriel received it and revealed it in time to Muhammad. Fasting demands complete abstinence from food and drink from dawn to sunset every day during *Ramadan*.

|5| The last cherished Pillar of Islam is the Pilgrimage to Mecca, *al-hajj*, where God's revelation was first disclosed to Muhammad. Believers worship publicly at the Holy

Mosque, expressing the full equality among Muslims with a common objective—all performing the same actions, all seeking to gain the favor of God. All pilgrims, from various cultures and classes, wear identical white robes as they assemble around a single center, the *Ka'aba*, which inspires them with a strong sense of unity. Every Muslim is expected to perform the pilgrimage at least once during his or her lifetime.

While the Islamic community throughout the world is united by the two essential beliefs in **|1|** the Oneness of God and **|2|** the divine mission of His prophet, there developed shortly after Muhammad's death a debate within the Islamic community over who should succeed the prophet as leader of the faithful. This debate split the community into Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims. It is important to remember, however, that on fundamental issues, Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims are in basic agreement since they both draw on the Qur'an and the Shari'ah, body of Islamic Law.

|2| Principles of Peaceful Relationships

All three monotheistic religions, while they can be viewed as sisters in their fundamentals, have historically often been bitter enemies. Some see that Jews and Christians, mainly in the West, are friends, but this is not true. History contains an

opposite image. This enmity among the three monotheisms is troubling, not only for the Middle East, but also for the rest of the world. What are the main causes of their enmity? Some say competition, because of evangelism done mainly by Christian missions in Muslim and Jewish lands. This, however, is wrong, because both Christianity and Islam are evangelistic religions, whereas Judaism does not refuse proselytes either. Misunderstandings? That certainly seems to be the case! As an Evangelical pastor, I want to suggest below a set of steps and principles that may help to bring about spiritual pacification among the followers of the three monotheisms.

1• Being aware of the erroneous image we hold of one another

I do not believe that it is helpful for Christians and Jews to hold an aggressive representation of Islam's prophet: Muhammad. Having studied Islam, I do not believe that Muhammad is equal to Jesus Christ (as Muslims do by holding that both were prophets), but neither have my studies led me to believe that he was a "false prophet" or that he was "demon-possessed" as is commonly asserted in many Christian circles and books nowadays. I see him as a social reformer who did good things for his society. Even the erroneous understandings he perpetrated about Christ he received from the legacy of Christian sects that were living in Arabia. At the same time, with all

[All three monotheistic religions, while they can be viewed as sisters in their fundamentals, have historically often been bitter enemies]

the respect that I have for Muhammad, I do not hesitate to invite Muslims to follow Christ as savior. My advice to my Evangelical fellows and Jewish friends is to study Islam objectively, not apologetically. This is the scientific method upon which all of the modern disciplines within the humanities are based.

2• Purifying our understanding

Unfortunately, in the history of Biblical hermeneutics, Christian exegesis committed awful errors: racial discrimination towards Africans on the basis of the supposed curse of Canaan (cf. Gn 9:24); hate towards Muslims because Ishmael is pictured in the Bible as a wild donkey (Gn 16:12)); the justification of anti-Semitism because the Jews crucified Christ; the killing of the Palestinians or sending them away after having taken their lands and houses on the basis that God gave this land to the people

of Israel; the justification of massacres under the pretext of "Just War"; the Justification of exterminations (genocide) on the pretext that there is a parallel in God's order to Joshua concerning Jericho (Jo 6).

I can see the most real and pure image of God in Jesus Christ. Is he not "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (He 1:3)? The life, teachings and death of Jesus draw the most accurate picture of God. This picture is reflected in the parable of the Prodigal and other circumstances of the life of Jesus. Can anybody believe that God, as we see him in Jesus, would order racial discrimination, committing murders and massacres for any reason? This image of God in Jesus in the New Testament should be a referential one; this is the real one. What then should we do with references, in the Old Testament, that SEEM to provide a different image? The science of hermeneutics is able to provide us with adequate solutions, but we should not bring God, who is love and mercy, down to the ethical level of the heathen gods in the Old Testament. God is God, God is Love. As a Christian, how can I offer a Bible to a Muslim while thinking in my mind that he is no higher in status than a donkey? Or how can I hand a Bible to a Palestinian while believing in my mind that all of the injustices happening to him are perpetrated under God's approval and help? How can I offer Jesus Christ to a Jew while maintaining in my mind that he is

responsible for killing Christ? Hence, we should purify our understanding of the Bible from all that is not Christian.

3• Showing ethical respect towards other beliefs

My Christian faith does not allow me to offend or insult the beliefs and convictions of others. Every religion has its sacred books, beliefs, rituals, customs, persons, etc. The adepts of these religions choose to consider the sacredness of these things or persons. This is their right, they are free to choose, and God Himself respects their free choice. We should remember that, especially in the Middle East, religion is a cultural issue, and religious occasions are social festivals. Religious customs become a part of the culture of human beings. The fact that I, as a Christian, do not believe in the sacredness of the other's sacred things does not allow me to disrespect them. If I really love the individual followers of other religions, my respect for what they view as sacred is a way to show them my love. At the same time, respecting their sacred things does not mean that I should leave them to what I consider to be their 'wrong beliefs'. On the contrary, it is my responsibility to offer them the message of salvation in Jesus Christ, and I can do it in a better way when I show respect to what they hold as sacred. When the message of Jesus Christ penetrates into their hearts and the Holy Spirit activates this message, they will discover for

themselves the gaps in their own beliefs.

4• Show a Christian and real love

Why do I speak about a "Christian and real love"? Is Christian love not real love by definition? Showing love to a Muslim person only for the purpose of evangelizing them is not "real love". Real love is pure love, empty of any ulterior motives. Real love means loving the person for who they are, regardless of their color, race language, nationality, and social class. Real love means offering help to the loved person without the expectation that I will receive anything in return. Real love includes respect for the cherished person's customs, beliefs, convictions and sacred things. Hence, I do not advise to offer material assistance combined with the message of the Gospel to a Muslim person. If I really love him or her, and if they need my social assistance, then my help should be **unconditional** wherever I can offer it. The person will feel God's love and my Christian spirit through this unconditional help. The association between evangelism and social help makes the latter, not a **sign of love**, but a **price** for accepting the Christian message. ■

[If I really love the individual followers of other religions, my respect for what they view as sacred is a way to show them my love.]

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