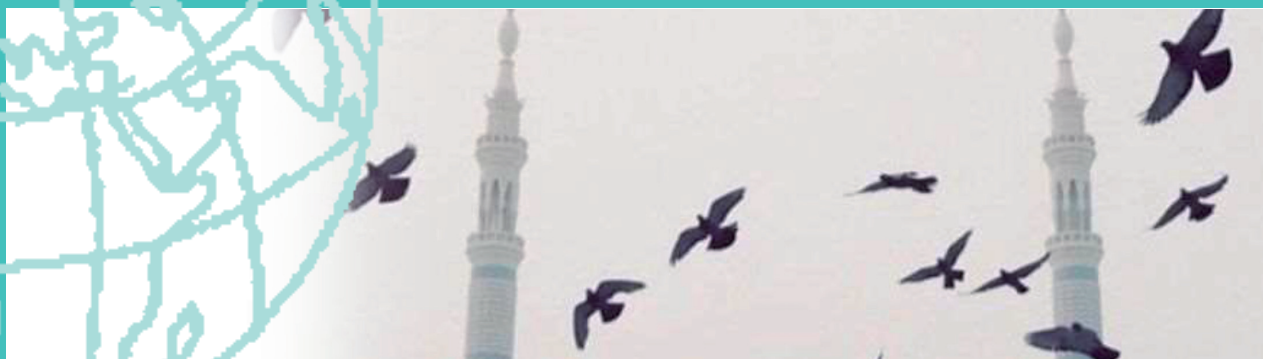


Bulletin 2017

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SEDOS



The world of Islam

Editorial	1
Dhikr and the Jesus Prayer: Unceasing recollection of God leading to peace <i>Andre De Bleeker, CICM</i>	2
La Yihād... La verdadera guerra santa <i>Martha Leticia Martínez de León</i>	11
Fatima, Mary, and Muslims <i>James H. Kroeger, MM</i>	15
Les Chrétiens du Moyen-Orient dans la tourmente actuelle: Le cas Palestinien <i>Rafiq Khoury</i>	20
How did religion assume a violent role in the Middle East? <i>Wajih Kanso</i>	27
Christian Identity in an Islamic Context <i>Christine Amjad-Ali</i>	30
<u>NEWS TODAY</u> : Istanbul "Città Franceseana"? <i>Egidio Picucci</i>	35
<u>DOCUMENTS</u> : Apostolic journey of his Holiness Pope Francis to Egypt (28-29 april 2017) Meeting and prayer with priests, religious and seminarians	37

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Editorial

Dear Readers,

In this issue, we have brought together different aspects of this beautiful Abrahamic religion, Islam. *Islam is the guardian of prayer.* Every



Muslim prays the “Salat” five times a day, something Mohammed learned from his Jewish friends. But Sufism, the mystical tradition within Islam, has developed its own prayer form, the *dhikr*, namely, the unceasing repetition of God’s name. Andre De Bleeker compares this practice with the Jesus Prayer of the Hesychast Tradition. He shows the power of prayer in building peace. Martha Leticia Martínez de León explains that in Sufism, the term *Jihad* is a mystical concept; it is a person’s interior struggle to walk the path of God. James Kroeger, MM, makes an appeal to try to discover a unique Muslim-Christian bond between the city of Fatima, where Our Lady appeared, and Islam. To take Mother Mary herself as a model of obedience, and Islam, which also means “submission” to the will of God .

From these spiritually oriented articles we enter into present-day Islam, especially in the Middle East. Rafiq Khoury show us how difficult it sometimes is for Christians in Palestine to live their faith in this turbulent period in the Arab world. He launches an appeal to the West to enter into real dialogue with our Palestinian brothers and sisters. Waji Kanso’s text explains the historical background of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East. Religion is not an island, it is also a reflection of what animates society in a specific period of history. This brings us to the last article which asks the question: “How does a Christian believe in an Islamic context?”. Christine Amjad-Ali points out that “public piety”, such as praying and fasting, is very strong in Islam and influences the way Christians live their faith. For instance, Paki-

stani Christians can pray more “freely and easily” in public as Christians than in other countries. Also, the observance of Lent is very important for them, as they feel the influence of the Muslim observance of Ramadan. However, the other side of the medal is that the combination of public piety and personal corruption also forms part of the Christian identity in Pakistan.

We end our issue on “The World of Islam” with a current example of the missionary role of a church in the Muslim environment of Istanbul, and with Pope Francis’ encouraging words to the seminarians in Egypt on how to resist seven kinds of temptation that can arise in religious life, but indirectly also in contact with another religion. Enjoy!

Dhikr and the Jesus Prayer

Unceasing recollection of God leading to peace

Introduction

There is this mysterious experience that the closer I am to God, the closer I come to the other. Indeed, prayer brings me closer to my brothers and sisters. Several years ago, Fr. Pierre de Bethune, secretary of the Intermonastic Council, said: "Beyond all violence, prayer is the strongest bond, because it goes through God. It is the shortest way between humans, because God is the one who is nearest to us."¹ It is striking that a spokesperson of the Sufi community in Tibhirine, Algeria, told the Trappists of Our Lady of Atlas that the Sufis wanted to meet for shared prayer. "We do not want," he said, "to engage in a theological dialogue with you, for it has often raised barriers which are man-made. Now we feel called by God to unity. So we have to let God invent something new between us. This can be done only through prayer."²

As a Christian, I am convinced that, being attuned to God's presence in my own life, I will gladly open myself for God's presence in my Muslim brothers and sisters. When I truly try to live my Christian faith on a deep mystical level, I easily open my heart for other believers. Hence, I very strongly believe that disciples of Jesus have to familiarize themselves with their very own rich mystical traditions and walk the mystical path. Karl Rahner said that the Christian of the future will be a mystic, or he or she will not exist at all. Maybe I can add that human beings of the future will be mystics or they won't exist at all. Unfortunately, as Sebastian Painadath writes: "Most Christians cannot sit quietly in meditation even for a short period of time. In the formation of priests and religious a

disciplined initiation to contemplative pursuits is weak. The laity often looks for gurus in spirituality outside the Church. [...] In contemplative silence all religions meet at the depth level."³ And is maybe only at this level that humanity will be able to create a lasting peace.

This article seeks to explore some aspects of Christian and Islamic mysticism, and their importance for the future of humanity. First, I will discuss the Jesus Prayer. Then I will describe the Islamic practice of *dhikr*, or the unceasing repetition of God's name. Finally, I will point out that a continuous recollection of God can contribute to peace in the world.

The Jesus Prayer

From 1975 to 1983, I was a missionary in the mission of Kabugao-Calanasan in the province of Kalinga-Apayao, Philippines. In July 1978 I got very sick and almost entered the pearly gates. When recovering, a confrere encouraged me to read *Silent Music* by William Johnston⁴ and other books dealing with Christian mysticism and the mystical aspects of other religions. These books opened a beautiful world for me. One book, which I have read many times, left an enduring impact on my missionary life. It is entitled *The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way*.⁵ On the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, the Pilgrim attends the Liturgy and hears the text of Saint Paul that it is necessary to pray continuously (1 Thess. 5:17). Deeply impressed by these words, the Pilgrim wonders "how it could be possible for a man to

¹ Marcus Braybrooke, "Prayer Across Frontiers," *The Tablet* (3 August 1996): 1014.

² *Ibid.*

³ Sebastian Painadath, "The Transforming Power of Contemplative Silence," *Concilium* 2015/5: 42.

⁴ William Johnston, *Silent Music: The Science of Meditation* (Metro Manila: Saint Paul Publications, 1986).

⁵ N.A., *The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way*, trans. Helen Bacovcin (New York: Doubleday, 1978).

pray without ceasing when the practical necessities of life demand so much attention.”⁶ He checks his Bible and sees what he has heard. He also finds other texts with the same message. “(T)hat it is necessary[...] to pray in the Spirit on every possible occasion (Eph 6:18); in every place to lift your hands reverently in prayer (1 Tim 2:8).”⁷ The pilgrim starts now looking for a person who will help him to pray unceasingly. He meets a hermit who tells him:

“The ceaseless Jesus Prayer is a continuous, uninterrupted call on the holy name of Jesus Christ with the lips, mind, and heart; and in the awareness of His abiding presence it is a plea for His blessing in all undertakings, in all places, at all times, even in sleep. The words of the Prayer are: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!’ Anyone who becomes accustomed to this Prayer will experience great comfort as well as the need to say it continuously. He will become accustomed to it to such a degree that he will not be able to do without it and eventually the Prayer will of itself flow in him.”⁸

Then the hermit reads from a book called *The Philokalia*⁹ so that the Pilgrim can learn ceaseless interior prayer. The rest of the book describes his adventures and conversations as he wanders all over his motherland Russia.

Its History

The Jesus prayer is rooted in the New Testament. Power emanates from the respectful pronouncing of the name of Jesus. Jesus reveals the power of his name to his disciples: “²³ b Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. ²⁴ Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy

may be complete” (Jn 16:23b-24). In his letter to the Philippians, Saint Paul is urging them to call upon the name of Jesus: “⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11). After having cured a crippled beggar, Saint Peter has to face the rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with all who were of the high-priestly family. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he addresses them: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The early Christians preached and performed healings in the name of Jesus. They believed that Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and rose from the dead, was still with them. Because of their sinfulness, they also realized that they needed his merciful healing. They cried out like the blind man on the road to Jericho: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me” (Lk 18:38). Like the tax collector in the parable they pleaded for mercy: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Lk 18:13b).

Beginning around the third century, desert fathers and desert mothers, who mainly lived in the desert of Egypt, aimed at constantly living in God’s presence and loving God with their whole heart and mind. They experienced Jesus as living within them, and called upon his name. For these Christian ascetics God was truly a living God in their lives. With them originated hesychasm,¹⁰ a mystical tradition and movement. They stressed very much interior silence and continual prayer. In the course of the centuries, the Jesus Prayer grew out of the desert hesychastic spirituality. This prayer spread in Eastern Churches and later also in the West.

In the introductory note to *A Discourse on Abba Philimon* it is mentioned that “the Jesus Prayer is cited by Philimon in what has become to be regarded as its standard form, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me’: the *Discourse* seems to be the earliest source to cite

⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ A collection of texts, originally in Greek, written by holy Fathers from the fourth to the fifteenth century. On page 13 of the Introduction to *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, compilers St Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth, translated and edited, G.E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, vol. 1 (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), the following description is found: “‘Philokalia’ itself means love of the beautiful, the exalted, the excellent, understood as the transcendent source of life and the revelation of Truth.”

¹⁰ From the Greek: ἡσυχασμός, hesychasmos; ἡσυχία, hesychia: stillness, rest, quiet, silence.

explicitly this precise formula.”¹¹ A brother named John came to Father Philimon (lived around 600) with the question:

‘What shall I do to be saved? For my intellect vacillates to and fro and strays after all the wrong things.’ [...] Abba Philimon replied: ‘Meditate inwardly for a while, deep in your heart; for this can cleanse your intellect of these things.’ The brother, not understanding what was said, asked the Elder: ‘What is inward meditation, father?’ The Elder replied: ‘Keep watch in your heart; and with watchfulness say in your mind with awe and trembling: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me.’ For this is the advice which the blessed Diadochos gave to beginners.¹²

Gradually, a fixed formula for the Jesus Prayer was being used. When “Byzantine monasteries had been ravaged by invading Turkish troops, a renaissance of the Jesus Prayer developed on Mount Athos in the 13th and 14th centuries following the writings of Nicephoros and St Gregory of Sinai.^{13,14} When discussing watchfulness, Nikiphoros the Monk (d. c. 1300) writes among others:

“Banish, then, all thoughts from this faculty¹⁵ — and you can do this if you want to — and in their place put the prayer, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me,’ and compel it to repeat this prayer ceaselessly. If you do this for some time, it will assuredly open for you the entrance to your heart in the way we have explained, and as we ourselves know from experience. Then, along with the attentiveness you have wished for, the whole choir of the virtues — love, joy, peace and the others (cf. Gal. 5:22) — will come to you. Through the virtues all your petitions will be answered in Christ Jesus our Lord.”¹⁶

It was during these 13th and 14th centuries that the Jesus Prayer acquired its fixed formula: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ “The fourteenth century is the high point in the development of the Jesus Prayer. In fact, over the following five centuries, there were three periods of great intensity in the practice of the Jesus Prayer: the fourteenth century in Byzantium, the eighteenth century in Greece, and the nineteenth century in Russia.”¹⁷

In the 18th century *The Philokalia*, collected by Metropolitan Makarios of Corinth (1731-1805) and Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain of Athos (c.1748-1809), was published. This Greek text contains the writings of the hesychastic Fathers, especially the texts dealing with the Jesus Prayer.

The influence of this work was not confined to the Greek-speaking world, as the editors and translators of *The Philokalia* write:

It was Paisii Velichkovskii (1722-1794), a Russian monk who visited Mount Athos and later settled in Moldavia, who first translated a selection of the texts into Slavonic, published, with the title *Dobrotolubiye*,¹⁸ at Moscow in 1793 and reprinted at Moscow in 1822. This was the translation carried by the pilgrim in *The Way of a Pilgrim*; and indeed the impact of the *Philokalia* on Russian spirituality and culture in writings of Dostoyevsky, an assiduous reader of the book, alone sufficiently testify. A translation

¹¹ *The Philokalia*, vol. 2 (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 343.

¹² Ibid., 347. For the advice of blessed Diadochos of Photiki (400-c. 486), see e.g. p. 270 of *The Philokalia*, vol. 1 (London: Faber and Faber, 1979). He says that to avoid a spirit of listlessness “we must confine the mind within very narrow limits, devoting ourselves solely to the remembrance of God. Only in this way will the intellect be able to regain its original fervor and escape this senseless dissipation.” He further stresses that we should give the intellect “nothing but the prayer ‘Lord Jesus’.”

¹³ See *The Philokalia*, vol. 4, 1995, p. 275-286, where St Gregory of Sinai (c. 1265-1346) describes how to say the prayer, how to sit during the prayer, how to focus, how to psalmodize, how to eat, and other related issues. In *The Jesus Prayer*, <http://store.ancientfaith.com/the-jesus-prayer-by-fr-david-hester/> (accessed November 17, 2015), David Hester writes: “He was a monk from Sinai who learned of the Jesus Prayer while living in Crete. He later went to Mount Athos, where he found only three monks who were experts in the contemplative life. He instructed the monks there in prayer, and from that point on, Athos would give its own particular stamp to the Jesus Prayer, with a particular emphasis on its formula and on accompanying psychophysical techniques.”

¹⁴ George A. Maloney, *Prayer of the Heart* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1981), 131.

¹⁵ He refers to the discursive faculty.

¹⁶ *The Philokalia*, vol. 4, p. 206.

¹⁷ Hester, *The Jesus Prayer*.

¹⁸ *Dobrotolubiye* means *Philokalia*.

into Russian was made by Ignatii Brianchaninov (1807-1867) and was published in 1857. Yet another Russian translation, still with the title *Dobrotolubiye*, was made by Bishop Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894).¹⁹

As of the end of 2015, only the first four of the five Greek volumes from the Third Greek edition have been published in English.²⁰ Due to the immigration of Orthodox Christians to the West, the establishment in Europe and North America of Orthodox monasteries, translations made of *The Philokalia*, and writings on the Jesus Prayer, Western Christians began to know the Jesus Prayer and to practice it.

Techniques and Experiences

Praying the Jesus Prayer is not an esoteric practice. As a matter of fact, there are no fixed rules for those who pray because we cannot force God to show his presence by using physical and/or mental techniques.

Some practitioners synchronize the Prayer with their breathing. They recite Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, while breathing in, and have mercy on me, a sinner,



while breathing out. Still others may pray only the name of Jesus. They recite ‘Je’ when breathing in, and ‘sus’ when breathing out. One can also say orally or mentally the whole prayer when breathing in and again the whole prayer while breathing out. In short, there are several ways to pray the Jesus Prayer. It is true that the elder in *The Way of a Pilgrim* gives some directives to the pilgrim: “Here is a rosary²¹ on which you can count and in the beginning say the Prayer at least three thousand times a day; do not add to or take away from this number by yourself. Through this exercise God will help you to achieve the ceaseless activity of the heart.”²² After some days he reports to the elder who instructs him to recite “the Prayer six thousand times a day.”²³ Later, the elder suggests “to

recite the Prayer twelve thousand times a day. Rise earlier and retire later; stay alone, and every two weeks come to me for direction.”²⁴ The pilgrim becomes so

accustomed to the Prayer “that if for a short while I stopped reciting it I felt as if I were missing something, as though I had lost something. When I would begin reciting the Prayer again, I would immediately feel great joy and delight.”²⁵ And this joy would stay with him. “I was joyful the whole day and seemingly oblivious to everything else. I seemed to be in another world. [. . .] For some days I continued in this manner, joyfully and lovingly calling on the name of Jesus.”²⁶ When the pilgrim reports his experiences, the elder mentions that “[y]our own experience testifies to the kind of feelings which can be experienced, without extraordinary grace, even in impure and sinful souls. Ah,

¹⁹ *The Philokalia*, vol. 1, 12.

²⁰ The texts of the first four volumes of *The Philokalia* are written by: (vol. 1) St Isaiah the Solitary, Evagrius the Solitary, St John Cassian, St Marc the Ascetic, St Hesychios the Priest, St Neilos the Ascetic, St Diadochos of Photiki, St John Karpathos; (vol. 2) St Theodoros the Great Ascetic, St Maximos the Confessor, St Thalassios the Libyan, St John of Damaskos, (on Abba Philimon), St Theognostos; (vol. 3) St Philotheos of Sinai, Ilias the Presbyter, Theophanis the Monk, St Peter of Damaskos, St Symeon Metaphrasis; (vol. 4) St Symeon the New Theologian, Nikitas Stithatos, Theoliptos Metropolitan of Philadelphia, Nikiphoros the Monk, St Gregory of Sinai, and St Gregory Palamas. According to <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philokalia> (accessed on November 17, 2015), these are the contents of the modern Greek translation of volume 5 of *The Philokalia*: Kallistos and Ignatios the Xanthopouloses, Kalistos Angelikoudis, Kalistos Tilikoudis (presumed the same as Kalistos Angelikoudis), Kalistos Katafygiotis (presumed the same as Kalistos Angelikoudis), Saint Simeon Archbishop of Thessaloniki, Saint Mark the Gentle, Anonymous, Saint Simeon the New Theologian, St. Gregory of Sinai, Excerpts from the life of St. Maximos Kapsokalivis, All Christians Must Pray Uninterruptedly.

²¹ A hundred beads and a cross strung together and used in reciting the Jesus Prayer. The use of the rosary or prayer rope, however, is not compulsory and it is considered as an aid to the beginners or the weak practitioners, those who face difficulties practicing the Prayer.

²² *The Way of a Pilgrim*, 21.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 22.

²⁵ Ibid., 21.

²⁶ Ibid., 22.

how indescribably wonderful it is when God deigns to purify a soul from passion and grants to it the gift of self-activating interior prayer. This condition is difficult to imagine and the revelation of this secret prayer is a foretaste of heavenly bliss while the soul is still here on earth.”²⁷ The pilgrim not only experiences a kind of heavenly bliss, but he also sees people in a new way: “And if I happened to meet people during the day they all seemed as close to me as if they were my kinsmen, even though I did not know them.”²⁸ Indeed, practitioners of this Prayer mention that the Prayer gives them peace and joy. When meeting people, they look at them with new eyes and an open mind. Looking at nature fills them with feelings of delight and happiness.

Several times the pilgrim is dreaming that he is praying.²⁹ Indeed, he and many others try to internalize the prayer, so that they are praying unceasingly. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit the repetition of the Jesus Prayer happens even in sleep hereby accomplishing St Paul’s exhortation to pray unceasingly.

After the death of his spiritual guide, the pilgrim starts his wanderings during which he continues reciting the Jesus Prayer. He is also able to buy a copy of *The Philokalia*. He is no longer upset by offenses: “When someone offends me, I remember how sweet the Jesus Prayer is and the offense and anger disappear and I forget everything.”³⁰

Praying the Jesus Prayer and other forms of concentrated meditation have an impact on the way the practitioner looks at people and the world. This is also expressed in *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

Nevertheless, through contemplation he is so growing in practical goodness and love that, when he speaks or prays with his fellow Christians at other times, the warmth of his love reaches out to them all, friend, enemy, stranger, and kin alike. If there is any partiality at all, it is more likely to be toward his enemy than toward his friend. [...] But in the contemplative work itself, he does not distinguish between friend

and enemy, brother and stranger. I do not mean, however, that he will cease to feel a spontaneous affection toward a few others who are especially close to him. [...] The point I am making is that during the work of contemplation everyone is equally dear to him since it is God alone who stirs him to love. He loves all men plainly and nakedly for God; and he loves them as he loves himself.³¹

The use of the Jesus Prayer brings my inner consciousness in touch with God. As God becomes more and more alive to me, I realize that human life can be lived only to the fullest degree through the consciously felt presence of God in people and in all things. Because of God’s presence I am able to reach out to all my brothers and sisters. My love becomes purer because selfishness fades away. Hence, true charity can grow and I discover the presence and loving activities of God in people and in all creatures. Repeating the name of Jesus will make me aware of my true self, a child of God. Gradually I will experience God as the core of my very being. Jesus, then, becomes a living person for me, acting within me. And so I render Jesus Christ present again in the world.

As a Christian I must encounter Jesus, the living Lord, so that I can move out into the modern world filled with love of God and with God’s love for his world. In this way I can contribute to peace in this war-torn world.

Dhikr

The practice of *dhikr*, remembrance of God, is based on texts of the Qur’ān³² and Hadith.³³ In

³¹ N.A., *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counseling*, ed. William Johnston (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 81-82.

³² All the quotations from the Qur’ān are taken from *The Holy Qur’ān: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary*, rev. ed. The Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, (Al-Madinah Al-Munawarah: King Fahd Holy Qur’ān Printing Complex, 1410 H/1990).

³³ The Arabic word *hadīth* (plural *ahādīth*) means primarily a communication or narrative in general whether religious or profane. In Islam, *hadīth* is a technical term that refers to an account of the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. It can be used both in a collective and singular sense. At first, the reports were transmitted orally. Later, gradually, these reports were recorded in written form.

²⁷ Ibid., 23.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 24.

surah³⁴ *Al-Kahf* (The Cave) 18:24, the unceasing remembrance of God and the forgetting of everything that is not God is mentioned: “And remember (*udhkur*) thy Lord when thou forgettest.” Understood here is that, when you forget everything which is not God, then you will remember God. Surah *Az-Zumar* (The Groups) 39:22 says: “Woe to those whose hearts are hardened against the remembrance of Allah (*dhikr Allah*)! They are manifestly wandering (in error)!” In surah *Al-Munāfiqūn* (The Hypocrites) 63:9 we read: “O ye who believe! Let not your riches or your children divert you from the remembrance of Allah.”

The term *dhikr* used in Islamic mysticism means the invocation of God, the mention of the Lord’s name, and the collective liturgical exercise of Sufi orders, consisting in incessant repetition of certain words or formulas in praise of God, often accompanied by music and dancing.

Sufism

The tendencies to mystical life, which are of all countries and of all nations, were not lacking in the Islam of Arabia of the first two centuries AH³⁵ (from 632 to about 730 CE). Several authentic ascetics of this period show distinct features of the mystic life in their interiorization of the rites of worship.

Muslim mysticism may claim among the companions of the Prophet two real precursors in Abu Dharr and Hudhaifa. After them came ascetics, penitents or “weepers” and popular preachers. At first isolated, they gradually tend to fall into two individual schools which had their headquarters on the Mesopotamian frontier of the Arabian Desert, one at Basra and the other at Kufa (both places now in Iraq).

By the ninth century the verbal noun *tasawwuf*, literally “being a Sufi” or “Sufism,” was adopted by representatives of this group as their appropriate designation. *Tasawwuf* is formed from the root *suf*, meaning “wool,” to denote “the practice of wearing the woollen robe,” hence the act of devoting oneself to the mystic life, to becoming what is called in Islam a Sufi.

At first, the wearing of the *suf* or “cloak of white wool” was considered as a foreign and reprehensible fashion of Christian origin. In the course of time it became and remained an eminently orthodox Muslim fashion. Several hadith even make it Muhammad’s favorite dress for a religious man.

In general the Sufis have seen themselves as Muslims who take seriously God’s call to perceive his presence both in the world and in the self. They tend to stress inwardness over outwardness, contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism. Sufis love to speak of God’s mercy, gentleness, and beauty far more than of his majesty and wrath.

Both men and women can walk the Sufi path. Margaret Smith writes that Sufis “give to a woman the first place among the earliest Muhammedan mystics and have chosen her to represent the first development of mysticism in Islām.”³⁶ This woman is Rābi‘ah (d. 801).

At about the twelfth century CE, Sufi orders (*tariqāhs*) begin to play a major role in Islamic history. Sufism has not only been associated with specific institutions but also with an enormously rich literature, especially poetry. Mention should be made of the masterpiece of Rumi (1207-1273), *The Mathnawi*.³⁷ The work reflects the experience of divine love.

Although at times attacked by jurists and rulers, Sufi authorities issued guidelines for keeping Sufism squarely at the heart of the Islamic tradition. Many Sufis lived rather retired lives in

³⁴ The Qur’ān is divided into one hundred and fourteen (114) surahs that are often translated as chapters.

³⁵ Regarding the Islamic calendar, Kenneth Cragg writes on p. xi of *The House of Islam* (Encino, California: Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc., 1975): “The Muslim dating A.H. (*Anno Hegirae*: ‘in the year of the Hijrah’) begins from July 16, 622 A.D., when Muhammad emigrated from Mecca to establish his cause in Medina. A Muslim year consists of 12 lunar months and each, therefore, recedes approximately 11 days each solar year. The Muslim calendar thus gains about three years every century on the Christian calendar.”

³⁶ Margaret Smith, *Rābi‘a: The Life and Work of Rābi‘a and Other Women Mystics in Islām* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1994), 21. See André De Bleeker, “The Love Mysticism of Hadewijch and Rābi‘ah al-cAdawīyah,” *MST Review*, vol. 14, nos 1 and 2, 2012: 111-147.

³⁷ Reynold A. Nicholson, ed., trans, and commentary, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu’d-dīn Rūmī* (Cambridge: The Trustees of the “E. J. W. Gibb Memorial”: 2001 [reprint of 1926 ed.].

voluntary poverty in order to meditate better on the Qur'ān and to draw near to God in prayer. The Sufis were beset by an intense desire to find God at any price.

The Ritual Act of Reminding Oneself about God's Presence in This World

Dhikr or the ritual act of the incessant recollection of God can be performed either in private or during special gatherings when it is often accompanied by bodily movements and postures. It can also accompany ritual dance as in the case of the whirling dervishes, the Mawlawīyah Order, organized by the disciples of Rumi. As a sort of litany repeated by the pious Muslim, *dhikr* shows parallels with the Jesus Prayer.

Some Sufi orders recommended the so-called silent *dhikr*, whispered in a low voice. Others insisted on a loud *dhikr*. Before performing a silent *dhikr*, the Sufi must sit in solitude, uttering continuously Allah (God) until this word begins to permeate his whole being.

The recitation of the *dhikr* presupposes preparation. According to al-Ghazālī³⁸ the practitioner has to renounce the world and adopt an ascetic lifestyle. He needs to have a sincere intention of the heart and not make *dhikr* an end in itself. The spiritual director of a given group of Sufis plays an important role. He oversees the recitation of *dhikr* and prevents the devotees from indulging in faked ecstatic behavior and from other excesses.

The *dhikr* formula may open with the first part of the Islamic creed, 'there is no deity but God.' Another formula of *dhikr* is the name of Allah. Other *dhikr* formulae usually consist of one of God's '99 beautiful names,' found in the Qur'ān: e.g. *Huwa* (He; with the understanding that He is mighty and majestic), *al-Haqq* (The Truth, The Reality), *al-Hayy* (The Living; being the source of all life), *al-Qayyūm* (The Self-Subsistent; eternally existing in and for Himself alone), *al-Qabbār* (The Almighty), *as-Salām* (The Peace-Maker, whose name is peace).

The spiritual leader, the shaykh, who presides over the session of *dhikr*, or the individual Sufi regulates the duration of *dhikr* with or without the help of a *subha*,³⁹ a sort of rosary. The reciter may repeat the invocations "300, 3.000, 6.000, 12.000, ...70.000"⁴⁰ times. As mentioned earlier, the elder or starets tells the Russian pilgrim to recite the Jesus Prayer 3,000 times a day. Later he has to recite it 6,000 times, then 12,000 times. With time, the reciter may lose track of the number of invocations, and the *dhikr* may become unceasing and spontaneous.

The reciter of the *dhikr* tries to implant God into his heart. After achieving this, he enters the stage of the *dhikr* of the heart. It is now, according to al-Ghazālī, that his heart takes over as the enunciator of *dhikr*, and the formula becomes integrated into the beating of the physical heart. God's presence makes the reciter oblivious of the surrounding world. "As a result, a union between the reciter, the recitation and the

³⁹ It has 99 small beads and one big one for God. There is also the small *subha* with 33 beads. The Sufis were the first to use the *subha*. On p. 438 of his book, *History of the Arabs: From the Earliest Times to the Present*, 9th ed. (London: MacMillan, 1967), Philip K. Hitti writes:

Today only the puritanical Wāḥhābis eschew the rosary, regarding it as an innovation (**bid 'ah**). Of Hindu origin, this instrument of devotion was probably borrowed by the Sufis from the Eastern Christian churches and not directly from India. During the Crusades the rosary found its way into the Roman Catholic West. The first mention of the rosary in Arabic literature was made by the poet laureate abu-Nuwās (+ ca. 810). The celebrated mystic al-Junayd (+ 910) of Baghdād used it as a means of attaining a state of ecstasy, and when once a critic remonstrated with him for the use of such an innovation despite his reputation for sanctity, al-Junayd replied: "I will not renounce a path that has led me to God." The religious movement known as the *Wāḥhābīyah* (sometimes anglicized as "Wahhabism") is founded on the teachings of Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wāḥhāb (1703-1791), who wrote on a variety of Islamic subjects such as theology, exegesis, jurisprudence, and the life of the prophet Muhammad. A number of issues dominated his teachings: e.g. the unity of God, visitation of tombs, building of tombs, and innovation. He was convinced that in order to restore Islam to the purity and simplicity of its beginnings, it had to get rid of all later accretions. He rejected all knowledge not based on the Qur'ān, the Sunnah or necessary inferences of reason. He also rejected many Sufi practices. To a large extent the ideology of IS is a further development of Wāḥhabism.

⁴⁰ G.-C. Anawati and Louis Gardet, *Mystique Musulmane: Aspects et Tendances, Expériences et Techniques*, 4th ed. (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1986), 204.

³⁸ Al-Ghazālī (c. 1058-1111) was a Muslim theologian, jurist, philosopher, and mystic of Persian descent. He has been referred to by some historians as the single most influential Muslim after the prophet Muhammad.

One whose name is recited, is effected. [. . .] The personality of the Sufi is thus dissolved in the all-encompassing divine unity that no longer allows any duality within it.”⁴¹

Mansur al-Hallāj (c.858-922), a Persian mystic and teacher of Sufism, describes “*dhikr* as a *method* of reminding oneself of God and of helping the soul to live in God’s presence.”⁴² For Ibn ‘Atā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī (1259-1310), *dhikr* is “not just a preparatory stage of the mystical path, but also an effective technique that gives the mystic direct access to the domain of divine mysteries.”⁴³ By concentrating all his thoughts and aspirations on God, the Sufi or mystical seeker is led to a direct encounter with God.

As an antidote against violent Islamic extremism, a Sufi revival is being promoted in Chechnya by its Moscow-backed president Ramzan Kadyrov. For almost two centuries Sufism has been the dominant form of Islam in Chechnya. In Soviet times it was forced underground.

Mr. Kadyrov belongs to the Qadiri order. Every Thursday evening he holds a *dhikr* at his home. In an interview at his offices in Grozny, Sultan Mirzayev, mufti of Chechnya and close ally of Mr. Kadyrov, said that “the Wahhabis offer nothing but death and destruction. We want to revive our homeland and give its people hope.”⁴⁴

This brief survey of the practice of *dhikr* reveals that Sufis and mystical seekers in Islam spare no effort to walk the road that leads to God. They focus with body, heart and soul on the beloved, on God. By walking the mystical path they also seek to promote peace as one of the ninety-nine beautiful names of God is peace.

Unceasing recollection of God leading to peace

Both in Islam and Christianity more and more believers perceive a link between prayer and the promotion of peace.⁴⁵ In the midst of ongoing armed conflicts, pious Muslims enter more deeply into the spiritual dimension of their faith. Henri Teissier⁴⁶ mentions that the excesses of political Islam or the political use of Islam has caused many Algerians to discover the specifically spiritual dimensions of Islam. This has also led to a revaluation of the Muslim Brotherhoods, as well as the Sufi dimension of a national hero as the Emir Abdelkader. Some Muslims have even committed themselves to rediscover the mystical sources of Islam, taking the road of the old brotherhoods or going directly to the sources of the great mystics (Al-Ghazali, Ibn ‘Arabi, and others).⁴⁷

As I said in the introduction, prayer brings believers of various religious traditions closer together. Pope John Paul II firmly believed this. That is why he organized the first World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi, on October 27, 1986. About 160 religious leaders were spending the day together while fasting and praying to their God or Gods. They represented Christian reli-

⁴⁵ See e.g. Timothy Wright, *No Peace Without Prayer: Encouraging Muslims and Christians to Pray Together* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013).

⁴⁶ Henri Teissier (b. 1929), a French national, was ordained a priest for the diocese of Algiers. He was ordained bishop by Cardinal Duval whom he succeeded as archbishop of Algiers. He obtained Algerian citizenship in 1966. Since 2008, he is archbishop emeritus of Algiers. He never tired of promoting peace when Algeria went through a terrible crisis during the last decade of the second millennium.

⁴⁷ These three sentences are my translation of the following Italian text: “Proprio quell’esagerato ‘Islam politico’ o ‘uso politico dell’Islam’ ha indotto molti algerini a ‘scoprire le dimensioni propriamente spirituali dell’Islam.’ Ciò ha spinto alla rivalutazione delle ‘confraternite musulmane,’ ‘così come la dimensione sufi di un eroe nazionale come l’emiro Abdelkader.’[...] Alcuni si sono perfino impegnati a ritrovare le fonti propriamente mistiche dell’Islam, riprendendo il cammino delle antiche confraternite, oppure cercando di attingere direttamente alle fonti dei grandi mistici (Al-Ghazali, Ibn ‘Arabi, ecc.).” This text is found in: Mirella Susini, *Cercatori di dio: Il dialogo tra cristiani e musulmani nel monastero dei martiri di Tibhirine* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 2015), 63.

⁴¹ Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 321.

⁴² Ibid., 322.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Tom Parfitt, *The Battle for the Soul of Chechnya*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/nov/22/chechnya.tomparfitt> (accessed January 8, 2016).

gious communities or organizations and 11 other religious traditions.

Four years later, Pope John Paul II issued the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*. In no. 29 we read: “The inter-religious meeting held in Assisi was meant to confirm my conviction that ‘every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart.’” Whenever believers think of God and pronounce reverently his name, the Spirit of the Lord is at work in their heart and in their life. By recalling God’s name, Christians and Muslims are being absorbed in God’s love. Although the starting points are different, they can reach the same end. Repeating God’s name unites Christians and Muslims ever more closely to God.

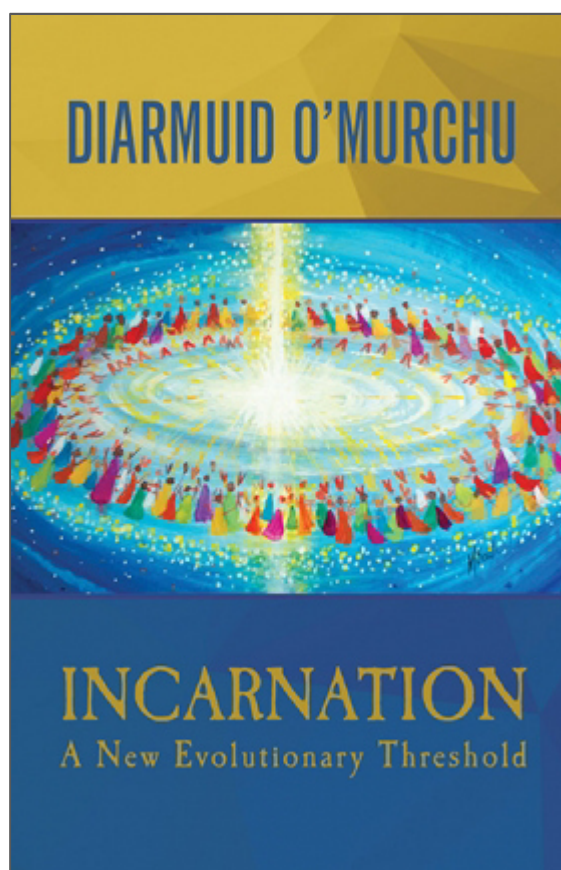
For many years I was involved in the Peacemakers’ Circle in Manila.⁴⁸ One of the important activities was, and still is, I believe, being together in prayer. By praying we open ourselves to God and to one another. How beautiful and mysterious becomes the bond that unites believers belonging to various religious traditions. This experience of being children of one God makes it unthinkable to wage war.

In Tibhirine, Algeria, Trappists, some other Catholics, and Sufis met regularly for shared prayer from 1979 up to 1996 when seven of the nine Trappists were abducted by a group of Muslim fundamentalists and later murdered.⁴⁹ It was the spokesperson of the Sufi community who said that “we feel called by God to unity. So we have to let God invent something new between us. This can be done only through prayer.”⁵⁰ In September 1981, the “prayer group” took on the name *Ribāt as-Salām*, the

Bond of Peace.⁵¹ This name clearly points to the link between prayer and peace.

The members of the *Ribāt as-Salām* manifested in their life and meetings that God seekers cannot but be peace seekers. Indeed, believers who walk the mystical path and unceasingly pray the name of Jesus or of God are on their way to the source of all peace. God seekers are peace seekers. There can be no peace without praying individually and together with other believers.

We thank the author who sent this article to be published in the Sedos Bulletin



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⁴⁸ See <http://www.thepeacemakerscircle.org/> (accessed January 10, 2016).

⁴⁹ The seven Trappists were murdered or killed (?) on May 21, 1996. However, it is not very clear who killed them. A retired French general testified to a judge that the monks had been accidentally killed by an Algerian military helicopter during an attack on a guerrilla position, then beheaded after their death to make it appear as though the extremists had killed them. However, Abdelhak Layada, a former leader of the Armed Islamic Group who was in prison when the monks were killed, claimed that the monks had been beheaded after a breakdown of negotiations with the French secret service.

⁵⁰ Braybrooke, *ibid*.

⁵¹ See the detailed study of their meetings written by Mirella Susini, *Cercatori di Dio*.

Martha Leticia Martínez de León

La Yihād... La verdadera guerra santa

¿CÓMO SE RESPONDE A UNA LÁGRIMA, al llanto que se desborda en el rostro, más allá de que sea de un anciano, de un adulto o de un niño(a)? cómo se da respuesta al dolor, a la muerte ocasionada por la mala interpretación de la palabra de Dios? ¿En dónde queda la respuesta, dónde habita en el interior cuando se acercan a ti para que tu conocimiento transfiera una respuesta?

Como estudiosa de las cinco grandes religiones, particularmente de las llamadas religiones del libro (Judaísmo, Cristianismo e Islam), digo en este momento que no tengo la respuesta, y me tiemblan las manos al escribir que la búsqueda del conocimiento y el estudio de los Libros Sagrados me ha vuelto ignorante ante la palabra, débil frente a la necesidad de paz y sin manos espirituales para ofrecer seguridad y protección al ser humano. Como creyente, me confieso perdida en dogmas y estudios que han encerrado a Dios en un libro, en templos, en mezquitas, en sinagogas, encarcelándolo mientras el ser humano se asesina por riquezas, poder y sobre todo por enfatizar una verdad absoluta, cuando esta, por sí misma, es inexistente, porque la verdad absoluta se construye con la verdad individual de cada persona que existe en el mundo.

A lo largo de la historia de la humanidad, el hombre y la mujer con poder han despojado de la vida a sus semejantes para conquistar tierras, adquirir minerales, petróleo, han matado animales para poseer marfil, pieles, han despojado a cientos de pueblos para dominar tierras, extraer sus riquezas, explotar el agua, han asesinado esclavizado al hombre y a la mujer para su servicio pisoteando su dignidad. Pero entre todos estos crímenes mencionados existe más terrible de todos, asesinar, destruir, dominar en nombre de Dios, gritando que es palabra o voluntad de Dios, sea cual sea nombre con el que se le pronuncie, o diciendo que Dios

dictaminó través de un libro que esto fuese así. Pero aunado a este fundamentalismo existe la otra parte, la de aquellos que no creen en Dios, ni tienen religión y agreden al que cree manifestando su negación de manera violenta, asesinando, torturando a quien se confiesa creyente. De esta manera, la violencia en nombre de Dios se desarrolla no solo a través de un fundamentalismo religioso que predica una verdad absoluta sino también al lado de aquél que violenta al creyente al burlarse de su espiritualidad o de su creencia. Analizado de manera racional, ninguna de las partes tienen razón; ninguna tiene derecho a agredir al otro. Ambas partes caen en el fundamentalismo de la verdad absoluta; o existe Dios en una sola verdad o no existe en otra sola verdad. Dios, es Él que es, como lo dice su significado, en quien anhela que sea así, y es Él que no es, en quien desea que sea así, pero esto debe de ser en la propia vida, sin enjuiciar y dañar al otro.

Esta verdad absoluta sobre Dios se ha reconstruido de diversas maneras en la historia de la humanidad. Es así como un gran porcentaje de los acontecimientos históricos tienen su fundamento en la lucha de imponer el nombre de Dios. Expondré un ejemplo terrible que abarca estos dos puntos: la matanza de los escritores de *Charlie Hebdo*, acto que se atribuye a la Yihād o Jihād, quienes se nombran custodios de la fe. Es absurdo, incomprensible, matar a otro en nombre de Dios!, este acto es condenable, pero, ¿qué pasa con la sociedad que solo analiza esta parte? ¿No es también terrible que un grupo de personas agredan a los creyentes y se enriquezcan dañando la espiritualidad del otro?, ¿acaso no es un acto de violencia?, ¿se puede llamar libertad de expresión a quien actúa sabiendo que dañará a otra persona? Ninguno de los puntos es justificable; ambos actúan de manera violenta, irrumpiendo en la armonía interior.

La libertad, un valor fundamental en la vida

del ser humano es el valor que más responsabilidad lleva en sí mismo, porque la libertad nos lleva a ver al otro, a encontrarnos con la persona en toda su integridad. ¿No enaltece esto las palabras de Voltaire al decir: “No estoy de acuerdo con lo que dices, pero defenderé con mi vida tu derecho a expresarlo?”, lo cual se relaciona completamente con la regla de oro de las religiones: “Ama al otro como a ti mismo”. En estas dos frases tenemos a la razón y a la fe pidiendo lo mismo. Cada uno de nuestros actos debe de tener en cuenta la paz y tranquilidad del otro, porque de esta manera se vivirá a través de la ética, la cual protege la dignidad, y no a través de leyes y dogmas que realmente nos esclavizan, porque han sido las leyes civiles y los dogmas religiosos los que — apoyando a una falsa justicia que es corruptible —, nos han separado del concepto ético de la dignidad al tergiversar conceptos y palabras. Un ejemplo es la llamada Jihâd o “guerra santa”, que tanto daño ha hecho, no solo a la sociedad sino a una de las más bellas religiones, como lo es el Islam.

Retrocedamos un poco a la historia.

En 1970, en Egipto, el grupo Hermanos Musulmanes originados en 1928, toma fuerza tras la muerte de Al Sadat, presidente de dicho país, al pretender derrocar al régimen egipcio y crear un Estado Islámico a través de actos violentos calificados como terrorismo. La mayoría de estos actos fueron cometidos en nombre de A decir, de Dios.

Pero este concepto que significa “esfuerzo” es llevado a cabo a través de una manipulación de su significado. La Yihâd o Jihâd es un concepto del Tasawwuf, del misticismo islámico, llamado “sufismo”, y se fundamenta en el esfuerzo que se realiza interiormente hacia el camino de Dios.

La Jihâd o guerra santa es una guerra interior que lleva al ser humano a enfrentarse a sus egoísmos. Esta escrito que un día el Profeta (sean con Él la salvación y la paz), dijo:

“Volvemos de una pequeña guerra pero nos dirigimos hacia la gran guerra. Entonces alguien preguntó, — ¿Cuál es esa gran guerra? — a lo que él respondió. —Se trata de la gran guerra que cada uno debe emprender contra su propio egoísmo.”

Así, como señala Shaij Khaled: “La gran gue-

rra santa no está destinada a extender la fe del Islam bajo el mandato de un tirano. La gran Jihâd (*Al jihâd al-akbar*), la jihâd de las almas, se remonta a los orígenes del hombre”.

Desde que el ser humano tuvo conciencia de todo lo que había recibido de Dios, la inteligencia y el conocimiento que lo llevaron a deducir su propia responsabilidad, y su ignorancia ante el universo con el cual se siente unido, fue cuando concluyó que tenía el poder de elegir su destino, de escoger entre el bien y el mal. Es este el punto islámico de la Jihâd donde se reconoce que esta gran guerra santa, no es más que la lucha del ser humano contra sí mismo, contra el ego. Es por eso que el sufismo dice: “Se debe manipular la vida con las manos, pero sin dejarla penetrar nunca en el corazón, porque las manos pueden lavarse, pero no así el corazón”.

Pero, ¿qué es el Sufismo?

Cuando se le pregunta a un maestro sufi sobre que es el Tasawwuf él suele responder de la siguiente manera: “Aquello que te ronda en la cabeza, abandónalo; lo que tienes entre manos, ofrécelo; lo que ha de sucederte, no lo esquives”.

Estas bellas palabras nos muestran que el Islam es una religión que anhela unir la espiritualidad del hombre y la mujer con su humanidad a través de la donación y la entrega al otro. Así, aquellos que condenan el Islam y a quienes lo practican ignoran completamente su verdadero significado, hiriendo a través de su ignorancia a miles de personas; creando con sus palabras violencia, acto que — está por demás decir —, condena el Islam desde su origen.

El Islam, desde su corazón, no condena ninguna religión; al contrario tiene como padre a Abraham, padre del pueblo judío y cristiano, y a Jesús como el segundo más grande profeta. Esto se lee en la tradición musulmana que dice: “Jesús era lo divino que habla en lo divino, el alma divina revelada a nuestra palabra”.

El camino místico del Islam es un camino de hermandad, que ha sido opacado por el extremismo de un grupo de personas. Pero esta mala interpretación no puede llevarnos a condenar a miles de musulmanes que realmente viven o tratan de vivir este camino.

Las palabras de Mahoma (sean con Él la sal-

vacación y la paz), van directas al interior del hombre y de la mujer para convivir en conocimiento y libertad con el otro. Así se lee en un Hadith o dicho del profeta: “Hablad a la gente de tal modo que os puedan entender”. Es decir: con palabras sencillas y con actos dignos que vayan más allá de instituciones.

Shaij Khaled Bentounés, un maestro sufi, expone: “los dogmas religiosos han desprovisto al hombre de todas sus referencias interiores de su espiritualidad; la religión se ha convertido en una ideología en un instrumento de manipulación de las masas”.

Una religión no puede ni debe ser ideología ni doctrina porque lleva a asesinar y a esclavizar.

El misticismo islámico a través de la Yihâd invita a una acción renovadora la cual tiene como punto central agredir al ego (al yo), pero nunca a la criatura; nunca a través de actos agresivos contra la sociedad. La Yihâd nos enseña que al vencer día a día en esta guerra, la vida se alarga en intensidad, porque —como señala el sufismo— : “Quien es generoso se hace a sí mismo un bien inmenso que hace que aumente su propia alegría de vivir. El camino del Islam nos enseña a destruir al maestro para revelar a Dios en cada ser humano”.

El Islam no condena a la mujer, al contrario la enaltece al ser considerada la parte femenina de Dios porque lleva en su vientre el don de crear. La vestimenta impuesta a las mujeres ha sido una mala comprensión de las palabras del Profeta (sean con Él la salvación y la paz), quien dice: “Dios no contempla ni vuestra apariencia ni vuestras acciones, sino que El mira en vuestros corazones”.

El Islam se fundamenta en la paz del corazón, por lo que un creyente no debe separar su fe de sus actos, pues cada acto tiene un deber y responsabilidad con el otro.

El Islam no condena a ninguna religión, al contrario, enaltece a sus grandes profetas enviados a quienes llama Rasûl. Se cree que cada profeta enviado agrega una nueva formal y brinda, así, un mensaje diferente.

Noé es considerado el Salvador de la humanidad, el símbolo de aquél que salvaguarda; Abraham, es reverenciado como el amigo de Dios, ya que encarna el nivel más alto de amistad con Dios, es el símbolo de la amistad entre lo divino y lo humano; Moisés encarna la palabra divina; es el hombre que buscó la verdad, y alcanzó el conocimiento, por ello lo representa, y Jesús es llamado “el Alma de Dios” porque encarna el Espíritu divino al más alto nivel”. Por eso se dice: “Jesús no escribió ni promulgó leyes porque todo estaba dirigido al Espíritu mientras que los hombres se apegaban a las letras”, acto que sigue sucediendo al valorar sobre la dignidad del ser humano palabras y leyes, regularmente mal interpretadas.



<http://images.asianage.com>

Subrayo: Una religión que percibe de esta manera a los grandes hombres del Judaísmo y del Cristianismo no puede estar en contra de ellas; al contrario, es una religión que las enaltece. El Profeta (sean con Él la salvación y la paz) decía: “Nadie es superior al otro; sois todos iguales, como

las púas de un mismo peine”.

Ante esto, es un error juzgar el Islam con base en actos terroristas de un grupo de hombres que pretenden imponer sus ideas, mas no las del Profeta, y que se hacen llamar jihâdistas, dañando el bello significado de este concepto.

La Yihâd es una guerra espiritual dividida de dos maneras:

1. A través de la lucha interior contra los egoísmos propios.
2. Una lucha que se vive como sociedad para eliminar la pobreza y las crisis económicas.

Estos sentidos la alejan del significado de muerte y armas con los que se la relaciona en la actualidad.

Un Jihâdistas es aquél que combate en su interior y sirve a la humanidad desde su acto social, eliminando día a día de su interior todo anhelo de riqueza y poder que conducen al hombre o mujer a someter o dañar a sus semejantes, teniendo como única arma, el amor; solo con él debe de luchar para derrocar a la mentira que se esconde en la manipulada justicia.

La justicia real debe basarse y salvaguardar la

dignidad de cada ser humano y no proteger leyes o dogmas, porque nada es más valioso que la dignidad que consagra la vida del ser humano.

El Islam vive a través de una ética donde se consagra al ser humano más allá de su etnia o religión. He aquí las palabras del Profeta (sean con Él la Salvación y la paz):

“Ayuda a tu hermano oprimido u opresor” — a lo que sus compañeros le respondieron: “comprendemos bien que tenemos que ayudar al oprimido. Pero: ¿cómo se puede ayudar al opresor?”. Entonces él les respondió: — Parando su mano, impidiéndole que haga el mal”.

Con las palabras dichas sobre el papel es imposible responder a miles de lágrimas derramadas a causa de fundamentalismos religiosos y/o políticos, a la ruptura que se crea en el espíritu ante la discriminación. Es claro que con palabras no se sana el corazón, ni se regresa de la muerte a la vida a miles de personas que son asesinadas por no pertenecer a una religión; tampoco se robustece la dignidad de los creyentes que son víctimas de racismo por su fe. Pero si creo que cada palabra unida al Silencio invita a la reflexión, a conocer un poco de una religión hermosa como lo es el Islam y a tender la mano a nuestros hermanos(as) musulmanes; evitando críticas y juicios creados por el desconocimiento profundo de esta religión y por medios de comunicación comprados que difunden información manipulada por grandes potencias las cuales, en unión con grupos extremistas, inducen al odio, a la discriminación y a la violencia contra quienes profesan, con fe y criterio, dicha religión. El ser humano se dignifica en sus diferencias, en la maravillosa experiencia de ser una sola realidad entre miles de realidades diversificadas a través de sus tiempos. Se enaltece en sus creencias y en sus increencias, se consagra en la fe en un Dios o en su rechazo a éste; en el valor que le otorga a la religión, a la ciencia, a la tecnología, a la razón. Porque cualquiera que sea el camino de cada persona, se crea un camino dual con el otro(a), pues a cada paso se construye un mundo, pero a la vez se está eri-

giendo otro para aquel que viene detrás. Por eso se da un paso después del otro, porque cada paso simboliza y enseña que para llegar a una meta se necesita el apoyo del otro. Si un pie tropieza el otro cae; si un paso avanza el otro también.

La Jihād invita a cada ser humano a aceptar al otro, a valorarlo, a cuidarlo al desprenderse de sus propios egoísmos. Es una puerta abierta a la libertad que conduce a cuidar al otro en cada uno de nuestros actos, más allá de si conocemos o no a las personas; sin que nos importe que sus creencias e ideologías concuerden o no con las nuestras.

No debemos olvidar que lo conocido hoy como Jihād es una distorsión de su significado real, una mala interpretación que lleva al extremismo tanto de quien incurre en él, como de quien discrimina al otro por pertenecer a una religión de la que no tiene un conocimiento claro.

Concluiré con la siguiente historia.

Râbi'a, una santa del Islam, salió de la ciudad llevando en una mano un cubo de agua y en la otra un haz de leña. Por el camino se encontró con uno de los grandes maestros, quien le preguntó a dónde iba. Ella respondió: “Con el cubo de agua voy a apagar el infierno y con la leña voy a quemar el paraíso, con el fin de que ya nunca nadie en la tierra adore a Dios por miedo al infierno o por deseo de ir al paraíso. Sólo quiero que todos adoren a Dios movidos exclusivamente por el amor”.

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James H. Kroeger, MM

Fatima, Mary, and Muslims

Catholics reverence Mary under several titles, one of which is “Our Lady of Fatima.” In the very name of the place in Portugal where Mary appeared six times to three shepherd children between May 13 and October 13, 1917, one discovers a unique Muslim-Christian bond. It all revolves around an interesting historical fact about which most Catholics have little or no knowledge.

Historical Background.

It is a fact of history that the Muslims occupied the Iberian Peninsula, which includes Portugal and Spain, for several centuries. The conquest began in 711 when Muslim forces invaded; within seven years they had conquered the entire Iberian Peninsula. The area became one of the great Islamic civilizations, reaching its summit during the Umayyad Caliphate in the tenth century (929-1031). After that period Muslim rule declined, ending in 1492 when Granada was captured (the same year Columbus reached America).

At the time of the *Reconquista* when the Muslims were being driven out, the last Muslim ruler of the area had a beautiful daughter named Fatima. A young Catholic knight named Don Gonalo Hermingues loved her and for him she stayed behind when the Muslims left; the Christian king agreed to their marriage on the condition that she would become a Christian. The husband’s love for her was so strong that later he had the town’s name changed to Fatima. Thus, the very place where Our Lady appeared in 1917 bears an historical connection to Fatima, a common Islamic name for women, since Fatima was the favorite daughter of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. When commenting on this fact, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen once noted: “I believe that the Blessed Virgin chose to be known as ‘Our Lady of Fatima’ as a pledge and sign of hope to the Muslim people.”

Fatima, Daughter of Muhammad.

Fatima was the fourth and youngest daughter of Khadijah and Muhammad. Most sources agree that she was born somewhere around the year 605. Fatima is often referred to as *Fatima Al-Zahra*, the “Resplendent One.” She is the only one of Muhammad’s children to give him descendants. Sources assert that she was growing up at a very difficult time in the Prophet’s life, when he was facing much opposition from the Meccans who were hostile to his preaching of a new faith. Fatima was a sensitive child and was deeply affected by the persecutions her father endured. Yet, she stood by him and defended him—even into her adulthood. She took special care of him after her mother Khadijah died.

In the year 622 Muhammad and his followers made the famous *Hijrah* (migration or journey) to the city of Yathrib, which Muhammad later renamed Medina, now a sacred place for Muslims. The *Hijrah* to Medina in 622 becomes Year One of the Islamic calendar. Fatima showed special care for her father during these times. Thus, she became known as *Umm Abiha* (the mother of her father); their relationship was close and deep. After the *Hijrah* to Medina, Fatima was married to Ali; they had four children. Ali is considered to be the first *Imam*. Their children Hasan and Husayn became the second and third *imams*. Fatima was respected for several traits; she was known to be deeply spiritual, spending much of her time in prayer and reading the *Qur’an*.

In the year 632 C.E. after completing his final *haji* (pilgrimage) the Prophet Muhammad died. Fatima herself died six months later at the age of 29. Of his daughter, Fatima, Muhammad had said: “She has the highest place in heaven after the Virgin Mary.” These few historical details provide the background to the fact that many Muslims choose to name their daughters Fatima.

Parallels in Faith.

Emerging from our Catholic love and reverence for Mary, known as “Our Lady of Fatima” and Fatima’s Islamic roots, Catholics should be delighted to discover how much Christians and Muslims have in common. Reverence for Mary is a dominant element of Muslim-Christian mutuality, a possible source of unity and a key for superseding hostilities.

Listen to the words of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) on the proper attitude of Catholics toward their Muslim neighbors: “Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this most sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all humanity, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom” (*Nostra Aetate* [NA] 3).

Most Christians are unaware of the reverence that Muslims have for Mary. Her name *Maryam* appears explicitly in the *Qur’an* 34 times; no other woman’s name is mentioned in the *Qur’an*, not even that of Fatima. In 24 of these references, *Maryam* is identified as the mother of Jesus (*Isā*). One chapter of the *Qur’an* (*Sura* 19) is entitled *Maryam* and narrates events of the Annunciation and Jesus’ birth. In addition, Muslims call Mary *Sitti Maryam*; *Sitti* is a term of endearment because of her privilege to be the mother of the prophet *Isā*.

Muhammad’s attitude toward Mary was always reverent and respectful. He spoke of her as a sign (*ayat*) for all creation and a model (*mathal*) for all believers. As the *Qur’an* notes (66:12), “she put her trust in the words of her Lord and believed in His Scriptures.” The Prophet of Mecca saw Mary as a sign and model because she truly submitted (*Islam*) to the will of Allah/God. This same virtue of Mary is rec-

orded by Saint Luke: “Mary said: I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say” (1:38).

Another Marian parallel is found in both the Islamic and Christian faiths: Mary has a special dignity as one favored by God.

The *Qur’an* (3:42) says: “Allah has chosen you, and made you pure, and exalted you above all women”; the Gospel of Luke (1:28, 42) states: “Hail, full of grace ... blessed are you among women.”

Muslim-Christian Mutual Respect.

The Catholic Church sought to promote a new vision of human relationships at the Second Vatican Council; we read in its documents: “Upon the Muslims too, the Church looks with esteem” (NA 3). Yes, “the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator.

In the first place among these are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge humanity” (*Lumen Gentium* 16). Many Catholics will no doubt be surprised at the words of Vatican II which

elaborate Muslim-Christian similarities; the

Muslims “adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to all. They strive to submit whole-heartedly even to His inscrutable decrees, just as did Abraham, which whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. *They also honor Mary, his Virgin Mother; at times they call on her, too, with devotion.* In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will give each one his due after raising him up. Consequently, they prize the moral life, and give worship to God especially through prayer, almsgiving, and fasting” [emphasis added] (NA 3).



Our Lady of Fatima

Vision of Vatican II.

Again, most Catholics are unaware that the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) produced one entire document on approaches to other faith traditions, *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Other Religions. Although the shortest document of the Council, it has had a wide-ranging impact on the life of the Church, especially in her relations with the followers of other living faiths (e.g. Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism). This is particularly true in Asia, where less than three percent of Asia's more than four billion people are Christian.

Nostra Aetate ("in our time") transformed the Church's view and relationship with other religions; NA asserts: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and life, those precepts and teachings ... [which] often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people" (NA 2).

"The Church, therefore, exhorts her children, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, ... they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these people" (NA 2).

Interfaith Dialogue and Service.

A popular expression to capture all these attitudes and initiatives is termed "interreligious dialogue." A similar term, perhaps more accurate, is "interfaith dialogue." All these efforts to build fraternal relationships and foster communication are anchored in people's faith. Authentic dialogue is much more than tactics or strategies for community management or the resolution of social tensions and problems.

Interfaith dialogue moves beyond discussion ("dialogue") about religious beliefs and practices; it is not focused on a comparative study of religions. Beyond mere windy words, dialogue means entering another's experience of God; it demands a growth in faith and a conversion to a deeper religious encounter with one's God. Thus, dialogue is always "faith-based," and from this perspective people will more readily collaborate to address social questions, authen-

tic human development, and the freedom of religious practice.

Dialogue does not happen between religious systems (e.g. Islam and Christianity) or tenets of religious belief and dogma. Essentially, dialogue occurs between persons and among communities; dialogue is people-centered and community-oriented. In a word, dialogue is based on the personal "God-experience" of the participants, be they Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu.

Today worldwide there are more Muslims than Catholics; approximate percentages of world religious population (2012 estimates) are: Catholics (16.10%), Muslims (22.32%), Christians [total] (31.50%). In this context, a very helpful guideline for Christians can be found in the scripture passage of I Peter 3:15-16: "Reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts, and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have; but give it with courtesy and respect and with a clear conscience." Indeed, the passage emphasizes both one's love and fidelity to Christ the source of hope as well as a courteous, respectful witnessing of one's faith before others.

When Pope John Paul II visited the Philippines in February 1981, he spoke some challenging words that promote interfaith respect, dialogue, and service. "Christians will, moreover, join hands with all men and women of good will who share a belief in the inestimable dignity of each human person. They will work together to bring about a more just and peaceful society in which the poor will be the first to be served."

An Inspiring Encounter.

A few years ago while I was waiting in a Manila office before formal business hours, I found myself in a fascinating conversation with a charming young lady. Although presently employed in Manila, she originates from Jolo, southern Philippines. In the course of our friendly chat, she proudly told me how her name "Mary Ann" reflects her family which is part Muslim and part Christian.

She narrated her background: "When my parents were choosing my name, it was my Muslim grandfather who insisted on 'Mary' because of

his admiration for Mary, the mother of Jesus (*Isā*) the prophet. Furthermore, he urged that my second name be ‘Ann’ in honor of Mary’s mother. Thus, while acceding to my parents’ decision that I would be baptized a Christian, he believed that my Muslim heritage would not be lost because of the name he had chosen for me.” She concluded her story: “I’m very happy that my own name symbolizes who I am—both Christian and Muslim.”

Nuestra Señora.

A second story illustrates the reverence that Muslims in Mindanao, southern Philippines, have for Mary. In Zamboanga a Muslim high school student explained to his Jesuit teacher why he had missed a day of class: “Yesterday was the fiesta of the Virgin Mary, *Nuestra Señora del Pilar*. I visited her shrine at Fort Pilar to pray and ask for her help.”

For Christians and many Muslims of Zamboanga, the Virgin Mary symbolizes their city’s culture, history, and destiny. A legend exists which says that the city will be destroyed if its people ever stop praying to Our Lady of the Pillar, a devotion which, in Zamboanga, dates back to the early 1700s. Many devout Muslims from the area are known to implore Mary’s special protection—particularly in difficult times or before they begin their pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca.

Nuestra Señora del Pilar is the principal shrine of Mary in all of Mindanao. It is one of the few Marian shrines that is not located inside a church; on the wall of the city’s old Spanish-built fort is a picture of Our Lady appearing to Saint James the Apostle. The shrine’s outdoor location makes it accessible to Muslims and Christians alike.

In Zamboanga itself, the Feast of *Pilar* (October 12) is a day when a remarkable spirit of unity and community is manifested. It is observed that some Muslims join the celebration and even light candles as an offering at the shrine. Although there are clear historical and dogmatic divergences between Muslims and Christians, a perceptive Zamboangueno has commented: “What is significant about this particular event is the fact that the negative experience that Muslims and Christians associate with

the colonial fort has taken on new meaning; a positive level of relationship is being born, shared and lived ... the friendship generated by the Feast of the Virgin of *Pilar* remains an undiscovered miracle.” Can Mary’s shrine be an omen of continued Muslim-Christian respect, cooperation, and fraternity?

I Will Ask Allah.

Friends, permit one more narrative of a personal encounter that reveals the deep faith of Muslims. Over thirty years ago, while I was a professor at the Regional Major Seminary in Davao City, southern Philippines, I received an emergency phone call in the early morning informing me that my younger sister in the United States had been in a serious automobile accident involving a truck. Her injuries were life-threatening and the next forty-eight hours would be critical. I immediately told the sad news to my fellow faculty members at the seminary; we prayed for my sister during the morning Mass. It wasn’t long before everyone—including the kitchen staff—had heard the news.

When I finished teaching my two morning classes, I was surprised to see Utol waiting for me outside the classroom. Well known to all, Utol served as our “fish-supplier,” personally delivering quality fresh fish three times a week. Utol lived in a small Muslim coastal village near the seminary. In the early morning, he would collect the evening catch from his Muslim neighbors and distribute the fish to several regular customers, including the seminary. Utol may have finished only one or two grades of school and couldn’t read or write well. After years of laboring in the tropical sun, his complexion was very dark. Too poor to afford a dentist, he was missing several teeth. His hands were callused and scarred from years of fishing.

Utol began speaking to me in Cebuano, the local language. “The cooks in the kitchen told me what happened to your sister. I am so sorry to hear the sad news.” I replied: “Thank you very much for your concern and expression of sympathy. You are very thoughtful; you waited for me for nearly two hours. You should be at home sleeping, as I’m sure you were up all night fishing.”

Utol continued, “I want to tell you that I will pray to Allah for your sister’s recovery. Allah will help her, I am sure.” “Thank you. Thank you,” I said, holding back my tears. As Utol turned to go, he assured me, “With Allah, all will be OK.”

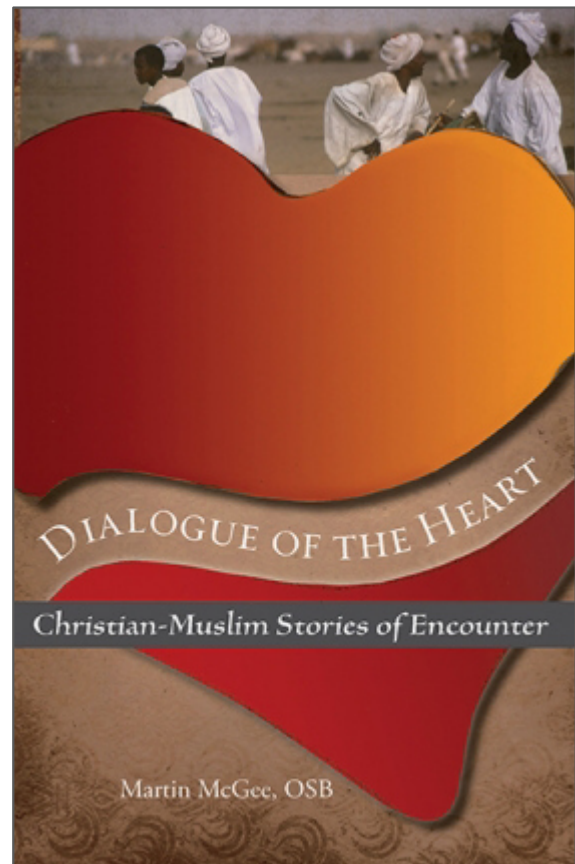
I was deeply moved. What faith! What trust in divine providence! What beautiful words, coming from the mouth of a man who obviously prays! And, yes, my younger sister is still alive today, over thirty years later.

Concluding Reflection.

To be sure, Christians and Muslims are not in total agreement in many aspects of faith and doctrine, including their understanding and beliefs about Mary. Yet, this should not prevent them from nurturing a deep and mutual reverence for Mary as “Our Lady” (*Sayidat*). Beginning with the common elements noted earlier, these two great monotheistic religions can grow closer together; Mary can be one bridge to closer fellowship. Can Mary become the “Common *Kaa’ba*” where Muslims and Christians clasp each other’s hand in worship of the one, true God? What marvels will Mary, Our Lady of Fatima, inspire as Christians and Muslims strive to follow the difficult path of mutual respect and harmony?

United in our love for Mary, together we can say: *Our Lady of Fatima*, pray for all of us, your children—Muslims and Christians alike!

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Les Chrétiens du Moyen-Orient dans la tourmente actuelle

- Le cas Palestinien -

Le Moyen-Orient et le monde arabe en général (pour ne pas dire, plus largement, le monde musulman) passe par une période critique de son histoire, qui déterminera, d'une manière sans précédent, son avenir. Nous savons que des communautés chrétiennes vivent dans les différents pays de cette région (Égypte, Syrie, Iraq, Jordanie, Liban, Palestine/Israël) dont elles font partie intégrante. Qu'en est-il de ces chrétiens dans la tourmente actuelle qui sévit dans le monde arabe? Il m'a été demandé de présenter un point de vue sur la situation et les attitudes des chrétiens palestiniens à l'égard des convulsions actuelles, mais peut-on séparer la Palestine du reste du monde arabe? Peut-on séparer les chrétiens palestiniens du reste des chrétiens du monde arabe? Je ne le pense pas, malgré la situation spécifique de chaque pays. En effet, ce qui se passe dans chacun de ces pays a, d'une manière ou d'une autre, de profondes répercussions sur les autres. C'est pour cette raison que mon point de vue se développera en deux parties. Dans un premier temps, nous jetterons un regard sur « le printemps arabe » et sur la situation et les attitudes des chrétiens dans le cadre de ces événements, pour passer, dans un second temps, à la situation et aux attitudes des Palestiniens et des chrétiens palestiniens.

Remarques Préliminaires

L'approche du monde arabe et de ses chrétiens est, à mon avis, incompréhensible, si on ne prend pas en considération certaines réalités, qui ont un impact profond sur ce qui se passe dans cette partie du monde et par conséquent aussi sur les chrétiens du Moyen-Orient, dont les chrétiens palestiniens. Je les énumère rapidement :

Une région stratégique: Le Moyen-Orient représente une région stratégique de première importance, étant au confluent de trois conti-

nents (l'Europe, l'Asie et l'Afrique). Les grandes routes du monde passent par cette région (Canal de Suez, Détroit d'Ormuz et Détroit de Bab Al-Mandeb). Les grandes puissances ne peuvent éviter d'englober cette région dans leur vision stratégique: dominer cette région n'est en effet rien moins que dominer le monde.

Des richesses incalculables: En plus de son importance stratégique, cette partie du monde accumule des richesses incalculables (pétrole, gaz, pétrodollars...), qui restent et resteront pour longtemps encore le nerf de l'économie mondiale.

Le berceau des trois religions monothéistes: Cette région est le berceau des grandes civilisations antiques, comme aussi des trois religions monothéistes, qui ont joué et jouent encore un rôle capital sur sa destinée, pour le meilleur ou pour le pire. Et si nous nous souvenons du rôle toujours grandissant des religions dans l'identité actuelle des peuples de cette région, nous pouvons imaginer qu'il est déterminant.

La centralité du problème palestinien: Le problème palestinien traumatise les peuples de cette région. Si les régimes politiques peuvent le reléguer au second plan, il reste dans la conscience populaire une question prépondérante et décisive. Depuis sa création, on peut dire que l'État d'Israël est, directement ou indirectement, au cœur de tous les événements majeurs qui ont bouleversé la région à l'époque moderne.

L'instabilité chronique: Dès le début des temps modernes, le monde arabe est en perte de vitesse. Le monde change à pas de géant, tandis que le monde arabe essaie de rattraper un rythme de changement qui ne lui laisse aucun répit. D'où une situation d'instabilité chronique à tous les niveaux (politique, économique, socioculturel et même religieux), qui ouvre la voie à des manipulations, intérieures et extérieures, qui ne cessent de le remettre en question.

De ce qui précède on peut imaginer que notre région, on ne peut plus névralgique, ne laisse personne indifférent, car elle se trouve au milieu d'un jeu des nations, où chacun essaie de la dominer pour ses propres intérêts. En effet, les grandes puissances internationales, régionales et locales ne cessent de s'ingérer dans ses affaires propres, directement ou indirectement, pour en faire une carte gagnante en vue de leurs profits à tous les niveaux. Une telle situation ne peut qu'engendrer conflits, luttes d'intérêt et guerres, qui laissent derrière elles des victimes, dont le nombre ne cesse de croître d'une manière tragique. Les chrétiens du Moyen-Orient, non seulement n'ont pas été en marge de ces luttes, mais ils ont eu à en souffrir plus que d'autres.

Printemps ou hiver arabe?

Le soulèvement populaire de ces dernières années a surpris le monde entier, peut-être même ses protagonistes. En effet, beaucoup pensaient que les populations avaient atteint un niveau de léthargie qui rendait leur soulèvement quasi impossible. Cette situation était confortable pour les grandes puissances, car elle leur permettait de dominer ce monde au travers de régimes dictatoriaux et oppressifs, qui laissaient la population en marge des événements décisifs commandant leur destin. Or, tout d'un coup, les populations se sont soulevées d'une manière sans précédent pour aboutir à des changements dramatiques. Dans tous les pays de la région, et dans les différentes couches de la population, ces soulèvements ont suscité un enthousiasme immense. En effet, ces populations ont eu à souffrir de ces régimes, du point de vue politique, économique et social. Par conséquent elles ne pouvaient que voir ces événements d'un regard positif.

Mais très vite les événements ont commencé à prendre une tournure particulière, du fait de l'intervention massive des grandes puissances régionales et internationales, qui se sont mis à œuvrer pour orienter ces soulèvements dans le sens de leurs intérêts propres, politiques et économiques, sous la couverture de la démocratie, de la liberté et des droits de l'homme. C'est ainsi que des courants islamistes — Frères musulmans et Salafistes surtout —, fortement organisés profitant du vide du pouvoir, ont réussi

à le combler et à mettre en ce des régimes islamistes avec, semble-t-il, la complicité secrète des grandes puissances qui voyaient dans ces régimes des alliés possibles. Mais tout cela n'allait pas dans le sens des masses populaires, surtout des jeunes, qui ne trouvaient pas dans cette évolution la réalisation de leurs aspirations. C'est alors que beaucoup ont commencé poser des questions. Où allons-nous? Vers le meilleur ou vers le pire? Le printemps arabe n'est-il pas en train de se transformer en un erreur? Quelle forme prendront les sociétés arabes?... Actuellement, personne n'est en mesure de donner des réponses définitives à ces questions, tandis que, sur le terrain, la lutte continue dans la confusion. Tout le monde est dans un état d'attente angoissée et cette phase d'instabilité risque de se prolonger, avec toutes ses répercussions négatives: détérioration de l'économie, chômage, émigration, terrorisme, etc. Le cas de l'Égypte est typique. Les forces populaires, qui ont amené les Frères musulmans et leurs alliés au pouvoir, sont celles mêmes qui ont provoqué leur chute, avec l'aide de l'armée. L'incertitude règne donc, mais une chose est certaine : les choses ne pourront jamais être comme elles étaient auparavant et un retour en arrière est impossible. Les masses populaires ont pris la parole, et elles ne sont pas près de la lâcher, malgré toutes les pressions intérieures et extérieures.

Les Chrétiens dans la tourmente

Les chrétiens, comme leurs concitoyens, ont accueilli les soulèvements populaires avec beaucoup d'enthousiasme. Avec tous, ils y voyaient une nouvelle ère de démocratie, qui ne pouvait que profiter à tout le monde, après des décennies de dictatures, d'oppression et de corruption. Et ils ne se sont pas contentés d'être des spectateurs, mais ils y ont pris une part active. Il suffit de se rappeler les scènes de la place Tahrir du Caire, où chrétiens et musulmans se trouvaient côte à côte dans une lutte commune, brandissant leurs symboles: le croissant et la croix, les prières musulmanes et chrétiennes, etc. Mais très vite, cet enthousiasme s'est refroidi pour laisser place à la peur voire même à l'angoisse. Ils devaient constater que les événe-

ments tournaient à leur désavantage, en tant que citoyens et en tant que chrétiens.

En tant que citoyens, ils partagent avec les autres une situation d'instabilité, qui a un impact négatif sur tous les aspects, économique, politique et social, de leur vie. Avec eux, ils assistent à l'installation de régimes qui orientent la société vers une islamisation forcée, qui est loin de faire l'unanimité. En tant que chrétiens, ils voient les vents se tourner contre eux, aggravant leur situation au lieu de l'améliorer. Les attaques contre les églises en Egypte ne sont qu'un exemple entre mille. La scène iraquienne est revenue à la mémoire. L'occupation américaine y a ouvert les portes de l'enfer sans être capable de les renfermer. Les chrétiens étaient abandonnés à leur propre sort. La chrétienté iraquienne a été profondément atteinte et a dû prendre les chemins de l'émigration, réduisant leur nombre à moins de la moitié. Allons-nous être affrontés à une situation de ce genre dans les autres pays? Entre-temps, la Syrie s'est enflammée et le même scénario semble se répéter un peu partout. Les chrétiens voient que non seulement leur présence est en péril, mais leur existence même dans cette partie du monde, qui est l'espace de leurs racines nationales et religieuses. Le jeu des nations, non seulement ne semble pas les prendre en considération, mais est prêt à les sacrifier pour des buts plus que discutables. Les chrétiens constatent avec étonnement comment les extrémistes islamistes et les puissances occidentales se trouvent, bon gré mal gré, dans les mêmes tranchées.

Où allons-nous? Allons-nous vers une nouvelle ère, où le monde arabe serait morcelé en une infinité de petits États confessionnels, qui l'affaibliraient au point d'en faire une région plus facile à dominer? Les questions sont nombreuses et sans réponse. Entre-temps, les populations de la région paient le prix de cette situation, et les chrétiens plus que d'autres.

Le cas Palestinien

Il importe avant tout de spécifier de quels Palestiniens nous parlons ici, car les Palestiniens sont éparpillés dans le monde entier: il y a la diaspora palestinienne (camps de réfugiés et autres), les Palestiniens à l'intérieur de l'État d'Israël et les Palestiniens des Territoires de

l'Autorité palestinienne. Nous nous limitons ici aux Palestiniens des Territoires de l'Autorité palestinienne. Il est évident qu'ils ont suivi avec un immense intérêt ce qui se passait sur les places publiques du monde arabe, comme il est évident qu'ils interprétaient cette nouveauté sous l'angle du problème palestinien. Beaucoup pensaient que cette nouvelle situation ne pouvait que tourner à leur avantage. Cette attente était d'autant plus forte que les régimes arabes en place, surtout celui égyptien, étaient perçus par eux comme incapables de contribuer à une solution véritable de leur problème, du fait de leur connivence avec la politique américaine, qui offre à Israël un appui illimité et quelquefois irraisonnable et aveugle. Depuis les accords avec Israël, l'Egypte se trouvait liée par des traités qui ne lui permettaient pas d'avoir un rôle déterminant à l'avantage des Palestiniens. C'est pour toutes ces raisons qu'ils ont vu dans les changements des régimes en place une lueur d'espoir permettant de penser que leur situation de stagnation allait changer. Mais, avec l'arrivée au pouvoir des Frères musulmans et de leurs alliés islamistes, cet espoir a été profondément déçu, surtout quand les Palestiniens ont constaté que ces nouveaux régimes jouissaient de l'appui de l'Occident, qui voyait en eux des alliés plus que des ennemis.

De plus, il n'est pas question d'imaginer un soulèvement populaire en Palestine à l'instar des autres pays arabes. En effet, les problèmes qui s'y posent ne sont pas les mêmes. Pour ce qui est de la démocratie, de la liberté et des droits de l'homme, les Palestiniens sont en avance sur la plupart des autres pays arabes. Il est vrai que la corruption sévit dans les rangs de la société palestinienne à tous les échelons. Mais ces questions ne sont rien à côté des autres problèmes politiques qu'ils affrontent. Leur priorité est ailleurs. Le grand problème des Palestiniens, c'est en premier lieu l'occupation israélienne; tous leurs efforts et leur lutte vont dans ce sens.

En effet, depuis le début des négociations de paix, depuis la conférence de Madrid (1993) en passant par les accords d'Oslo, malgré toutes les négociations qui ont eu lieu depuis, aucun résultat vraiment significatif n'a été obtenu par les Palestiniens. Les négociations tournent en rond et on a l'impression que leur but consiste à gérer

un conflit plutôt qu'à le résoudre. Les Palestiniens ont le sentiment d'être pris en otage à l'intérieur des limites des Territoires de l'Autorité palestinienne, manipulés par une politique israélienne, sans aucune volonté sérieuse de faire progresser le processus de paix. De plus, depuis le début de ce soi-disant processus, la situation des Palestiniens n'a cessé de se détériorer à tous les niveaux, politique (un processus de paix sans issue, la construction de plus en plus déterminée de colonies dans les Territoires occupés), économique (le bouclage des Territoires, la dépendance de l'économie palestinienne de celle de l'Etat d'Israël, le chômage qui en résulte...), social (le mur de séparation qui a disloqué les Territoires palestiniens, faisant d'eux des cantons sans vraie communication entre eux...). Tout cela rend la vie quotidienne des Palestiniens quasiment impossible. Si un soulèvement est nécessaire ou en vue, c'est un soulèvement contre l'occupation. Et il n'est pas impossible qu'il n'éclate un

jour dans la situation sans issue qui est la leur. Évidemment, on ne peut passer sous silence la division existant entre Palestiniens (Hamas et Fatah), mais ces divisions ne sont que l'image ou les conséquences des divisions profondes du monde arabe lui-même.

Les Chrétiens Palestiniens

De même que les Palestiniens constituent un cas à part dans l'ensemble des pays arabes, les chrétiens palestiniens sont un cas à part dans l'ensemble des chrétientés du Moyen-Orient. Il est évident que les chrétiens palestiniens ont suivi, et suivent encore, avec passion ce qui se passe dans les pays arabes voisins, pour des raisons qu'ils partagent avec les autres Palestiniens et que nous avons mentionnées plus haut. Mais ils ont aussi leurs propres raisons, en tant que chrétiens, de suivre attentivement le cours des événements, car ils voient bien le sort des autres

chrétientés au Moyen-Orient. Le cas de l'Iraq est bien connu : l'occupation américaine de ce pays a eu des conséquences dramatiques pour les chrétiens, provoquant leur émigration massive, alors que ceux qui restaient étaient la cible d'attaques continuelles. Le cas de l'Egypte n'est guère plus encourageant : les attaques des églises sont un spectacle presque quotidien, sans parler des harcèlements de toutes sortes. Il en va de même du côté de la Syrie, où les chrétiens risquent le même sort qu'en Iraq. La montée des fondamentalismes et des courants islamistes ne peuvent que leur inspirer la peur. Qu'en sera-t-il de leur avenir?... Les chrétiens palestiniens aussi ont peur, parce qu'ils ne peuvent pas ne pas prendre en considération ce qui se passe autour d'eux dans les différents pays du Moyen-Orient.



Chrétiens de Palestine

<http://frontiernews.it/2013/04/>

Les chrétiens, comme l'ensemble des Palestiniens, voient les conséquences négatives de ces événements, mais ils ont aussi leurs propres raisons de craindre l'avenir.

Toutefois, au milieu de tout cela, il faut noter la différence existant entre la situation des chrétiens

palestiniens et celle des autres chrétientés du

monde arabe. En effet, les relations islamo-chrétiennes en Palestine sont en général bonnes, malgré les difficultés qui peuvent surgir de temps à autre. Nous n'assistons pas en Palestine aux phénomènes enregistrés dans les autres pays voisins : attaques contre des églises ou contre les institutions chrétiennes, etc. L'insertion des Palestiniens chrétiens dans leur société est aussi bien plus forte que dans beaucoup d'autres pays. Peut-être la raison en est-elle que les chrétiens et les musulmans palestiniens ont souffert ensemble, luttent ensemble pour la récupération de leurs droits légitimes et partagent les mêmes aspirations. On ne peut oublier que la création de l'État d'Israël a eu des conséquences désastreuses également sur les chrétiens palestiniens, puisqu'elle a entraîné leur dispersion.

Il suffit de rappeler qu'à la veille de la création de l'État d'Israël, les chrétiens palestiniens de Jérusalem étaient 29.000. Dès après la créa-

tion de l'État d'Israël, ce nombre est tombé à 14.000. Depuis la guerre de 1967, il n'a cessé de décroître, pour arriver actuellement à environ 10.000 seulement. Par conséquent, le problème des chrétiens palestiniens est celui des musulmans palestiniens, à savoir l'occupation israélienne qui les empêche de se développer d'une manière normale. Tous les sondages montrent que le motif de l'émigration est la situation politique et économique des territoires. Même les tendances islamistes palestiniennes n'ont pas une note antichrétienne en Palestine, comme c'est le cas dans d'autres pays. Elles prétendent même protéger les chrétiens. Mais, le seul fait de l'existence de ces courants inspire la peur aux chrétiens palestiniens, parce que, face à une telle idéologie, ils se demandent nécessairement quelle serait leur place dans une Palestine islamisée. Par ailleurs, il faut dire que l'expérience palestinienne depuis plus d'un demi-siècle montre qu'aucun parti ne pourrait gouverner tout seul en Palestine, étant donné le pluralisme des tendances politiques actives sur place.

Pour se convaincre du fait que les chrétiens palestiniens voient dans l'occupation israélienne la source de leurs malheurs, comme les autres Palestiniens, il suffit de parcourir le document *Kairos-Palestine* (surtout au n. 2.5 ; cf. *POC* 2010, 42-64), où l'occupation est décrite comme un péché contre Dieu et contre l'homme. Les chrétiens ont la conviction que la solution juste du problème palestinien et, en clair, la fin de l'occupation, aura sans aucun doute une conséquence positive considérable sur l'évolution de leur sort. Mais tout cela n'empêche pas les Palestiniens chrétiens de ressentir la peur. Ils partagent celle des autres Palestiniens, tout en ayant leurs raisons propres.

Remarques Conclusives

Comme j'ai commencé par des remarques préliminaires, je conclus par quelques remarques conclusives, qui me semblent importantes pour une meilleure compréhension entre l'Orient et l'Occident.

Un nouveau regard

L'approche du monde arabe — et plus largement du monde musulman — de la part de l'Occident a été une approche ambiguë, sinon

erronée, depuis le retour du monde arabe sur la scène de l'histoire à partir de la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle. Le monde arabe a fait ce retour en ami de l'Occident. Malheureusement l'Occident a tout fait pour en faire un ennemi. Sans entrer dans les détails, l'histoire moderne depuis la première guerre mondiale le confirme. Cette évolution a été commandée par les intérêts de l'Occident et de l'État d'Israël, incapables de regarder ce monde en lui-même, avec ses difficultés et ses aspirations. L'Occident s'étonne de la haine que nourrit ce monde envers l'Occident — et c'est un fait — mais ne faut-il pas aller aux sources de cette haine? Il me semble qu'il est temps pour l'Occident de changer de regard pour approcher ce monde d'une autre manière, plus objective et pour lui-même, afin de l'aider vraiment à sortir de ses impasses. Il s'agit de changer de cap et de ne pas rester prisonnier d'une pure politique d'intérêts. Il s'agit de sortir de l'impasse de la relation dominateurs/dominés, pour accéder à une relation de partenariat. Sinon, nous continuerons de vivre dans cette spirale de haine réciproque, qui ne profite à personne.

Solution du problème palestinien

Qu'on le veuille ou non, le problème palestinien reste au cœur de tous les problèmes qui traumatisent le monde arabe, comme aussi le monde musulman. Beaucoup, en Orient, sont convaincus — avec raison — que toutes les tragédies qu'ils ont connues au cours de l'histoire contemporaine (guerres, révolutions, instabilité...) ont un lien profond avec le problème palestinien. Qu'on le veuille ou non, la création de l'État d'Israël a été fondée sur une injustice flagrante envers le peuple palestinien, qui a été déraciné de son propre pays pour être jeté sur les routes du monde, dans la misère et la pauvreté. Qu'on le veuille ou non, l'Occident a toujours accordé un soutien illimité et irraisonnable à la politique israélienne, sans aucune considération pour les droits légitimes du peuple palestinien. D'où la politique du double standard adoptée par l'Occident, un standard pour Israël et un autre pour les Palestiniens; une soixantaine de vetos américains au Conseil de sécurité empêchant une résolution pro-palestinienne, sont un exemple entre mille. Il est temps de se pencher sérieusement, avec équité et impartialité, sur ce

problème qui envenime les relations du monde arabe avec l'Occident, afin de lui trouver une solution juste et durable, qui mette fin à une occupation qui dure depuis plus de 45 ans. Tant que ce problème persiste, il n'y aura jamais ni paix ni stabilité dans notre région, au détriment de tous.

Le salut des chrétiens du Moyen-Orient

L'expérience moderne a appris aux chrétiens du Moyen-Orient que leur salut ne viendra jamais de l'extérieur, et surtout pas de l'Occident. Chaque fois qu'ils ont eu la velléité de recourir à l'Occident, la conséquence a été désastreuse. Il suffit de rappeler l'expérience des Assyriens irakiens dans la années 1930, celle des chrétiens libanais lors de la guerre civile à partir de 1975, l'occupation de l'Iraq en 2003, la création de l'État d'Israël en 1948, et, actuellement, ce qui se passe en Syrie, où l'ironie du sort veut que l'Occident — qu'il le veuille ou non — se trouve dans les mêmes tranchées que les extrémistes islamistes.

Le salut des chrétiens du Moyen-Orient ne peut venir que de leur foi profonde bien sûr, mais aussi de leur enracinement dans leurs pays et leurs sociétés. Leur engagement dans leurs sociétés, pour contribuer à leur progrès et développement, leur permettra de s'assurer une place dans la région. Il est à remarquer que des voix de plus en plus nombreuses et de plus en plus fortes se lèvent dans tous les pays du monde arabe pour rappeler l'importance des chrétiens du Moyen-Orient pour leur société et que la protection de ces chrétiens n'est pas seulement un bien pour eux, mais aussi pour leurs sociétés respectives. Malheureusement, certains chrétiens en Occident, surtout les fondamentalistes évangéliques des États-Unis, considèrent les chrétiens du Moyen-Orient comme un objet de propagande contre le monde musulman, faisant du tort et aux musulmans et aux chrétiens, et à l'Occident lui-même.

L'aide des chrétiens d'Occident

On nous demande souvent: que peuvent faire pour vous les chrétiens d'Occident? En plus du nouveau regard dont nous avons parlé plus haut, il s'agit pour l'Occident d'aider les chrétiens à rester dans leurs pays et à rester enracinés dans leurs sociétés. Ce n'est pas en ouvrant les portes

de l'émigration qu'on résout leurs problèmes, mais en les aidant à demeurer sur place, pour l'équilibre de ce vaste monde. Il est vrai que les chrétiens sont peu nombreux, mais ils ne sont pas un accident de l'histoire dans cette partie du monde, comme ils ne sont pas des minorités étrangères; ils font bel et bien partie du tissu de leur sol et de leurs sociétés. On ne peut comprendre leurs sociétés sans leur présence et contribution, et cela tant dans le passé qu'aujourd'hui. Ils font partie de l'identité de ce monde, comme ce monde fait aussi partie de leur identité. Les déraciner conduit à leur appauvrissement et à l'appauvrissement de leurs sociétés, car cela les réduit à de petits groupés isolés et fermés sur eux-mêmes, dans des ghettos dispersés dans différents pays du monde. Leur destin est d'être, comme dit l'Évangile, sel et lumière dans leurs sociétés, dans l'engagement et dans l'humilité. Si une aide est envisagée, c'est dans ce sens qu'il faut l'orienter.

Espoirs et espérance

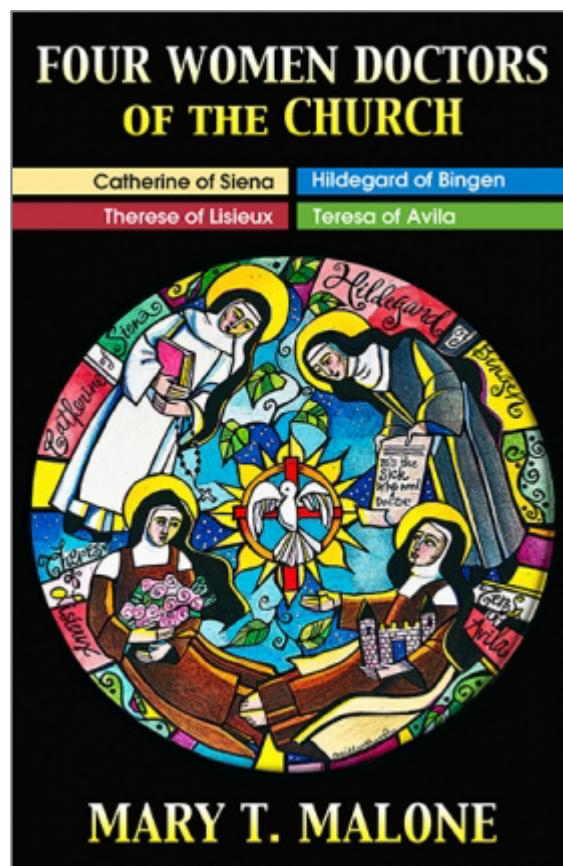
Je ne voudrais pas terminer cet article sans une note d'espérance, non pas d'espérance naïve, mais d'espérance fondée sur la foi et l'histoire. Au cours de sa longue histoire le Moyen-Orient a connu une série de bouleversements dramatiques, qui ont laissé des traces et des blessures profondes dans la mémoire. Les chrétiens ont toujours subi les répercussions de ces tragédies. Malgré tout cela, ils ont continué, dans la pauvreté et l'humilité, non seulement à survivre, mais aussi à vivre, dans ce sens qu'ils ont toujours eu le génie de s'acclimater dans les nouvelles situations pour poursuivre leur présence et leur contribution à leurs sociétés dans tous les domaines. Les difficultés qu'ils connaissent aujourd'hui ne sont pas plus dramatiques que celles du passé. Et comme ils ont été capables de surmonter ces difficultés dans le passé, ils sont aussi capables d'affronter celles d'aujourd'hui. Quant aux raisons de foi, nous savons que le Christ accompagne ces chrétientés pour leur donner courage et espérance. D'où l'importance pour eux de revenir à ces sources vives de leur foi pour y trouver des raisons de vivre en étant signes d'espérance dans leur société.

Conclusion Générale

Certains trouveront peut-être dans les pages qui précèdent des notes trop critiques à l'égard de l'Occident. Si cela est vrai, c'est pourtant dans un esprit de dialogue et d'amitié qu'elles ont été formulées, et non dans un esprit de confrontation. Il est plus nécessaire que jamais d'écouter ces voix criant dans le désert pour ouvrir une nouvelle voie de compréhension et d'estime mutuelles. Il en va de l'avenir de ces chrétiens, de leurs sociétés, sinon de l'avenir du monde. Il est certain que le nombre des chrétiens ne cesse de décroître depuis des décennies. Le temps n'est pourtant pas au désespoir, mais à l'espérance vive et agissante. En Terre Sainte, nous ne pouvons oublier que nous vivons proches d'un tombeau vide, parce que Jésus est ressuscité et qu'il nous invite à regarder la situation actuelle comme une invitation à plus de foi, plus d'espérance et plus de charité. Et l'espérance ne déçoit pas.

Ref: *Proche-Orient Chrétien*, Tome 64, 2014 Fasc. 1-2, pages 69 -80.

Une traduction anglaise de cet article sera publiée sur le site de SEDOS,
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How did religion assume a violent role in the Middle East?

I will start with a simple question: what makes a specific religion, at a certain period of time, highly promoting and conducive to peace, strengthening social stability, and consolidating citizenship? And what makes it at other times destructive and employed to inflame hatred and violence? Is it the attributes and characteristics of that specific religion that lead us into classifying some religions as evil religions that threaten humanity and therefore must be exterminated, while praising others as good religions?

Religion as interpretation

We learned from history that no religion could ever keep a constant position, attitude, and practices towards public issues, especially those related to human rights, democracy, freedom, science, diversity, and peace. We witnessed representatives of the same religion waging calls for holy wars, denouncing freedom of thought and expression, and being highly conservative against secular political systems. While at different times, the same religion advocated social stability, world peace, tolerance, and human values.

This means that religion does not assume a fixed role in society at all times. I will go further to say that religion cannot define its role on its own; it accepts roles defined by values and concepts promoted by the society, nature and the structure of political systems, in addition to the changing conception of the relation between state and religion. In other words, religion does not speak by itself, we make it speak. Moreover, religious meanings do not spring from the scripture itself, it rather results from the interactive process between the reader and the text. This is what we call the reading process, which comprises the religious text, interpreter, and presuppositions, held by the interpreter, and the environment that defines the time, place, and social culture within which the process of inter-

pretation takes place. Such environment defines the mental state of the reader and exerts a guiding power on him that makes him select a potential meaning out of many other equally potential meanings.

It is the external circumstances that encompass both the reader and the text, and drive the interpretation in a certain direction, leading the reader to conclude a specific meaning out of infinite potential ones. Such circumstances are conditioned by political, social, and economical situations that drive the reading process consciously or subconsciously in one specific direction rather than the other. This is what Gadamar calls historical horizon.

Amberto Icco, a well-known hermeneutic philosopher, claims that there is a good use and a misuse of the text. This means that the text is mainly used as a tool in the public domain, and may be devised as a productive tool or be used to strongly support ideologies, justify violence, holy wars of all sorts, and even validate slavery.

Religiosity as a socio-political phenomenon

So the question that now surfaces is: what circumstances should be attained and sustained to drive the reception of the religious text in a positive and productive way, in order to promote democracy and value, to encourage individualism and free expression, to be aware of individual rights and responsibilities, to be part of the public debate, and instill the motive to be part of the political and decision making process?

In other words, what are the socio-political conditions that lead religion to contribute to the positive and constructive evolving of the public domain?

A survey study about religiosity on a global scope that was conducted by Inglehart, a well-known American sociologist, entitled "Sacred and Secular" attempts to answer the question: what circumstances make people highly reli-

gious and make them indifferent or less enthusiastic to embrace any particular religion?

Inglehart proposes a theory, which states that people generally resort to religion whenever they feel threatened. Using Inglehart terms: An individual, community, or society resort to religion whenever they lack human existential security that is constituted by material and moral elements, such as food supply, medical treatment, proper education, basic infrastructure services (water supply, electricity, sanitary), life safety, political stability, human dignity, freedom, etc....

Inglehart concludes that societies all over the world that lack conditions of human existential security resort to religion, and show higher inclination toward religion than other societies. The reason behind it is that religion provides comfort and internal strength against outside threats and discomforts; it also creates a collective determination to cope with daily life difficulties.

Therefore, religiosity is a socio-political phenomenon, not a purely religious phenomenon, and assumes its function and role, whether positive or negative, constructive or destructive, from the economic political and social conditions that prevail in any given society.

That is why, for proper conception and scrutiny of the religious movements that have surfaced lately in the Arab world, we need to understand them as social phenomena that emerged as a result of political, cultural, and social conditions, rather than picturing them as mere Islamic manifestations or reflections of Islamic values, beliefs and legal System. Remember, religion always tends to adapt to changing circumstances rather than creating its own circumstances, and assumes its role from the established environment, rather than trying to define its role on its own and from within its institutions.

The cultural and political causes of fundamentalism in the Middle East

What we are currently witnessing in the Arab world is a new and unprecedented form of religious attitude and political discourse, which came as a result of identity crisis in the Arab world as well as a direct consequence of post-colonial states failure. Thus, we can identify two major causes of Islamic fundamentalism in the Arab world: identity crisis on the one hand, and political System failure or post-colonial state failure on the other hand.

Concerning identity crisis, it emerged as a result of the abrupt and swift change that took place in the Arab world, from the traditional and

highly conservative mode to the exposure to modern life style, and because of the change from the state of caliphate to western form of governance. This was known in the Arab world as the “modernity shock”.

Representatives of traditional values, and as a way to confront what they conceived as im-

posed western values and political structures, developed Islamic ideologies that took modern form and called for the establishment of the Islamic state. This was a desperate attempt to counter attack western values and create a feeling of security and immunity against swiftly changing political events.

It turned out that such ideologies were mere illusions, because there is no such thing as Islamic state in Islam, where Muslims in history experienced various forms of governance, and never along the history of Islam, were there an Islamic state, i.e. a state defined and structured by religion. All forms of rulings in Islamic history were mere imitations of ruling regimes that were prominent and well established political systems in the Middle East, namely the Persian and Byzantine ruling systems.



The other cause of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism was the failure of the post-colonial Arab states in fulfilling their promises and political agendas. Namely, they failed in achieving economic prosperity and developing a democratic political System. Consequently, Arab countries became poorer, and distribution of wealth was unjust; few people confiscated the nations' wealth, and regimes used most brutal and harsh means to govern and rule societies - the Arab world maintaining the highest score of political prisoners and executions. Moreover, freedom of all sorts were prohibited and harsh punishments were inflicted on all forms of political oppositions.

Therefore, a gap was created between state and society, and a growing sense of insecurity started to evolve among the people in the Arab world, especially with the presence of high unemployment rate, restricted freedom of expression, and political regimes that used the most suppressive and cruel means of rulings and control.

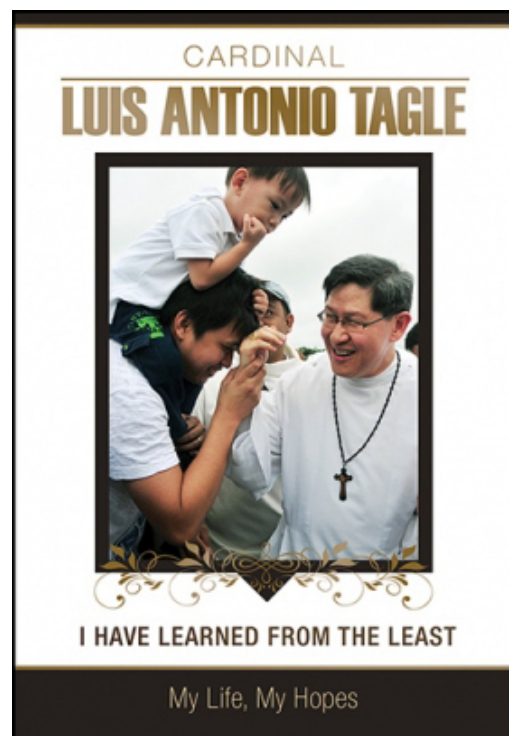
This has led Arab societies to resort to religion, as a means to compensate for the insecure environment created by the despotic regimes, and the imposition of modern values by the West. Religion was used as a psychological and a cultural tool to bear and endure the insecure environment; however, when it got transformed into a political ideology to seek power and authority, it went out of control and produced the most unprecedented barbaric acts.

Conclusion

Killing terrorists will not end terrorism, and radical Islam will continue to be highly effective and will charm the new cohorts who are in a way, highly suppressed, alienated, and have a deep feeling of future impasse.

A transformation process must be initiated by social and political forces and organizations, to transform the Arabic world to a new life style and world views, that sanctify human rights, so it can embrace democratic values, and make paradigm shift from traditional views and social relations to rational based political systems and social institutions. Otherwise, we will continue spinning in a closed circle.

Ref: *Proche-Orient Chrétien*, Tome 66-2016, Fasc.1/2- Pages 129 -133.



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Christian Identity in an Islamic Context

Introduction

First of all, I will try to set the parameters of what I hope to explore in this paper. What its focus is and, perhaps as importantly, what it will not be addressing directly. In this paper I will not be specifically exploring what we might commonly describe as 'minority issues'. The way discrimination, marginalization and generally being treated as a second-class citizen affects the Christian community and Christian self-understanding. That is not to down play the reality and importance of this experience - but perhaps to suggest that sometimes we need to remind ourselves it is not the whole of our experience. So the paper will have a slightly different focus - how the Islamic religious context that the Pakistani Christian community lives in, affects the ways Christians in Pakistan understand and practice their own religion. That influence is not necessarily either negative or positive - but it is surely something that we need to be aware of.

Christian Practice

I will begin by looking at Christian practice - what we do as Christians. Beginning with practice rather than beliefs perhaps says something about how deeply I have been influenced by this Islamic context as well. Normally I instinctively start with the 'head' (beliefs and theory) and only then move on to actions. But Islam is a deeply practical faith. The outward, public, visible practice of faith is very important. We see this everywhere — in fact it is so common that it operates as an almost unnoticed backdrop to daily life. The sounds of the *Azan* that punctuate every day become a sort of background melody. When travelling we take for granted the sight of men simply and unselfconsciously stopping at the side of the road and finding a clean bit of grass where they can offer their prayers. We are used to Muslim speakers beginning every presentation — no matter what the topic — with

the *Bismillah*. There are many other examples. Outward, public expressions of piety matter a great deal in Islam. Let me be clear that I do not mean that negatively. I am certainly not suggesting that outward expressions of piety are somehow superficial. Nor that they are hypocritical. In Islam at its best, the regular, outward habits of public piety develop an awareness of the presence of God in the whole of life and regularly witness to the world that it is ultimately God who is Lord of all. As a Muslim scholar writes, "Islam gives unequivocal and crystal clear priority to the centrality of ritual, religious observance and spirituality ... In ritual, a world that is perceived, understood and imagined by Muslims is made real."¹ This regular daily practice of outward ritual is similar to Jewish piety and indeed to aspects of the Christian tradition such as monasticism. But to a large extent this public piety has got lost in modern western Christianity. Here the stress on individuality and 'authenticity' (being true to oneself) have led to an identification of spirituality with the 'inner' rather than the 'outer'.² In contrast, it seems to me, Christianity in Pakistan (like Islam) places a lot of stress on the outward habits of piety. Here I simply note some almost random examples.

Public prayer. Western Christian visitors are often surprised by how freely and easily Pakistani Christians from all backgrounds are able to pray in public. The language and rhythm of public prayer seem to come naturally and 'powerful' public praying is clearly much valued. At a more individual level ordinary Christians will often, without any self-consciousness, say a prayer out loud at the beginning of a journey or other significant moment.

¹ Maleiha Malik. 'European Muslims. Faith in the public sphere', *Islamochristiana* 38(2012) 175-189. p.185.

² Alistair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) argues that the loss of a living tradition of 'virtue' based on relationship of inner attitudes and outward habits of behavior has diminished western ethics, perhaps fatally.

The observance of Lent. Keeping *roza* (fast) - and having clear rules about keeping *roza* - is very important for many Christians in Pakistan. As someone who is regarded as a teacher of the Bible, one of the questions I am most often asked by ordinary Christian groups is what are the Biblical rules for observing Lent. Trying to explain that there are no Biblical laws about this as such is never easy. Many aspects of Pakistani Christian observance of Lent is obviously much influenced by the Muslim observance of Ramadan. This is so much so that sometimes the Christian practice seems to be a competition - 'my fast is stricter or longer than your fast'. But what I want to highlight here is just that observing Lent is important to Christian identity in this context - the correct outward practice of religious ritual is felt to matter.

Another example of the importance of public piety is the public respect and reverence shown to the Bible as a physical artefact by, for example, never placing it on the ground or keeping it on the highest shelf in the room. Again this clearly reflects the way Muslims respect the Holy Quran but it is nonetheless a real expression of devotion. A final example, and one that personally I find to be a really beautiful and appropriate symbol of reverence for the holiness of God, is the taking off of one's shoes as one approaches the altar.

Public, outward expressions of piety are an important aspect of the practice of faith in Pakistan - Muslim or Christian. Such habits of piety can be a great strength, giving visible expression and reinforcement to the heart of religious faith. They show one of the significant ways living in this Islamic context has influenced Christian identity positively.

There is also, however, a negative side. I spoke earlier about the way this public piety worked in 'Islam at its best'. The problem is that all too often what is seen in Pakistan is very far from Islam at its best. This is also part of the Islamic context Christians live in and are deeply influenced by. Again and again Islam has been misused to provide legitimacy to those who are seeking to seize power or hold on to power in

Pakistan. As a result (as Masood Ashraf Raja has argued³) what has come to matter is solely the externalized, ritualized public practice of Islam. A man can be a terrorist and a murderer, but if he wears a beard and says his prayers, he is a good Muslim - he may even become a Shaheed.⁴ Public piety is not used to develop virtue but instead to define identity in order to gain access to power and benefits and exclude others. 'Religious ritual is shorn of its spiritual significance and reduced to an act of public performance that indicates belonging or citizenship'.⁵



called churches they contain (usually marked by a large cross on the roof), and for the drug and alcohol dealing and prostitution that goes on. But this combination of public piety and personal corruption does not just happen among the poorest Christians. It exists at all levels. We may note, e.g., the fights over church property that absorbs most of the energy of many dioceses and denominations, or the false claims for asylum made by many Christians seeking to emigrate to the West. The issue here is not that sometimes people make mistakes or fall into temptation. The issue is the seemingly total disconnect between the public religious practices that we associate with our Christian identity and

³ Masood Ashraf Raja, 'Neoliberal Dispositif and the Rise of Fundamentalism: The Case of Pakistan,' in *Journal of International and Global Studies*, Vol 3, Issue 1, pp 21-31. (www.lindenwood.edu/jigs/docs/volume3Issue1/essays/21-31.pdf).

⁴ Following the killing of Hakimullah Mesud, the head of the Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan, in a drone strike, the amir of Jamaat-i-Islami, Syed Munawwar Hasan, declared the infamous Taliban leader and terrorist a Shaheed (religious martyr). A political commentator has noted that although this "might have 'tainted' Syed Munawwar Hasan in national politics but it has certainly raised his stature within the pary (JI) circles." (Amjad Mahmood, "'Shaheed' comment pays Munawwar dividend", *The Dawn*, Jan 9th, 2014, p. 9.

⁵ Rafia Zakaria, 'Neoliberalism and the Taliban', *The Dawn*, 24 July 2013, p. 9; drawing on the thesis of Masood Ashraf Raja.

ordinary, common morality - you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, you shall not covet neighbour's house.

Christian Ethics and Islam

The foregoing discussion leads on to the broader question of ethics. Where do we get our moral principles from? How do we work out how to behave in particular situations? In Islam (or at least the versions of Islam that are most common in Pakistan) the answer to these sorts of questions is theoretically quite simple. Islam is a complete way of life. The Shariah tells one how to behave - often in quite specific detail - and it is the job of religious Muslims to bring society into conformity with Shariah law through enjoining the good and forbidding the bad (*amr bil ma'aruf wanahi anil munkar*).⁶ In Christianity it is not quite that simple. As Jesus' debates with the Pharisees show, being zealous for the law is not the same as being good or following the will of God.⁷ Being too focused on the law can get things the wrong way around. The law is meant to be a servant that helps God's people live rightly, not a master that forces them into a straightjacket that ends up perverting what it means to be truly human. As Jesus taught, 'the Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath' (Mark 2.23)

Christian ethics, then, always involves some tension between law and Christian freedom. The Bible cannot be used as if it were a law book that will lay down rules for every situation - in the words of St Paul, we need to 'work out our own salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in us, enabling us both to

will and to work for his good pleasure' (Phil 2.13-14).

I think that this is a tension that Pakistani Christianity -because of the Islamic context - finds it very hard to maintain. There is always a push towards legalism. Christians desperately want there to be a law for every question (even if we have no intention of keeping it). We have earlier noted the concern about rules for keeping Roza/fast but there are many other examples. I vividly remember being told by a Christian professional woman how her daughter had been asked by her Muslim professor why her religion did not forbid drinking alcohol, and had not known how to answer. The woman then told her daughter what she should have said. 'We believe in the same God as you do, so he must have given us the same law as he gave you. So if it is against the law to drink alcohol in Islam it is also against the law to drink alcohol in Christianity'. This is a very logical piece of legal reasoning but it does not reflect Christian moral teaching. There is no explicit rule about drinking alcohol in Christianity. Christians, in different contexts, need to work out what is appropriate Christian behaviour. In many contexts Christian communities or individuals may quite rightly refrain from drinking alcohol on moral or ethical grounds, but it is not against the law. And Christians in other contexts are not sinning when they drink in moderation.

The pressure to conform to an Islamic understanding, to define right and wrong behaviour in terms of blacks and whites and simplistic rules is almost overwhelming. But thinking of ethics in this Islamic way, which does not match our own scriptures or tradition, leads us to neglect those methods of forming good Christian character that our own tradition has developed. Very little attention is paid in our churches to the teaching, formation and pastoral care that can enable Christians to live as mature, free adults able to show Jesus' life in a complicated world.⁸

⁶ Cf the text of the Shariah Act of 1991 which included the clause 'And whereas Islam enjoins establishment of social order based on the Islamic values of bidding what is right and forbidding what is wrong (*amr bil ma'aruf wanahi anil munkar*)' in its preamble. See Christine Amjad-Ali and Charles Amjad-Ali, *The Legislative History of the Shariah Act*, (Christian Study Centre, Rawalpindi, 1992), pp. 13-14. 90

⁷ See Matt 23.23-24, 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!'

⁸ Compare Ephesians 4.12-15 which describes the work of ministers in the church as 'building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love we

Scripture

Another area where Christian understanding faces a great deal of pressure to conform to Islamic rather than Christian belief is how we view the Bible. Here I think that as Christians in a Muslim context, we are often just so relieved that there is at least one aspect of Islamic understanding of Christianity that is positive that we simply don't look at it too closely. According to Muslims, Christianity, like Islam, is a religion of the Book, and Christians are '*ahl-e-khitab*' (People of the Book). This gives Christians an honourable status from the Muslim viewpoint and not surprisingly we latch on to it quite firmly.

The danger, it seems to me, is that this understanding of Christian identity subtly but surely moves us off our own centre of faith. We begin to see ourselves as Bible-centred people rather than as Christ-centred people - a process that is exacerbated by the influence of the Christian fundamentalist theology that comes from America and elsewhere. One result has been a particularly Protestant apologetic tradition in Pakistan that focuses on proving that the Bible is somehow 'better' than the Quran. This is an activity that is not only disrespectful and un-neighbourly but also foolish, and these days, dangerous. The Bible is a rich, precious and wonderful book, but its wealth and value is lost when it is forced into a Quranic mould in order to compete against Islam. We need to let the Bible be what it is - the word of God in human words that reveals THE Word of God to us:

Jesus, the Word made flesh, who himself is God with us and God incarnate.⁹

The Church and the Christian Community

Finally I want to think about how the Islamic context may have influenced Pakistani Christian understanding of Church and Christian community. Islam has a strong sense of community. The Ummah, the worldwide Muslim commu-

nity, remains a powerful reality for Muslims, despite the very obvious divisions and conflicts between Muslim sects and the rise of nationalism and the formation of separate Muslim nations in the post-colonial period.¹⁰

Christianity also has a strong sense of being a worldwide community which Pakistani Christians also share. But Pakistani Christians also have a very strong sense of being a Christian community in Pakistan. This community is felt to include all who call themselves Christians in Pakistan, whatever their denomination, and indeed whether or not they have an affiliation to a church. This very strong communal identity no-doubt has historic roots in the origin of a major part of the community in one particular tribal/caste group in the mass conversions, and it also reflects a sense of solidarity that is a response to living as a minority in Pakistan. But it may also, to some extent, be influenced by the sense of community in Islam. In my view this strong sense of community identity is one of the great strengths of Christianity in Pakistan.

However this strong sense of community is not matched by a strong ecclesiology - that is by an understanding of being church. The exception to this may be the hierarchical institutions of the Catholic Church - the bishops, priests, and religious. But even in the Catholic Church, among ordinary laity as among the Protestant community, the understanding of church is growing more and more limited. I can perhaps explain what I mean by this by pointing to a very familiar phenomenon: the self-made pastor or even bishop who collects a congregation around himself and starts a church. Even in the so-called main-line churches, time and again a local church seems to become the personal possession of the local pastor - to be fought over in the courts if necessary. The issue here is not that of motives. I assume that 'self-made' pastors will usually have mixed motives which may well include a sincere desire to preach the Gospel. Rather, my concern is the almost total lack of a theological understanding of what the Church is. There seems little awareness of the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church' that the Creed speaks of; or of the sense of the church as the local manifestation of the Body of Christ, which is nourished through the sacra-

must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.'

⁹ See Kenneth Cragg's helpful discussion on interpreting Christian Scriptures in the context of deeper Christian Muslim understanding in *The Call of the Minaret* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1985 2nd edition) pp 247-258.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 175-6.

ments and in turn is a sign and sacrament to the world.¹¹ Where is the recognition that because the local church is the Body of Christ it must be well-ordered that word and sacrament might be faithfully administered; it cannot be a personal possession or a private enterprise; it needs to be tied to the Universal Church by connections of mutual responsibility and servanthood that model the communion of the Son with the Father.¹²

This lack of ecclesiological understanding seems to me to be one of the great weaknesses of Christian identity in Pakistan. There are many contributing factors and similar situations are seen in Africa and elsewhere, influenced among other things by Pentecostalism. The Global consumerist culture and entrepreneurial spirit also plays a role, particularly as it is mediated through American evangelicalism. But we should also recognize the influence of the Islamic context of the Christianity in Pakistan. Islam has a community, an Ummah, but it does not have a real equivalent to the Christian understanding of church. Sects may be somewhat equivalent to denominations but masjids are not the same as churches. A masjid is a building where a group of Muslim men can gather to say prayers and worship, and where someone can be appointed to preach the Friday sermon if desired. They are voluntary associations. Any man can build a masjid and if they have the skills can set themselves up as prayer-leader. They do not need to be selected or recognized or ordained by some larger body. Men will gather to pray behind the prayer leader if they choose or pray elsewhere if they do not. This comes very close to the de-facto impoverished understanding of

church that we now see operating in large segments of the Christian community in Pakistan.

Conclusion

Christianity the world over is unavoidably affected by the specific context in which it dwells and in Pakistan that context has a very strong Islamic nature. It is only natural then that Pakistani Christianity and Christian identity has been influenced by Islamic thought and practice in many ways. Sometimes we are not aware of the influence - it is so much part of our cultural and social environment we do not notice it. Sometimes the influence comes, rather paradoxically, through the desire to compete with Islam. These influences can be positive or negative, or a bit of both. Being more aware of these influences however can help us recognize what is good and of the Spirit of God in this context - but it also allows us to recognize what may be harmful or problematic and find ways to counteract such influences. In the words of St Paul, 'Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect.' Rom 12.2

Ref: *Al-Mushir*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2014, pp 64 – 75.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Institute of Theology and Christian Formation Seminar on 'Relationship Between Christian Identity and Culture' held in December 2013 at the Christian Study Centre, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

¹¹ See the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* and, from a Protestant perspective, Leslie Newbigin's understanding of the local congregation as 'the hermeneutic of the Gospel', *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Grand Rapids Mich, Wm B Eerdmans, 1989) chapter 18, pp. 222-283.

¹² See, e.g., Robert W. Jenson, 'The Church and Sacraments' in Colin E Gunton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 207-225. "It is 'because the one and only God is the communion of three persons' that the one church is 'a communion of many communities and the local church a communion of persons.'" Ibid p. 216, quoting the Orthodox and Roman Catholic dialogue, *The Mystery of the Church*, II.2.

Egidio Picucci

Istanbul “Città Francescana”?

Una delle prime immagini di San Francesco, secondo alcuni anteriore a quelle di Giotto, non si trova ad Assisi, ma in Turchia, a Istanbul. La sorpresa è maggiore quando si scopre che non si tratta di un solo dipinto, ma di un ciclo che illustra alcuni episodi della vita del Santo, come la guarigione della cieca di Narni, il suo transito e la famosa predica agli uccelli, affresco in cui gli atteggiamenti naturali degli uccelli sembrano anticipare il naturalismo della scuola di Giotto.

Il ciclo, che pare sia stato commissionato da Fra Giovanni Buralli da Parma, fu dipinto nell'antica chiesa ortodossa di Theotokos Kyriotissa (la Madre di Dio in trono), oggi moschea di Kalenderhane, a due passi dal Gran Bazar. La chiesa ha due particolari: un mosaico di un metro quadrato, che ritrae la Presentazione di Gesù al tempio, unico esemplare preiconoclasta di un soggetto religioso superstite in città, e questo ciclo pittorico del XIII secolo, unica serie di affreschi di epoca latina trovata in Turchia. C'è chi dice che essi risalirebbero ai tempi della morte del Santo (1226). Data a parte, è certo che i Francescani sono arrivati sul Bosforo ai tempi delle crociate, restandovi fino ad oggi.

Se nessuno, compresi i turisti, si interessa purtroppo dei dipinti francescani (oggi nel Museo archeologico della città), tutta Istanbul conosce e ama un grande santo francescano che non è presente negli affreschi, ma veneratissimo nella Sent Antuan kilisesi, la sua bella chiesa costruita nel 1917 (la prima risaliva nel 1725) e che, aggirando le leggi che vietavano di costruire edifici cristiani vicino alla strada, fiancheggia l'affollatissima Istiklâl Caddesi, grazie a una felice soluzione di due architetti che l'hanno “schermata” dietro le geometrie di un'artistica inferriata.

La chiesa è affidata ai Frati minori conventuali che vi accolgono settimanalmente dalle quattro alle cinquemila persone, “in gran parte giovani - scrivono i religiosi - che non vengono per pregare S. Antonio, ma a pregare Dio per

intercessione del Santo. È quanto deduciamo dal ‘libro dei desideri’, un grande registro che il martedì (giorno di maggior affluenza) è messo a disposizione dei visitatori e su cui devoti turchi, siriani, armeni, greci, caldei, gregoriani esprimono liberamente pensieri, desideri e chiedono aiuto per le necessità esistenziali. La maggioranza dei devoti è composta da donne quasi tutte musulmane - ‘chiesa e moschea sono la casa di Dio’, dicono - che qui si trovano a loro agio potendo entrare senza velo e lontane dagli sguardi degli uomini. Entrano in chiesa, si avvicinano alla statua del Santo, comprano una candela, la accendono e pregano alzando le mani, ripetendo Allahim, Allahim, mio Dio, mio Dio, chiedendo salute, benessere, serenità, buoni matrimoni per i figli. Altre vengono a godersi uno spazio di serenità, quando addirittura non sono mandate da qualche imam perché qui è possibile un rapporto individuale con il sacro, al punto che qualcuna accenna perfino a un furtivo segno di croce. Vengono non solo dalla città, ma dall'intera Turchia”.

“Nella nostra chiesa - ha scritto P. Luigi Iannitto, 50 anni di Turchia - accade spesso di vedere intere scolaresche con i loro insegnanti, ma soprattutto moltissimi giovani aperti, interessati al domani, senza complessi, in cerca di strade nuove e di soluzioni forti dei loro problemi. Fidanzati e giovani sposi chiedono una benedizione come auspicio di fedeltà e di unità. La devozione al Santo ci offre la possibilità di fare esperienze preziose e di conoscere situazioni altamente rivelatrici. Molti dicono che di fronte ad Aziz Antuan (S. Antonio) avvertono la presenza di Dio. ‘I professori - mi disse un giorno una studentessa di sociologia di Ankara - spiegano tutto con l'ateismo e il materialismo e non si accorgono che noi giovani andiamo in cerca di un Dio accettabile dall'uomo moderno, diverso da quello che ci presenta l'Islam’.

Si dice che l'80% dei giovani turchi è in ricerca di valori nel campo della scienza,

dell'arte, della tecnica e della fede, cosa non facile nell'ambito musulmano, dando così ragione a quanto avrebbe detto Atatürk, e cioè che 'il cristianesimo è più consono all'anima turca di quanto non lo sia l'Islam'. Io constato giornalmente quanto questo sia vero, perché i giovani che entrano nella nostra chiesa dicono di trovarvi quello che cercano inutilmente nella moschea, aiutati sia dalle spiegazioni dei religiosi che dai libri in turco che abbiamo preparato soprattutto per loro. A mio parere questi giovani stanno mettendo le prime pietre per la testa di quel ponte che potrebbe favorire un incontro e un dialogo pratico Islamo-cristiano, continuando quello avviato da S. Francesco con il Sultano Melek-el-Kamel a Damietta. Il "miracolo" si deve alla lingua turca, che ha unito due mondi religiosi per merito di Angelo Roncalli allorché era Delegato apostolico, e fece il primo passo chiamando i musulmani fratelli e pregando per la prima volta in turco".

Ref: *Religiosi in Italia*, Marzo – Aprile 2017 , N° 419, pp.75 -77.

Sent Antuan kilisesi



DOCUMENTS:

**APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE FRANCIS TO EGYPT
(28-29 APRIL 2017)
MEETING AND PRAYER WITH PRIESTS, RELIGIOUS AND SEMINARIANS**

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Saint Leo the Great Patriarchal Seminary,
Maadi, Saturday, 29 April 2017

*Your Beatitudes,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,
As-salamu alaykum! Peace be with you!*

“This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice in him! Christ is forever victorious over death, let us rejoice in him!”

I am happy to be with you in this house of formation for priests, which represents the heart of the Catholic Church in Egypt. I am pleased to greet you, the priests and consecrated men and women of the small Catholic flock in Egypt, as the “leaven” which God is preparing for this blessed land, so that, together with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, his Kingdom may increase in this place (cf. *Mt* 13:13).

I wish first of all to thank you for your witness and for the good that you do every day amid many challenges and often few consolations. I want to encourage you! Do not be afraid of the burdens of your daily service and the difficult circumstances some of you must endure. We venerate the Holy Cross, the instrument and sign of our salvation. When we flee the Cross, we flee the resurrection!

“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (*Lk* 12:32).

This, then, demands believing, witnessing to the truth, sowing and cultivating without waiting for the harvest. In fact, we reap the fruits of so many others, whether consecrated or not, who have generously worked in the Lord’s vineyard. Your history is filled with such people! Although there are many reasons to be discouraged, amid many prophets of destruction and condemnation, and so many negative and despairing voices, may you be a positive force,

salt and light for this society. Like the engine of a train, may you be the driving force leading all towards their destination. May you be sowers of hope, builders of bridges and agents of dialogue and harmony.

This will be possible if consecrated men and women do not give in to the temptations they daily encounter along their way. I would like to highlight some of the greatest of these temptations. You know them, because the earliest monks of Egypt described well these temptations.

1. *The temptation to let ourselves be led, rather than to lead.* The Good Shepherd has the responsibility of guiding the sheep (cf. *Jn* 10:3-4), of bringing them to fresh pastures and springs of flowing water (cf. *Ps* 23). He cannot let himself be dragged down by disappointment and pessimism: “What can I do?” He is always full of initiative and creativity, like a spring that flows even in the midst of drought. He always shares the caress of consolation even when he is broken-hearted. He is a father when his children show him gratitude, but especially when they prove ungrateful (cf. *Lk* 15:11-32). Our faithfulness to the Lord must never depend on human gratitude: “Your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (*Mt* 6:4, 6, 18).

2. *The temptation to complain constantly.* It is easy to always complain about others, about the shortcomings of superiors, about the state of the Church and society, about the lack of possibilities... But consecrated persons, through the Holy Spirit’s anointing, are those who turn every obstacle into an opportunity, and not every difficulty into an excuse! The person who is always complaining is really someone who doesn’t want to work. It was for this reason that

the Lord said to the pastors: “Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees” (*Heb* 12:12; cf. *Is* 35:3).

3. *The temptation to gossip and envy.* And this is terrible! It is a great danger when consecrated persons, instead of helping the little ones to grow and to rejoice in the successes of their brothers and sisters, allow themselves to be dominated by envy and to hurt others through gossip. When, instead of striving to grow, they start to destroy those who are growing; instead of following their good example, they judge them and belittle their value. Envy is a cancer that destroys the body in no time: “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand” (*Mk* 3:24-25). In fact – and do not forget this – “through the devil’s envy death entered the world” (*Wis* 2:24). Gossip is its means and its weapon.

4. *The temptation to compare ourselves to others.* Enrichment is found in the diversity and uniqueness of each one of us. Comparing ourselves with those better off often leads to grudges; comparing ourselves with those worse off often leads to pride and laziness. Those who are always comparing themselves with others end up paralyzed. May we learn from Saints Peter and Paul to experience the diversity of qualities, charisms and opinions through willingness to listen and docility to the Holy Spirit.

5. *The temptation to become like Pharaoh* – we are in Egypt! – that is, to harden our hearts and close them off to the Lord and our brothers and sisters. Here the temptation is to think that we are better than others, and to lord it over them out of pride; to presume to be served rather than to serve. It is a temptation that, from the very beginning, was present among the disciples, who – as the Gospel tells us – on the way argued with one another about which of them was the greatest (cf. *Mk* 9:34). The antidote to this poison is: “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (*Mk* 9:35).

6. *The temptation to individualism.* As a well-known Egyptian saying goes: “Me, and after me, the flood!” This is the temptation of selfish people: along the way, they lose sight of the

goal and, rather than think of others, they are unashamed to think only of themselves, or even worse, to justify themselves. The Church is the community of the faithful, the Body of Christ, where the salvation of one member is linked to the holiness of all (cf. *1 Cor* 12:12-27; [*Lumen Gentium*, 7.](#)) An individualist is a cause of scandal and of conflict.

7. *The temptation to keep walking without direction or destination.* Consecrated men and women can lose their identity and begin to be “neither fish nor fowl”. They can live with a heart between God and worldliness. They can forget their first love (cf. *Rev* 2:4). Indeed, when they lose clear and solid identity, consecrated men and women end up walking aimlessly; instead of leading others, they scatter them. Your identity as sons and daughters of the Church is to be Copts – rooted in your noble and ancient origins – and to be Catholics – part of the one and universal Church: like a tree that, the more deeply rooted it is in the earth, the higher it reaches to the heavens!

Dear consecrated friends, resisting these temptations is not easy, but it is possible if we are grafted on to Jesus: “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me” (*Jn* 15:4). The more we are rooted in Christ, the more we are alive and fruitful! Only in this way can we preserve the wonder and the passion of our first encounter with God, and experience renewed excitement and gratitude in our life with God and in our mission. The quality of our consecration depends on the quality of our spiritual life.

Egypt has enriched the Church through the inestimable value of monastic life. I urge you, therefore, to draw upon the example of Saint Paul the Hermit, Saint Anthony, the holy Desert Fathers, and the countless monks and nuns who by their lives and example opened the gates of heaven to so many of our brothers and sisters. You too can be salt and light, and thus an occasion of salvation for yourselves and for all others, believers and non-believers alike, and especially for those who are poor, those in need, the abandoned and discarded.

May the Holy Family protect and bless all of you, your country and its entire people. With all my heart, I invoke God's blessings on you, and through you I greet the faithful whom the Lord has entrusted to your care. May he grant you the fruits of his Holy Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (*Gal 5:22*).

You are always in my heart and in my prayers. Take heart and keep moving forward with the help of the Holy Spirit! "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice in him!" And please, don't forget to pray for me!



Pope Francis in Egypt, 28-29 April 2017

The UISG/USG Commission for Dialogue

invites you to a morning exploring:

*Ecumenical collaboration
in promoting inter-religious dialogue:
Perspectives, achievements and possibilities*

A conversation with:

Archbishop Bernard Ntahoturi



New director, Anglican Centre, Rome

Date: Wednesday November 15, 2017

Time: 9.30–12.30

Place: UISG Headquarters

Piazza di Ponte Sant'Angelo, 28 –00186 Roma

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**Thursday, 30 November, 2017 at UISG
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from 3 pm to 6 pm**

Remembering All Saints & All Souls Day



We remember with deep gratitude your missionary, brothers and sisters, who have gone before us.