

## ISLAMIC CURRENT EVOLUTION, CONTEMPORAY ISSUES AND INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

### INTRODUCTION

After the recent terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, as well as the continual suicide bombings in Iraq and the tension between Hamas – Israel - Hezbollah, Islam is at the front page of many newspapers and main talks on television shows. People ask questions: Why is Islam so violent? Does the Koran approve of terrorism and suicide bombings? Is Islam compatible with modernity? Why do Moslems hate Jews and Christians<sup>1</sup>? Do Moslems have something in common with Jews and Christians? What can a Christian community learn from a religion associated with terrorism? After all, what is Islam? How did it come to what it is today?

To correctly answer these burning questions requires a serious examination of the historical roots and doctrine of Islam, especially with regard to its consequences for the present situation of the world, and to its relation to Christianity. My point is that Islam is a conquering religion to which corresponds its double structure as a religious society and political organization. Any attempt in understanding Islam should treat it not only as a religion, but also as a political institution. This ambiguous situation is nowadays exasperated by the problem of Palestine. A lasting solution to the Palestinian problem would have a double effect of appeasing the tensions between the Moslem world and the Christian West, on the one hand, and on the other hand, would contribute to the peaceful coexistence of Islam and Christianity. Intentionally, I will not discuss the question of Palestine because its dimension goes beyond the scope of this talk. My reference to it will be allusive as far as it interferes to some extent with the subject. However, the inter-religious dialogue should not focus only on political considerations, but on religious principles inspired by efforts of peace and a search for unity. To approach these points, I will, first, present a historical overview on Islam. Second, I will talk about the conquering character of Islam

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Esposito, *What everyone needs to know about Islam*, Oxford, University Press, 2002, p. xiii.

and its consequences. Finally, I will analyze some current issues linked to the development of Islam in today's world, especially with regard to the inter-religious dialogue. My intention, then, is to provide you with some clues which can help you understand Islam and some of the issues it raises in today's world.

## **I. What is Islam?**

### **1. Exploring the Historical Roots**

Islam was founded by a man called Mahomet or Muhammad ibn Abdullah in the 7th Century of our time in Saudi Arabia. Muhammad was born in 570 in Mecca. His father passed away before he was born and his mother died when he was relatively young. His grandfather took care of him and raised him. In order to survive he engaged in the caravan trade, where he became a commercial agent to a rich widow named Khadija, whom he married later and from whom he had four daughters. After the death of Khadija, Muhammad contracted twelve other marriages<sup>2</sup>.

When he was about 40 years old, Muhammad started making claims about a revelation he had received from God, Allah in Arabic, through the mediation of the Angel Gabriel and a Spirit. The Quran (recitation in Arabic) was then revealed as the final redaction of the will of Allah, "the God of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes [of Israel] ... and Jesus" (Koran 2, 136) which he wanted to communicate to mankind making, thereby, Muhammad his prophet. The intent of the revelation was that every human being must submit himself to it lest he undergo God's judgment. Whenever Muslims talk about the prophet, they always say "May the peace and the blessing of Allah be upon him".

At his beginning, Mahomet met a strong opposition from the leaders of established polytheist sects, as well as from local businessmen who lived off the shrines and the pilgrimages. To save his life, he fled to Medina, a city outside Mecca, with his followers in the autumn of 622. This migration of Muhammad and

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<sup>2</sup> Akbar S. Ahmed, *Islam Today. A Short Introduction to the Muslim world*, London. New York, 2002, p. 16-19.

his followers is called *Hegira* (departure in Arabic); it marks the year one of Moslem calendar.

In two battles in 624 and 627, Mohammad attempted to conquer Mecca, but he failed. Finally, he succeeded and entered Mecca victoriously in 630. He broke down the pagan idols of Kaaba, rebuilt the sacred temple and in its foundation set the same black stone which Arabian animists had kissed for centuries as part of their pilgrimage ritual. The black stone symbolizes for Moslems the sins and the impurity of the pagan world. After that, he went back to reside in Medina and organized his religion. In 632, he made a first and last pilgrimage to Mecca and died shortly after his return in June 8, 632.

## 2. The Koran and the doctrine

The sacred book of the Moslems is called the Koran. It consists of 114 chapters of revelation called *Surahs*, each one being arranged according to its length and the shortest being the first. *Surahs* in turn are divided into verses and numbered like in the Bible. The *Surahs* are titled according to a particular subject like Abraham, Mary, Women, Divorce, etc... The duty of the faithful is to accept the Koran literally and not to question the tenor or the meaning of the revelation.

Beside the Koran, there is the *Sunna*. It is a collection of traditions, sayings and anecdotes. Both the Koran and the *Sunna* are reinforced by the principle of *Ijma*, which states that the belief of the majority of Moslems cannot be in error. The Koran, the *Sunna* and the *Ijma* are the three source books of Islam.

### What can be known about the Islamic Doctrine?

Islam maintains a sharp distinction between faith (*iman*) and practice (*ihsan*). Faith defined as "assent to that which comes from God, and confession to it", has been formulated in an article of profession of faith called *Shahada*: "*There is no god but God [Allah]. And Mohammad is His messenger*".

The Moslem creed contains **six classical articles** concerning God, angels, the Holy Scriptures, prophets and messengers, resurrection and judgment, and predestination. Islam is a very strong monotheism that allows no filiation in God.

God is unique and a complete Master of the universe. He determines everything by his will, whether good or bad. Although Moslems have a strong view on predestination, it cannot, however, be reduced to a crude fatalism.

Moslems distinguish prophets from “messengers”; the latter being believed holy men sent by God to teach specific peoples. Among the most prominent mentioned in the Koran are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Mohammed is considered as the “seal” of the prophets. He closes the long line of prophets. After him, there will be no prophet. Despite the honor in which Abraham is held, the predominant figure in the Koran is Moses.

In the Koran, Jesus appeared to be simply a messenger of Allah and nothing more. The Koran denies that the Jews have killed Jesus. Yet God will punish the Jews for rejecting Mohammed, slandering Mary’s virginity and claiming to have crucified Jesus. In the same way, the blessed virgin, although respectfully treated, is only the mother of Jesus. However, she is recognized to have given miraculous birth to Jesus. In this respect, the virgin birth of Christ is a unique privilege in the history of mankind.

### **What are the Islamic Practices?**

Before talking about the Islamic practices, let me note that the religious life of a Muslim, as described by the Koran, remains essentially on a personal and individual basis, implying thereby a personal responsibility of the believer and rejection of any spiritual hierarchy. Islam does not accept the concept of “church” and has excluded from its religious leadership any of the spiritual functions and prerogatives of priesthood. There are **five “Pillars of faith”** in the Islamic practices.

a. ***The profession of faith***: It consists of a repetition of the words of witness: “There is no god but God, and Mohammed is his messenger”. The believing recitation of this formula, preferably before witnesses, is sufficient in itself to make someone a Moslem. In the view of *Sunni* Islam (Orthodox Islam), no one who repeats the *shahada* (profession of faith) can be considered as an infidel or

excluded from the community of Muslims. Sunnis account for about 90 percent of the Muslim world population.

Nonetheless, there are many sects and religious entities separable from “orthodoxy” in varying degrees and according to various criteria. The most famous are the *Shiites* who originated among the political partisans of Mohammad’s cousin and son-in law, Ali and his heirs, and developed, through a number of distinct doctrinal, legal, and ritualistic features. Sectarianism in Islam has not the same connotation as heresy in the Christian Church. The Shiites believe that Ali should have been the successor of the prophet as the first male to embrace Islam. If Ali had been the first caliph, his son Hussain would then have been caliph in place of Yazid, the very man who ordered Hussain’s death at Karbala. The most significant difference between Sunnites and Shiites is that, while for the first the caliphs who succeeded to the prophet were just political and military leaders, the second consider the Imam as both political leader and religious guide divinely inspired<sup>3</sup>.

b. **Prayer.** The prayer (*sala*) is required of all Moslems once they reach puberty and as long as they are in good health. The ritual consists of a series of seven movements, with their appropriate recitations between bowing (*raka*), standing and kneeling. The prayers are done at daybreak, noon, mid-afternoon, after sunset, and in the early hour of the night. Additional prayers are recommended, especially during the night. There is also a tradition of private and contemplative prayer, largely associated with **Sufism**.

In a mosque, the worshipers stand behind the prayer-leader (*Imam*) all facing in the direction of *Quibla*, the sacred mosque in Mecca marked by a niche in the wall of the mosque. The ablution of face, head, arms, feet and ankles is obligatory; and for this purpose, each mosque is furnished with a water-tank<sup>4</sup>. The noon prayer on Friday is the principal congregational service of the week,

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<sup>3</sup> Idem, p. 43-45.

<sup>4</sup> H. R. Gibb, *Islam*, in *Encyclopedia of the World’s Religions*, New York, Barnes & Noble, 1997, p. 175.

and is distinguished by a formal address (*khutba*) in two sections, partly invocation of blessings on the Prophet, the Moslem leaders, and the political rulers of the State; and a sermon delivered by a preacher<sup>5</sup>.

c. **Almsgiving:** Moslems are enjoined to give alms (*Zakat* in Arabic). It has to be distinguished from free-will offerings, and in early times was regularly assessed as a tax on the possessions of Muslims. However, it is not a tax, but a loan made to God in form of a regular percentage (normally one fortieth) of annual revenue, made over the local authorities for the relief of the poor and needy, and the freeing of slaves and prisoners<sup>6</sup>. It was extended to other religious objects and those fighting in a holy war<sup>7</sup>. **[See Koran 9. 60]**

d. **Fasting:** There is an obligation for all the Moslems to fast during the ninth lunar month of **Ramadan**, which is reckoned from Hegira. The sick and the travelers are exempt, but they should make compensation by fasting an equal number of days later. Fasting involves total abstinence of food and drink and sexual intercourse. The fast goes from daybreak to sunset. Its purpose is to provoke repentance and to draw the hearts of the believers nearer God<sup>8</sup>.

e. **Pilgrimage to Mecca:** Once in his life, each Moslem is expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, at the twelfth month of the lunar year, if he has the means and the physical capability. The pilgrimage consists in kissing the Black Stone, stoning the pillars representing the devil, visiting the mosque and going seven times in Kaaba and, finally, offering sacrifices of camels and sheep on the way back from the vicinity of Mina<sup>9</sup>. As part of pilgrimage, purification, shaving of the head and a discard of ordinary clothing are observed.

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<sup>5</sup> J. A. Hardon, *Religions of the World*, Society of Saint Paul New York, 1963, p. 83.

<sup>6</sup> H. R. Gibb, *Islam*, in *Encyclopedia of the World's Religions*, New York, Barnes & Noble, 1997, p. 175.

<sup>7</sup> J. Kritzcek, *Islam*, in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VII, Washington, The Catholic University of America, 1967, p. 681.

<sup>8</sup> J. Kritzcek, *Islam*, in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, p. 680.

<sup>9</sup> J. A. Hardon, *Religions of the World*, Society of Saint Paul New York, 1963, p. 85.

## II. The conquering Character of Islam and its Consequences

All the historians are unanimous in recognizing that there are two stages in the life of Mahomet corresponding to his stays in Mecca and in Medina. In fact, “the flight to Median changed not only the scene but the actor and the drama in Islamic history. In Mecca, the prophet had been simply a religious leader, concerned for the social morals of his people and zealous to share his revealed convictions; at Median he suddenly became a political and military figure, whose new role is clearly indicated by a sudden transition in the Koran”<sup>10</sup>.

By entering Medina, Mahomet broke all resistance of Bedouin tribes at the battle of Hunajn and established the city as the capital of a new Moslem state. “Here he received delegates from Arabian chieftains who vowed submission, and from here, he sent his last military expeditions against the Byzantine power, foreshadowing the vast expansion of the Islamic empire of the future”<sup>11</sup>. The fall of Mecca could but reinforce Mahomet in this enterprise and to make Islam a political-religious society. At his death, his direct successors (*khalifa*), namely Abu Bakr and Umar, were established as political and religious headships.

The historian H. R. A. Gibbs maintains that “with the establishment of the community at al-Madina Islam asserts itself as a religious system, distinct from Judaism and Christianity (both of which, in its own view, it completes, purifies from accumulated errors, and supersedes), and carrying with it a complex of divinely ordained social institution”. He says also that “by virtue of the repeated injunction to ‘*strive in the path of God, until allegiance to God is victorious over all other allegiance*’, the community is invested with a duty and a power of expansion, universal in aim. So far as lies within the capacity of Muslims, idolatry is not to be tolerated; Jews and Christians, on the other hand, are not to be

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<sup>10</sup> J. A. Hardon, *Religions of the World*, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> J. A. Hardon, *Religions of the World*, p. 69.

molested provided they acknowledge the supremacy of the Muslim state and pay the stipulated tribute”<sup>12</sup>.

In a documentary movie presented in the aftermath of September 11 on channel 6 [(PBS) October 1, 2001) entitled “*Islam: Empire of Faith*”, the point all the contributors made was that from its beginning Islam was tolerant of other religious Confessions. This changed when in 1009 Caliph Ali Haki suddenly invaded Jerusalem, destroying churches and forcing Christians to convert or to disappear. It is this invasion and the occupation of Jerusalem that led Pope Urban II in 1044 to declare the crusades for the liberation of the Holy Land, and opened thereby a period of conflict between Islam and Christianity.

To my understanding, this argument would like to say, in other words, that Islam in itself was a tolerant religion and the intolerance in its structure has come as a matter of historical accident. The argument defended here refers to the evolution of Islam as it appeared in history. But we should not forget that what is written in the Koran is taken by Moslems as the will of God to which nobody has the right to disagree. This is why, it seems to me, important to put this argument into perspective.

In fact, it is true that the principle of tolerance can be found in the Koran, but it is fragile and ambiguous. If the purpose of Moslem evangelization is to preach until allegiance to Allah is victorious over all other allegiances, how and to what extent can such a demand support the presence of other religions? Moreover, if there is supremacy of Islam over Judaism and Christianity, as declared in the Koran, would not a convinced Moslem find it difficult to cope with a religion that does not accept Allah or Mahomet as the great and last prophet of God?

In fact, we cannot say that there was a perversion of the initial message of the Koran through history, because what is happening today is the radicalization of something that already exists in the Koran. It does not mean, however, that tolerant Moslems do not exist, but they live at the edge of a fragile tolerance. In

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<sup>12</sup> H. A. R. Gibbs, *Islam*. p. 169.



politics, the principle “Whoever needs peace should prepare war” can work, but applied to religion, it becomes harmful and a denial of the essence of what religion is, as a factor of unification of people beyond their differences. The reaction in the Moslem world to the citation the pope Benedict XVI used from the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologos, in his last visit in Germany, shows where Moslem tolerance can stand. Instead of asking themselves internal questions about the spread of violence in the world by using religious motivation from radical movements, many Moslems threw their fury on the pope.

Similar fury can rise again as far as the Palestinian question is not resolved. As a matter of fact, when in 1948 the State of Israel was created from a portion of land taken from what was known as Palestine, Moslem countries interpreted it as a Christian-European attempt to clear their conscience from the holocaust perpetrated against the Jewish people. The defeat of Arab armies in the 1967 war against Israel and the long restless wandering of Palestinian people without a permanent State could but exasperate, or make more grievous, the wounded relationship in history. The failure of multiple attempts to settle peace between Israel and Palestine and, thereby to give Palestinians a State, has been experienced by radical Moslems as humiliation, of which they try to get rid in their own way by giving free vent to violence. Without the establishment of Palestinian State, of course with the coexistence of Israel, it would be very difficult to hope for a harmonious relationship between the West and Islam and between Christians and Moslems. This being said, let us examine now the consequences of the existence of the Moslem state.

### **Consequences of the establishment of the Moslem State**

The first consequence was the political expansion of Islam and the rise of sects. In fact, the establishment of the Moslem state in Medina led to the conquest of Western Asia and Egypt with the entire Islamic political configuration we have today. For instance, North Africa that was Christian and has produced Church fathers like St Augustine, St Athanasius, St Cyril of Alexandria, St Cyprian, St Anthony of Egypt..., has become completely Islamic. To come to such an

expansion, Islam proceeded as an “organized and political institution that was able to set up regular administration in the conquered provinces under the supreme government of a Caliph, whose religious authority gave him means of control over traditional tendencies of the Arab tribes to anarchical independence”<sup>13</sup>.

It should be noted, however, that neither the Koran nor Mahomet himself set clear rules about the government of the Moslem State. This brought an internal civil war between the partisans of his elected Caliph, Abu Bakr, and those who recognized the legitimacy of his succession only in his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, and their descendants. This is the origin of the majority party called *Sunni* or followers of the *Sunna* (practice) and the *Shi at Ali*, partisan of Ali. A third group, the *Kharijites*, rejecting both Sunnites and Shiites, maintained the right of the community to choose and depose its head in case of sin<sup>14</sup>.

A second consequence was the consolidation of Islamic law. As Islam was established as a religion and political institution, it turned out that the practical problems of the community took precedence over religious affairs. Furthermore, if the basic social institution was laid down in the Koran, “in daily life, Caliphs and governors (...) supplemented the Koranic rulings by drawing on traditional Arab practice and their own judgment”. This gave rise to different schools which “elaborate legal systems, supplementing the Koran by drawing on rulings and tradition handed down from the first-generation Muslims (the companions of the prophet) and by reasoning based on these and the rulings of the Koran”<sup>15</sup>.

It was in that order that the Islamic law called *Shari ‘a* took its final shape as the pattern of the communal order of Moslem society. The interpretation was that God gave the law for all mankind, and not only for the Moslems, in order to show the good to do and the evil to avoid. The law is mandatory, universal and

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<sup>13</sup> H. A. R. Gibbs, *Islam*, p. 169.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 170.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 170-171.

immutable except by his decrees. Therefore, no one has the right to question it without incurring the sin, unless qualified by the Koran itself<sup>16</sup>. “Both the Muslim theory of the law and the pursuit of unity implied the fixation and a degree of formal rigidity which gave little room for flexibility”<sup>17</sup>.

However, with the rise of modern society, it became very difficult to apply the Shari’a in all the situations and cases. “Particularly in criminal cases and public administrations, and to some extent in commercial practice, the government of Moslem countries steadily encroached on the prerogatives of the Sharia’s courts by setting rival jurisdictions. These derogations were partially justified, at least, by the defective methods of procedure and excessive scrupulosity of (Shari’a) courts in criminal cases, and by the changing systems of land tenure and public finance administration. But the final result was to establish two distinct and separate systems of justice in all Muslim societies, based on different authorities and sanctions”<sup>18</sup>.

For the partisans or the supporters of Islamic tribunal, the fact of separating justice and applying the law, other than the Shari’a, was perceived as an evident sign of a growing secularization of Islamic society. Only the first was legitimate as expression of Moslem society, while the second was accepted only by the sanction of power as the result of the degeneration of Muslim community and its abandonment of the true bases of its proper constitution<sup>19</sup>.

While, on the one hand, the government tried to control the partisans of pure Islamic law, on the other hand they tried to fight back in regaining some ground through charitable associations. This can explain the social success of the movement like Moslem brothers in Egypt, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Islamic Front of salvation in Algeria or Hamas in Palestine. All these movements,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 171

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 173.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 173.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 173.

although religious, have ultimately become political, because of the double structure Islam bears in its foundational texts as a religious and a political society. Unfortunately, some of them have given rise to fundamentalism as an affirmation of Moslem identity and as a means of protecting themselves from what they consider as the degeneration and the invasion of Islam by secularized West.

The third consequence is solidarity through institutional unity. As I said before, for Moslems to surmount humiliation in the Palestinian question, there should exist a strong sentiment of unity that keeps them all together throughout the world. Moslems consider themselves as a coherent body having duties and obligations defined by the Koran and a one nation, the Arab Nation. This factor has played a big role in times of conflict. When one country is attacked, others feel concerned, although sometimes the “national interest” prevails over that Arab-Islamic Nation. But in the case of war against Israel, that has functioned and has led to the defeat of Arabs and an occupation of a part of Syria and the Egyptian Sinai Mountain by Israel. In the case of the Gulf war, the Arabic unity was difficult to find, because Saddam Hussein was considered a traitor of the Arabic cause by invading Kuwait.

The Arabic language, which brings all Moslems together as one people, sharing the same religious values, reinforces also their political unity<sup>20</sup>.

### **III Contemporary Issues Linked to the Evolution of Islam**

#### **1. The question of holy War or Jihad**

The Jihad is one of the most controversial themes in the Koran and whose prescription is historically most significant to explain the propagation of Islam over the years. The Jihad refers to the Quran’s command to struggle in the path of God and in the example of the prophet and his companions. It can be a struggle against evil; but, according to circumstances, it can also be fighting

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<sup>20</sup> Caesar E. Farah, *Islam. Beliefs and Observances*, Barron’s, New York, 2003, p. 153.

injustice and oppression, spreading and defending Islam, armed struggle or holy war<sup>21</sup>. Three passages are classic and deserve to be quoted in full about Jihad.

First of all, the Jihad is duty given to all Moslems. Its language recalls the difficult situation through which Mohammad himself went through in his beginnings:

**“Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, but do not transgress limits, for Allah loves not transgressors. Slay them whenever you find them and drive them from whence they have expelled you, for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter. Fight them until sedition is no more and allegiance is rendered to God alone. But if they desist, then make no aggression except against evildoers” [25].**

There is no doubt that this Surah founds the Holy War against the non- Muslims and contains some ambiguity. Where it recommends to Muslims not to transgress the limits, it is not clear what limits are in question. Furthermore, where it says that if the pagans desist, then, make no aggression, it is not clear what “desist” means? What shall they desist, their own faith or Muslim faith? Everything is so ambiguous that a good Muslim can only slay the pagans in the name of Allah.

The second passage is concerned with Jews and Christians:

**When the sacred Months (of truce) are over, kill those who ascribe partners to God, wheresoever you find them. Seize them, encompass them, and ambush them. Then, if they repent and observe the prayer, and pay the alms, let them go their way.**

**Fight against those who believe not in Allah, nor in the last day, who prohibit not what God and His prophet have forbidden, and who refuse allegiance to the True Faith-until they pay the tribute readily after being brought low. The Jews say, “Ezra is the son of Allah”, and the Christians say, “Christ is the son of Allah”, that is their saying with their mouth. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved of old. Allah Himself fights against them. How perverse they are [26].**

Let me say that the duty of waging a Holy War against unbelievers is a collective obligation, not an individual one. While the Koran does not make the Jihad an article of faith, it is the **Hadith** which renders it into a formula for “active struggle” that invariably tended toward a militant expression<sup>22</sup>. According to Islamic tradition, the world is divided into subjugated zones and regions not yet under the

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<sup>21</sup> John J. Esposito, *What everyone needs to know about Islam?* p. 117.

<sup>22</sup> C. E. Farah, *Islam*, p. 158.

Moslem control. To conquer the latter is an apostolic venture and those who die in the cause are not dead; they are alive in bliss with Allah.

While it is impossible to find a complete consensus of Moslem opinion on the subject, modern Islamic commentators fairly agree on certain general facts and interpretations about the Holy War. Next to their attitude toward women, they feel that Moslems have been most misinterpreted in their attitude toward the use of force.

For the apologists of a more liberal view who are in the majority, although they admit that the Koran teaches the *jihad*, they insist this should be balanced by other verses where toleration is proclaimed. Here is a corresponding *Surah*:

**There is no compulsion in religion. The right direction is henceforth distinct from error.**

**For each one We have appointed a divine law and traced out a way. Had Allah willed, He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He has given you (He has made you who you are), wherefore press forward in good works. Unto Allah you will all return, and He will then tell you concerning that wherein you disagree.**

**Say: O disbelievers! I worship not that which you worship; nor do you worship that which I worship. And I shall not worship that which you worship, nor will you worship that which I worship. Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion [27].**

## 2. The Question of Fundamentalism

The term fundamentalism when applied to Islam has not the same meaning as in Christianity as the literal reading and interpretation of sacred texts. In Moslem approach, it is an activism aiming at the rejuvenation, the renewal and the integration of pure Islamic teaching with the institution governing Islamic societies<sup>23</sup>.

Certain features of this phenomenon can be identified. There is a belief that Islam is a comprehensive way of life, that it includes society, politics and economics. There is also a belief that the failure of Muslims is due to their

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<sup>23</sup> C. E. Farah, *Islam*, p. 404.

departure from the straight path of Islam and their infatuation with Western secularism and its materialistic ideology. Then it is felt that the renewal of society necessitates a return to Islam, which draws its inspiration directly from the Quran and the prophet. However, beyond these beliefs some see the West as continuing the Crusades against Muslims with the crusader mentality. They reject even their own Muslim governments because they are not inspired by the *Shariah*. Although considering the Jews and the Christians as people of book, they link them to Western colonialism and Zionism, which pushes to consider them as unbelievers<sup>24</sup>.

According to John L. Esposito, Islamic fundamentalism or Political Islam started in the late 1960s affecting both the personal and public life of Muslims. From the point of view of personal life, many Muslims have become more religiously observant and attentive to prayer, fasting, dress, and family values, as well as to mysticism or Sufism. In public life, fundamentalism appeared as a political alternative and a social ideology to secular nationalism, Western capitalism, and Marxist socialism, of which many believe having failed to resolve the problem of poverty, unemployment and political oppression<sup>25</sup>.

Fundamentalism is made up of different categories of people, moderates as well as extremists, and with diverse educational and social background. While some are from economically or politically marginalized or “oppressed” backgrounds, others are well-educated university students and professionals<sup>26</sup>. It should be noted, however, that many Islamist activists are part of a nonviolent political and social force in mainstream society. Only a militant minority are extremists and terrorists<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Akbar S. Ahmed, *Islam Today. A Short Introduction to the Muslim World*, London. New York, I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2002, p. 226.

<sup>25</sup> J. L. Esposito, *What everyone should know about Islam*, Oxford, University Press, 2002, p. 60.

<sup>26</sup> *Idem*, p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61.

Islamists cherish also modernism. Modernists in Islam start from the Islamic premise and then seek those adjustments that would make it compatible with the dynamics of the modern world based on science and technology. That is why they see in Islamic activism and militancy a setback in time and progress<sup>28</sup>. It does not mean that Islamists reject scientific knowledge or secularized technology, rather everything that is void of any ethical content and a blind borrowing of Western materialist and secular values<sup>29</sup>.

### 3. Inter-religious Dialogue within Catholic Perspective

In his “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christians Religions”, the Vatican II Council (**Nostra Aetate**, from October 28, 1965), has defined the principles that guide the Catholic Church in dealing with non-Christian Religions.

This declaration can be summarized in the following points: First of all, there is the recognition that all men form but one community, because all stem from the one stock of which God has created all the people of the earth<sup>30</sup>.

Given that common origin, the different religions in the world appear as the answer of human beings to the different problems of human existence, which problems refer to the question of the origin and the essence of man, the meaning and the purpose of life, the way of conducting in the world and the endeavor to distinguish the good from the bad. All these questions presuppose that there is a Supreme Being to which all these religions refer. For that, all the religions in the world appear as an attempt in their own ways to calm the hearts of men by outlining a program of life covering doctrine, moral precepts and sacred rites<sup>31</sup>.

For its part, the Catholic Church accepts everything that is true and holy in these religions. It takes in high esteem their manner of life and conduct, the precepts and the doctrine although differing from its own teaching, and believes that they

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<sup>28</sup> C. E. Farah, *Islam*, p. 404.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, 45.

<sup>30</sup> *Declaration on The Relation of the Church to No-Christian Religions*, # 1

<sup>31</sup> *Idem*, # 2.



contain nonetheless a certain ray of truth that enlightens all men. And yet, the Catholic Church proclaims Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the light of the world (John 1, 6) and in whom God reconciles everything in heaven and on earth in him (2Cor 5, 18-19).

For that specific reason, “the Church, therefore, urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture<sup>32</sup>.

With regard to the Muslims, the Church has also a high regard for them as they worship the one, true and living God, creator of heaven and earth. The Church recognizes their effort to submit their life without reserve to the decrees of God, as Abraham did to whom Muslims are linked. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they honor him as a prophet, as well as they do with his virgin mother, Mary, and await the future judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. The Church appreciates also their prayer and alms-deeds, as well as their fast.

Even if in the past, there were problems of conflicts and quarrels between Muslims and Christians, the Church esteems that the time has come to turn all that behind us by the achievement of mutual understanding and promoting peace, liberty, social justice and moral values<sup>33</sup>.

## **CONCLUSION**

My conclusion can be stated in the following lines of claims. From the catholic point of view, it is true that we have to be tolerant toward Muslims, as well as all non-Christians religions, but that should not lead us to relativism. There is the question of truth and that of the plenitude of salvation brought to us in Jesus Christ that any Christian dealing with non-Christian religions should take

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<sup>32</sup> Idem, # 2.

<sup>33</sup> Idem, # 3.

seriously. Of course, it depends on God and God alone to judge human beings and the ways they come to their eternal salvation, but we cannot forget that Jesus is the truth, the light and the way to salvation.

As Pope Benedict XVI said in his book *Truth and Tolerance*, “Salvation in the world to come presumes a righteous life in this world. (...) Salvation must make its mark in a way of life that makes a person “human” here and thus capable of relating to God. (...) [Salvation begins with man becoming righteous in this world as an individual and society]. There are the kinds of behavior that can never serve man’s growth in righteousness and others that are always a part of man’s righteousness. The question of salvation therefore always carries within it an element of the criticism of religion<sup>34</sup>.

This claim of Pope Benedict is carried out also by some Moslems who want to critically revisit the Koran especially with regard to some of its passages dealing with violence. We find such an example in the book of the activist Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam Today: A Muslim’s Call for Reform in Her Faith*.

The position of this author is that Islam is not locked into one, the seventy-century fundamentalist interpretation, but is open to contemporary analysis and reason. Manji recommends Moslems to reinterpret the violent passages in the Quran by taking them out of the warp of the seventeenth century as the Jews and Christians did by rescuing their sacred Scriptures from extremism. For that, she enjoins the Moslems to get comfortable asking questions out loud about their belief, because “the power of asking question can even transform a seasoned jihad terrorist”.

Second claim. With the phenomenon of globalization, we are living in changing times, where the frontiers of the globe are shrinking dramatically. We need to understand the others without passion and with a view of living together as good neighbors. Without that positive insight on Islam, it would be difficult to accept Islam as a viable religion and its members as worthy of something.

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<sup>34</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religion*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2004, p. 205

Third claim. It is important to bear in mind that, though the Christian ethics recommends turning a cheek to the enemy, ideal Muslims are prepared to fight at all cost for what they think in their view as just and right. It is that which makes Muslims argumentative and, sometimes, aggressive. A good Muslim will never be passive<sup>35</sup>. However, such an attitude is a challenge toward all serious Moslems so that they may work from within that they religion may not appear as a source of violence.

Fourth claim. We are all influenced by the cultural and geographic context in which we were born and grew up. That context determines, to some extent, who we are today and how we deal with the problems present to us in the world. Sometimes Muslims feel that they are victims of prejudice and prejudices due to the evolution of the history of the world, as well as Christians are seen in the same way by Muslims. If we base our relationships on prejudices and prejudices, we will never come to a true dialogue. True dialogue requires openness to others and acceptance of the differences as a possibility of living together.

### **Rev. Felicien Ilunga Mbala, PhD**

Presented to Saint John the Evangelist Catholic Church  
November 14, 2007

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<sup>35</sup> Akbar S. Ahmed, *Islam Today. A Short Introduction to the Muslim World*, London. New York, I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2002, p. 231-232.