

## **Challenges Facing Islam of Today**

It is a tough time to defend religion.

It is tougher to defend Islam.

The evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson, claims that :  
“For the sake of human progress, the best thing we could possibly do, would be to diminish, to the point of eliminating, religious faiths”.

It's not easy to argue this claim, taking into consideration :

- a-Extremists who kill innocent people, destroy their homes and churches and burn their farms in the name of the religion of Islam.
- b- Extremists who occupy the land of others and turn them into homeless and stateless people in the name of the religion of Judaism.

c-Pedophiles who commit their moral crimes even in the houses of God, or in schools covered with their Christian or Buddhist robes.

It's not the irrationality that religious beliefs are accused with, that make religion so vulnerable and open to criticism and even to refusal, it is the misinterpretation, and the misuse of religion by its people themselves that make it increasingly unacceptable, and incompatible with human evolution and understandings.

Here, it is important to differentiate between the Holy text, and understanding this text.

Religion is not necessarily what God revealed, it's what we, humans, understood from His revelation.

Time proved that our understanding is not always right or true, and that it is not one understanding.

This explains why we have different denomination~~s~~ confessions and sects within the same religion, and in every religion.

Islam is not an exception. Today Islam is an example.

The Holy text being the Torah, the Bible or the Koran is Holy, because it is a revelation from God. And because it is holy, and sacred it is permanent; and it carries the absolute of meanings. But understanding this text is human, and anything of human character is open to be right or wrong. That is why understanding the Holy text is changeable (not permanent) and is relative (not absolute).

The problem erupts when we –Muslims- consider –and many of our scholars do consider or at least behave as if human interpretation of the Holy text, is as Holy as the text itself. And consequently when we stop updating our understandings to be compatible with the new facts of life that we are confronted with. It's not logical to follow the interpretations of the Middle Ages and before, in the 21 century. The Holy text is open to new

understandings and to new interpretations. This to me is a major challenge that we face today.

We have encountered extremist religious leaders who used social media to bypass the realm of Islamic teachings entirely, addressing the sentiments of their followers without a filter of educated argument and without a marginal interest in what anyone with a mind, might have said. They considered themselves conservatives. But as Edmund Burke pointed out in one of the founding documents of modern conservatism, his reflections on the revolution in France, “We must reform in order to conserve”.

But Contrary to this noble idea their reflection was, “We must conserve in order not to reform”. Reformation is not only a taboo to them, it is anti-Islam. It’s HARAM.

One of the major challenges is how to admit, and then how to face the fact that there is religious Islamic thought which promotes terror. This sort of thought emerged longtime ago through interpreting the Holy text as a reaction to foreign invasions, the Moguls and the Crusades, and then to western conquer and to western imperialism.

Later some Muslim scholars considered the role of the new emerging national states, not simply to administer public affairs, but also to implement religion, by changing the SHARIA code of conduct into a penalty law. During these periods the famous phrase "Islam is a religion and a state", was coined in India and then by the brother-hood Org. in the mid-20s. The debate goes on up till now : Is the Sharia a source of, or the source of law making? Should the state, the national state, be considered Islamic, or should the head of the state be a Muslim ?. And what about Muslims in a state that its head is non Muslims, and its law has nothing to do with SHARIA?.

المولد والدين

مختار

*Besides that*

↳ Extremist Islamists were cornered and isolated during the times of the national state run by the military. But they never surrendered. On the contrary, they were divided –in prisons and outside- into two groups:

*or  
oppressive  
regimes*

One group adopted the concept of direct violence as a mean, to reach political power; the other group decided to infiltrate into the veins and arteries of the state and to try from within to impose or at least to <sup>*infiltrate*</sup> push the process of Islamization.

Both groups failed, but never surrendered. The dangers of their teachings that were underestimated by Muslim main religious authorities, found a golden opportunity during the last upheavals and turmoils that struck the middle East (from 1967 the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem to 2003 the American invasion of Iraq, and its tragic consequences).

*but diverted*

Half-forgotten wounds in the past can trigger ridiculous overreactions in the present and in the future. Muslim extremist movements reached its culmination with the culture of Al-kaeda as a religious reaction to the June 1967 war, and grew up in Afghanistan, as a movement against the infidels the Soviets. A radical disillusionment with military and oppressive elites (in Syria - Iraq – Libya – Tunisia, and Egypt) that oversaw a losing war with Israel, led some veterans (and others who were shaped by the war) to an extremist rejection of these governments refracted through the lens of religion. Used, betrayed, discarded, these veterans would eventually take up arms against their own countries, bringing the war home in defense of what they believed Islamic dignity and “God’s sacred places” under occupation.

Those who built ISIS movement emerged from under the moral ruins of the American invasion to Iraq in 2003 and its aftermath.

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After all, repairing a relationship can be a process of transformation. Christians <sup>and</sup> ~~or~~ Muslims we are stuck together permanently in this country – Lebanon- and in this region, the Middle East; and as the saying goes, the only way to get out of the mess we are suffering from, is to get into it. Because the only way for a plural community – like ours- to build its future is to build it together.

Listening to people argue about Christian-Muslim relations these days is like over hearing people who are in a bad marriage. They are always trying to use disagreements to establish superiority. It's not merely "we are different". It's "I am better". Both people in it are likely to feel unknown or misunderstood.



Each person brings into the marriage a pattern of interaction absorbed from his or her original family. Psychologists, <sup>joke</sup> like that early marriage is a battle ground in which two families send their best warriors to determine which family's culture will direct the couple's lives.

Then over time the couple creates their own pattern of interaction, which may control them to act in ways that neither person particularly likes.

We in Lebanon and in spite of all our draw backs, created our own pattern of interaction through dialogue. That is why Pope John Paul II described Lebanon as a message. Yes we are not always up to that message, but we believe in it. And we do consider it the backbone, (the vertebral column) of our national identity. A clear example is the declaration of the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, the day of Mary's Annunciation, a national day for all Lebanese Christians and Muslims-. We tried to promote this concept all over the Middle East. We are still trying; (the constructive Lebanese Christian-

o Another example is

Muslim contribution to the Azhar four declarations on religious freedom, citizenship, equal rights and uprooting terror is another good example.

We, in Lebanon, learned the hard lesson, that our marriage lives upon almost impossible times, when it is perfectly clear to the two partners (Christians and Muslims) that nothing else but pure sacrificial love can hold us together. This involves a deliberate choosing of closeness over distance, of companionship over isolation. That involves a relentless turning toward each other.

To give a practical example about how we – Muslims- face the current challenge, I would like to underline the importance of the initiative taken by Al-Makassed org. (It is an Islamic educational and cultural org. 140 years old). As a board member I arranged with two other colleagues a conference here in Beirut about “Religious freedom”. We came out with a declaration in the name of Islam that says :

“ For more than thirteen centuries, our land has seen mosques, churches, and places of worship being built side by side. We want this heritage of freedom, collaboration and living-in-common to remain deeply established in our land, in our cities and among our youths. Our religion and national traditions, our covenants and our laws guide us to adhere firmly to these principles.

Denying the rights of Christian communities to exercise their freedom of religion and deserting their churches, monasteries, educational and social institutions, is contrary to the teachings of Islam and is a flagrant violation of its principles, which these abuses are committed in its name.

Consequently, we proclaim, from Islamic, humanitarian and national standpoints, that we are absolutely against such destructive acts, and we call on our Christian compatriots to resist the acts of terror which seek to displace them from their lands, and urge them to remain attached and deeply rooted in these lands, along with their

Muslim brothers, enjoying with them equal rights and obligations. In this way, they, with Muslim compatriots, will safeguard our common values and our life together in an all - embracing multi-religious community.

Our common cultural heritage as believers in God, enjoins upon us to reject compulsion in matters of faith, to respect intellectual freedom, and to accept differences among men as an expression of God's Will. Only God's shall pass judgment on peoples in those matters in which they differ”.

Because of this, I was accused by some extremists of blasphemy, of being a “Kafer”.

I have devoted a substantial part of my intellectual life to defining and defending Islam as a religion of peace, love and conviviality. Each time I think I have hit the nail on the head, the nail slips to one side and the hammer blow falls on my fingers. Luckily, more hits came from different parts of the Islamic institutions :

Al-Azhar went further and stronger; it declared that the concept of majority and minority between Muslims and Christians is not Islamic. That equal citizenship is the norm. Al-Azhar said too :

“All parties and armed groups and sectarian ‘militias,’ who use violence and terror in the face of the nation’s sons and daughters, under the false banner of religion, are sinful in thinking and seditious in behavior, and do not represent true Islam at all. Terrorizing and killing the innocent, committing acts of assault on people and property, and denigrating religious values are crimes against humanity, condemned by Islam. In addition, targeting nations with division and nation states with fragmentation only offers the world a distorted picture of Islam. Therefore, such crimes are not only inconsistent with, but offensive to the true religion of Islam, which is a religion of peace and unity, a religion of justice and charity and a religion of human brotherhood.”

“Muslims and Christians in the East are brothers; they belong to one civilization and one nation; they have lived together for many centuries; and they should continue to live together in national, sovereign and Free states, achieve the equality of all citizens and respect freedoms. The multiplicity of religions and sects is not a new phenomenon in our shared history; this diversity was, and will remain an indispensable asset for the world. History bears witness to that.”

“The displacement of Christians and other religious and ethnic groups is a crime that we all agree to condemn.”

**The Marrakesh** (Morocco) conference re-adopted the Muhammadan doctrine of Al-Medina constitution, that says Muslims and other believers (Christians and Jews) are one nation. Which means today religious plurality in one nation; It declared also :

“Our firm commitment to the principles articulated in the Charter of Medina, whose provisions contained a number of the principles of constitutional contractual citizenship, such as freedom of movement, property ownership, mutual solidarity and defense, as well as principles of justice and equality before the law; and that,

The objectives of the Charter of Medina provide a suitable framework for national constitutions in countries with Muslim majorities, and the United Nations Charter and related documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are in harmony with the Charter of Medina, including consideration for public order.”

**The Amman** religious declaration clearly declared that “a civil state is compatible with Islam”. It said:

“It is the participants’ view that the most feasible model for a viable and sustainable Islamic State is a ‘civic state’ where trustworthy and competent specialists rule, each in their field, in accordance with the provisions of a constitution based on respect of the law and equality between citizens from all ethnic and religious spectra in a manner than does not contradict the general principles of true Islam.”

**KAICIID** succeeded in cooperating with Christian and Muslims religious leaders from all over the Middle East to draft a common charter of national understanding to rebuild their common future together.

These are just few examples of Islamic initiatives (that I have been part of) that were meant to deal with challenges facing Islam of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

With these new interpretations of the Islamic doctrine, we are closing a sad chapter in our contemporary history, hoping to open a ~~new and~~ <sup>new and</sup> ~~good~~ promising chapter. ~~better and new~~



` Often people are moved to tears by sadness, but occasionally, people are moved to tears by goodness. I suggest that you prepare your handkerchiefs.

Mohammad Sammak

[msammak@almustaqbal.com.lb](mailto:msammak@almustaqbal.com.lb)