

AL-LIQA' JOURNAL

for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land

A special issue on:

*Context of Religious Identity
in the Middle East*



Volume 48 / 49 , 2017

AL-LIQA' JOURNAL

For Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land

A special issue on:
**Context of Religious Identity in
the Middle East**

Volume 48 / 49, 2017

Editorial Board

Dr. Saleem Zoughbi (*Editor in Chief*)

Fr. Dr. Rafiq Khoury

Mrs. Hanadi Sudah Younan

Dr. Adnan Musallam

Dr. Yousef Zaknoun

- A message from the Editor-in-Chief* page 3
- The Source of Religious Identity* page 5
Isma'il in the Christian Tradition,
Fr. Dr. Rafiq Khoury
- Freedom of identity in Islam in the Quran* page 33
The Concept of Freedom in the Quran,
Prof. Dr. Abdul Sattar Qassim
- Identity within Christians in the East* page 53
Issues uniting or separating Christians of the East,
Fr. Dr. Pierre Giorgio Giannaza
- Identity of Christians in the Arab Countries* page 67
Arab Christians: Citizens Not Minorities,
Prof. Dr. Nasser Rabbat
- Identity of interfaith in Arab society: Example of
Nablus* page 71
Religious Chart and Dialogue in Nablus,
Dr. Kian Reme

All articles and reviews published here are the author / reviewer responsibility for copyright.

The Journal published the selected articles and reviews based on academic content but does not have any responsibility regarding any issue related to copyright or content.

Opinions expressed here DO NOT represent in any way the official opinion of the Al-Liqā' Center, they are the personal opinions of the authors only.

Dear readers of Journal of AL-LIQA' JOURNAL

As Al-Liqa' Journal has been published over many years, concerns and interests of research and focus on issues have witnessed, as any other domain of research in the academic world, an ever changing development. Certainly the scope of research on religion and heritage studies was as well changing. However in the Middle East, the Holy land, in the past five or six years other factors have exerted their toll on both: the subject of research and the new and different angles and considerations that researchers have found themselves to accommodate in their thoughts and writing.

Instead of restricting research on philosophy and religion, new considerations advocated the meticulous, and in many ways gloomy, study of the recent developments in the region since 2011. Examples of such considerations are: the heavy political indoctrination of governance and societies, the swelling predisposition of religious extremism, the economics of military and war machines and trade as well as dictatorial and autocratic rule which is not limited to the governing system in a country, but also the dominating super power on such countries.

At the wake of such serious developments that predominantly included war and violence, it was evident that many of these were caused by outside powers in enabling terrorists from over sixty nationalities to declare an Islamic State. Under the umbrella of "Islam" they waged war inside Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, in addition to other concerns, researchers and authors have realized it is binding that they should rethink and explore not only the "why" but the "what next". This led to a genuine effort to wonder about their identity in their religions and culture. Hence this issue of Al-Liqa' Journal is dedicated to present samples of work and opinions that help us to search for "Religious Identity in the Middle East". These articles and reviews are meant to present the view from Christians as well as Moslems in the Holy Land.

Saleem Zoughbi

P. S.

A pulse of pain!

It was a pleasant visit. As an old and dear friend of this lovely family, I made a rule that every time I go to Cairo, I get in touch with them, and visit.

My friend is a wonderful man, he and his family are an exemplary genuine Egyptian family: proud to be Egyptian Arabs and proud to be Christian Copts. The lady of the house, a very caring woman that makes a family home a true home. We had delicious meals, typical Egyptian cuisine: stuffed pigeons with Freikah, and true Egyptian Molukhiya.

The four-year old grandson was a happy child. We moved to have dessert in the living room. A birthday cake appeared all of a sudden: it was the birthday of one of the young sons of my friend. As we were enjoying it happily with a fine cup of tea, the daughter-in law of my friend was checking birthday wishes on her mobile, when her face turned solemn and dejected.

It was a Friday afternoon, November 2, 2018.

The news just broke out that a terrorist attack on an Egyptian buss of Christians resulted in the loss of seven innocent youth... Just because they were Christians Copts.

It was a moment that reminded us of how low and evil the perpetrators were. Also, it reminded us that this is probably not going to be the last terror against Christian Copts in Egypt, and for that matter against Arab Christians everywhere by individuals who are not Moslems. They were members of a terrorist group from the Islamic State (IS) practicing a mutation of vile crimes of a religious dogma.

Saleem Zoughbi

ISMA'IL IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Father Dr. Rafiq Khoury
Theology,
Latin Patriarchate, Jerusalem



I. Introduction

In the midst of the Municipality Garden in Nazareth you see a huge and expressive statue entitled “The Tent of Hajar”. It represents Hajar raising her son Isma’il high in her hands towards heaven and shouting with pride and anger before God and the world protesting her destiny and the destiny of her son having been expelled from the house of Abraham to wander aimlessly about in the desert, as if she was saying to God: Why, O Lord? And to the world: Why are you rejecting this lad?...The first drop of tears which is mentioned here in the Bible is exactly the drop of tears of Hajar: “And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went, and sat down over against him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot¹; for she said: “Let me not look upon the death of the child.” And as she sat over against him, she lifted her voice and wept.”(Genesis 21:14-16). It is known that the prevailing tradition and which is based on the Book of Genesis, view that the Arab peoples are from the progeny of Hajar and Isma’il. The Arab peoples at the top of whom is the Palestinian people is still groaning under the pressure of a big injustice which reached its peak in recent

¹ Here we can refer to the similarity of expressions in this text and the texts which talks about the prayer of Jesus in the Olive Garden and his agony of death. The text here says: “about the distance of a bowshot”, and in the Olive Garden, the text says: “And he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw. (Luke 22:41).

years. The second letter of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East described this state by saying under the title: “An Agonized Human Being”:

“And the human being in our area is an agonized human being. Ordeals from every side have rallied against him in his contemporary history, so that he came to live under the sign of pain and suffering and he walks in the path of pains carrying his cross. He is agonized in his internal entity because of the psychological and social restrictions from which he sometimes sees no exit, in his daily living circumstances which he struggles in order to improve their conditions in a situation of limited potentials, and in his human, political and civilizational aspirations whereby he views that the others deny him this right, and they want him to curtail and subjugate him, and in his desire to have a place for him at the dining table of `peoples so that he contributes in developing them and making them grow. He is agonized because of his internal restrictions or because of what is imposed on him or because of the interference of others in his affairs or because of the view of the others of him or because of the suppressive tools to which he is exposed every day from his household and from the others. He looks at his glorious past, his difficult present and his ambiguous future and he is agonized. In the midst of all of this, he longs for emancipation and liberation so that he can achieve his humanity and make it able to take its role in the march of the present world. Thus we see him anxiously searching for his identity and his originality and for his personality and his message. In the outbreak of his anger and his distress, we sometimes see him recourse to express himself in a negative way by means of violence or extremism or aggressiveness or fanaticism where he sees that the world threatens him in his identity, his personality and his entity. Perhaps these orientations are an outward expression of his hidden fear, his anxiety and his lack of stability.”²

Therefore this study is not neutral. Rather it takes the position of solidarity with these peoples and their aspirations and it moves between their distant past and their disturbed present. Isn't it time to lift the burden from the children of Hajar and Isma'il this big injustice so that they take their place and their status among the peoples of the earth?

² The letter of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East “The Christian Presence in the East: A Testimony and a Message,”1992, number 53.

What is the significance of Isma'il in the Christian tradition?....This is what we are attempting to present in this hasty work. It is natural that this presentation be based basically on the Bible in its Old Testament (specially The Book of Genesis) and the New Testament, with the help of the explanations which are mentioned in the books of interpreting the Bible, and then, after this tour in the Bible, we give some theological observations which are related to this topic. Here it is inevitable to observe that this presentation is governed by a Christian vision, that is the interpretation of the Bible and what is related to Isma'il from it comes in the light of Christ and His teachings. This might cast new lights on what was mentioned in the Bible and which might open the door for a new and creative thinking about Isma'il and his progeny³.

*A depiction of Hagar and her son
Isma'il in the Arabian
desert by François-Joseph Navez.*

*Prophet,
Patriarch,
Apostle to Arabia,
Father of the Arabs*



II. Isma'il in the Old Testament

³ In addition to the Bible and its interpretations, we were inspired by two important studies by Father Michel Hayik, the Lebanese Maronite priest, who studied the personality of Isma'il based specially on what is mentioned in the Holy Quran, in two books in the French language and they are: *Le Mystere d'Ismael* (1964) (*The Mystery of Isma'il*, 1964) and *Les arabes ou le bapteme des larmes* (1972) (*The Arabs or the Baptism of Tears*, 1972).

It can be said that the personality of Isma'il in the Old Testament and the New Testament does not form a focus of an extensive and real interest. For it seems that his story ends in a vacuum without apparently leading us to any place. In reality with the death of Isma'il the Bible stops mentioning him and talking basically about him. Thus we find that the interpretations of the Bible in the Christian tradition do not stop except accidentally and in a quick way at this personality or they are absolutely not interested in it, and by this they follow the Bible itself. The events which are related to his life and his destiny are not registered except as functional events on the margin of the history of salvation and they are narrated in order to make the role of Isaac and his progeny prominent. Rather the focus is on Isaac the youngest son of Abraham⁴ and his progeny as being the position of the promises of salvation, and subsequently it is he who preoccupies of the march of the history of salvation> Nevertheless, in the narrative of the Old Testament itself there is a collection of signs which are rich in its implications and which deserve a special interest and justify the question about this personality, its features and its status in the history of salvation.

1) The Narrative of Isma'il

The Bible deals with the story of Isma'il in the Book of Genesis, and basically in chapters 16, 17, 21, 25 and this is within the several stages of Abraham's life. These chapters are collecting of different narratives and various oral traditions which developed between the sixth and the tenth centuries with a theological vision which is special to each of them and which were confirmed and focused in the first part of the millennium which preceded Christ when the editor collected them and bestowed on them the final formulation which we know today⁵ Of

⁴ In this hasty work, we use the two names "Abraham" and "Sarah" knowing that they are called "Abram" and "Sarai" in the first part of the narrative until God changes their two names into "Abraham" and "Sarah" (see Genesis 17: 5, 15) except in the texts which are quoted from the Bible itself whereby the names are mentioned as they came in the original text.

⁵ We can notice that the narrative of Isma'il in the Book of Genesis forms a complete and integrated march of life, from the cradle to the tomb, and this indicates its importance. We can also notice that the literary structure which is used in the narrative of Ismail is quite parallel to the structure of the narrative of Isaac and is similar to it, for it uses nearly

course, our study can deal with the issues which are related to the history of the text, its structure and its meaning, the cultural framework in which it came, the milieu which conveyed it and specifying its historical, social, mythical and oral backgrounds. However, all of these considerations do not form a real necessity for our research because the Bible is not a history book in the modern sense and it is not a sociology book or human genealogies and others. Rather it is a religious and theological book in the first place in which the theological vision might vary with the variation of the different traditions.

From the summary of these traditions, they can narrate the major events of Isma'il's life and the main features of his personality. The birth of Ismail was an initiative from Sarah, the first wife of Abraham. She was barren, and this forms a thorny issue for a woman in general and to a woman who was and her husband were promised with many offsprings. So she gave up begetting children who will guarantee a big progeny for Abraham, as God had promised him. "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."(Genesis 12:1), and it is the promise which is regularly repeated in the narrative of Abraham. Sarah had "an Egyptian maid whose name is Hajar. "So she asked Abraham to beget a son for him from her." Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar; and Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her. "And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarah."(Genesis 16:16:1-2). This was not a strange matter in that historical period. The laws of the peoples of Mesopotamia legislated such practices. They allowed the husband of the barren woman to take a slave woman as wife for him in order to beget children from her. These laws recognized their legitimacy and their right in inheritance. Thus Abraham begot Isma'il from her. He was called Isma'il, and it means "God hears." "Behold, you are with a child, and shall bear a son; you shall call his name Ishmael; because the Lord has given heed to your affliction."

the same expressions (the birth, circumcision, the covenant, the promises, the blessing, the progeny, the death...) which allows us to compare between the two of them easily.

“And Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abraham was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. (Genesis 16:15-16). However, as soon as Hagar was pregnant, that she became haughty and felt superior over her lady, and she behaved as if she was the housewife. This aroused the sensitivity of Sarah which began to persecute Hagar to the extent that the latter was forced to flee. However the angel of the Lord appeared to her (exactly as he had appeared to Abraham at different stages of his life) and he ordered her to return to her lady.

Here a new narrative for another tradition (Genesis chapter 17) begins. It narrates the sign of the covenant between Abraham and God, and which is circumcision: “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.....and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.” (Genesis 17:10-11). Then God promised him that he would have a son from Sarah whose name is Isaac, “I shall establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.”(Genesis 17:19). As for Isma’il, no fear is about him. Following the wish of Abraham:” O that Isma’il might live in thy sight!”, God said “As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly...and I will make him a great nation.”(Genesis 17:20). So Abraham was circumcised and his entire household was circumcised including Isma’il. “That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised; and all the men of his house were circumcised.” (Genesis 17:22-26).

In chapter 21, the book of Genesis narrates the birth of Isaac. “And Abraham circumcised Isaac when he was eight days old,” And the child grew and was weaned” (Genesis 21: 4, 8). Here too, the jealousy of Sarah took its course again, when she had seen her son playing with Isma’il, so she was afraid that he would inherit with her son. “But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.”(Genesis (21:9-10). Abraham was displeased with this speech because he was attached to Isma’il and considered him his son. But God reassured him saying: “As for the son of the maid, I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman

because he is your offspring.”(Genesis 21:14). This is what happened. On this account, “Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba,” (Genesis 21:14) where the angel of the Lord appeared to her (and the angel is God Himself), and asked her to take care of the lad. The Book of Genesis adds by saying: “And God was with the lad, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.” (Genesis (21:21).

The Book of Genesis returns anew to Isma’il in chapter twenty-five to enumerate the genealogy of Isma’il. It seems that they are the names of Arabian clans and tribes which indicates that the tradition sees in Isma’il the father of the Arabs (see Genesis 25:12-18). The Book of Genesis concludes the narrative of Isma’il by the news of his death: “These are the years of the life of Ishmael, a hundred and thirty-seven years; he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his kindred.” (Genesis 25:17-18). With this the narrative of Isma’il ends, who disappears to leave the place for his brother Isaac who and his progeny appropriated the following narrative. The two brothers did not meet except when they buried their father (see Genesis 24:9): “Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him.” (Genesis 25:9). There is perhaps in this last meeting a certain sign and a prophecy.

III. Isma’il between Sarah, Abraham, Hajar and God:

Since the beginning and throughout his life, Isma’il was in the middle of several divine and human attractions, which understanding them can help to crystallize the personality of Isma’il and his position in the history of salvation. And these are attractions between Sarah, Abraham, Hagar and God.

2) Sarah:

We begin with Sarah whom is preoccupied by two obsessions: the obsession of begetting and progeny on the one hand, and God's promise to her husband Abraham that he will be a father of "a great nation" (Genesis 12:2). And how can this be and she is barren "did not beget children for him," For the Lord has prevented me from begetting children" (Genesis 16:1-2). So she resorted to that custom which was recognized in the laws and traditions of her time, which is resorting to the Egyptian slave woman, Hajar, in order that she begets a son for him "It may be that I shall obtain children by her." (Genesis 16:2). Abraham adopted his wife's idea, and he begot from Hajar his son Isma'il. "And Hagar bore Abraham a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram." (16:15). However, Hajar behaved as any woman would behave in this case. So she felt superior on Sarah, for "she looked with contempt on her mistress" (Genesis 16:4). Sarah's reaction was that she felt insulted and humiliated. So she began to think of how to get rid of her. She complained to Abraham, and told him: "May the wrong done to me be on you!" and she asked him to stand by her. She began to humiliate Hajar who felt that she had no place beside Sarah, "so she fled from her" (Genesis 16:7). She wandered aimlessly in the wilderness. However, the Lord appeared to her and asked her to return to her mistress and humiliate herself before her. So she did as the angel of the Lord commanded her to do.

When Isaac was borne of Sarah by God's planning, and he grew up, "But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac." (Genesis 21:8). So the feelings of jealousy and competition returned to act in her heart. So she asked Abraham to expel Hajar and her son: "for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." (Genesis 21:10). Abraham reluctantly accepted. After the Lord had reassured him concerning his son Isma'il, he provided Hajar with bread and water and sent her away. "So she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba." (Genesis 21:14).

With the behaviors of Sarah, one might ask about mentioning these human confusions (and they are many in the Bible), including cheap and low-level feelings, in a religious text. And this makes us say that God has his own scheme concerning human beings, but this scheme takes its course through human confusions with all the crookedness, sins, feelings and behaviors in them, because God deals with real human beings and not imaginary ones. The Portugese proverb says: “God writes in straight lines through zigzagging lines.” The straight lines are His salvation scheme and the zigzagging lines are the human feelings, which do not inactivate the divine scheme. God goes beyond human contradictions, and He goes with His divine scheme towards completion.

3) Abraham:

We come to Abraham. Abraham considered Isma’il his son before the birth of Isaac and after it. He did forsake him at any time. However, he yielded to the feelings of his wife Sarah, even reluctantly, and he left Hajar with her, “Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her as you please.” (See Genesis 16:6). The Book of Genesis insists on calling Isma’il “his son” (Genesis 16:15, 17:23, 26...). The Book of Genesis mentions that Abraham was the one who called Isma’il with this name, after God had called him with this name. Giving the name indicates that he considers him a real son of him. As Isaac was later circumcised, so Isma’il was circumcised too. “That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised” (Genesis 17:26). After the birth of Isaac, he did not forsake his son Isma’il. So when Sarah asked him to expel Hajar and her son, “And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son.” (Genesis 21:11). However, he yielded here also to the instinctive demands of Sarah, and this time at the request of God, who emphasized that to Abraham that he would not forsake the lad, “because he is your progeny.” (Genesis 21:13).

4) Hajar:

As for Hajar, she is between Sarah who is jealous from her, and Abraham who considers Isma’il his son, and God who takes care of the lad and his mother. She considers Isma’il her son and Abraham her husband. In all cases, she stayed beside the lad and took care of

him. God himself also interferes and reassures Hajar that He too would not forsake the lad. He we reach to God's position **towards Isma'il and his mother.**

5) God:

God has His own rulings and His salvation scheme which are not connected to human beings. He chooses whom He wants to implement this salvation scheme, despite all of the human confusions which accompany its implementation. He had chosen Isaac "for through Isaac shall your descendants be named." (Genesis 21:12). From that time, the Book of Genesis began to focus on Isaac because he is the son of the promise, who would achieve the salvation scheme through him. At this time, Isma'il is absent from the theater, and leaves it to Isaac and his progeny, and the history of salvation continues its march through him.

Here we draw the attention to the fact that God is free in His Choices, and He does not submit to the estimations of human beings and their ideas and their criteria. From the text it seems that Isma'il surpasses Isaac from many aspects. For Isaac seems to be weak and Isma'il strong ("He was an expert with the bow" (Genesis 21:20). He is the firstborn and Isaac is the younger brother. Also Isma'il seems to have a prominent character and able-bodied in contrast with Isaac who has a weak personality, whereby his brother mocks him. Despite this, God chooses Isaac and not Isma'il. For the choice of God is liberal and free and does not submit to the achievements of human beings or their characteristics, rather it contradicts human logic in many instances. God chooses whom the human beings do not expect Him to choose. He had chosen Isaac instead of Isma'il, Jacob instead of Essau and Joseph instead of all of his brothers, and he was the youngest of them in age. He also chose David from all of his brothers although he was the youngest in age among them. This is the wisdom of God which is not perceived and its mysteries are not known. However, here it is inevitable to notice also that God's choice is not a reason for pride and boasting. For the choice is not a privilege, rather it is a message. The choice does not mean that the chosen one has a higher status and characteristics than the others. God does not complete His scheme in this form, that is Isaac against Isma'il. For each of the two has his own course, no matter how various the courses are. God chooses freely,

but He does not discriminate, rather the human beings are those who change the choice into a privilege, breaking up and division.

God chose Isaac but He did not cast off Isma'il. When we read the Book of Genesis, we notice that God accompanies Isma'il with His care and His love at every important junction of the march of his life. So when Hajar fled from Sarah, we see that God is manifested to her in the image of an angel, and He asked about her "because the Lord had given heed to your affliction." (Genesis 16:11). He named the child which she would give birth to Isma'il. Here too, giving the name by Od Himself means that God looks at him in a special way and He would not forsake him. God sought her and asked her to return to her house.

When Isma'il was born and became exposed to Sarah's persecution, we see that he remained the object of God's care. This is what appears in his dialogue with Abraham (see Genesis 21:12-13). This is what specially appears when Sarah wandered aimlessly in the desert and God manifested Himself to her anew and said to her: "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand." (Genesis 21:17-18). He guided her to a water well, "so she went and filled the skin with water and gave water to the land to drink." The Book of Genesis adds: "And God was with the lad, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow." (Genesis 21:20). God not only took care of, protected and looked after him, but he was from God the object of a covenant, a promise and a blessing.

IV. A Covenant, a Promise and a Blessing

Isma'il did not remain outside the circle of the covenant, promise and blessing. So what is the meaning of all of this?

1) The Covenant:

The custom of circumcision had been known among the peoples of the area, their culture and their religions. Circumcision was a rite for integration in the community and belonging to it. The lads approaching the youthful age submitted to it. For circumcision was a social function. It expresses belonging to a certain religious or ethnic

community which takes out the person from the narrow circle of his self so that his personality is completed in the community. This practice was transferred to the Old Testament, and it acquired, in the priestly tradition, a religious meaning. This rite appeared at the time of Abraham (see the Book of Genesis 17:9-14), and in the Book of Leviticus it became a religious law “And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.”(Leviticus 12:3). God concluded a covenant with Abraham: “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.”(Genesis 17:7).

As for circumcision, it is a perceptible and bodily sign for this covenant: “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you... so shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.” (Genesis 17:9-11,13).

On this basis, Isaac was circumcised eight days after his birth (Genesis 21:4). However, what interests us here is the circumcision of Isma'il. “Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all the slaves born in his house or bought with money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcized the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcized in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcized in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcized,” (Genesis 17:23-27). What is the meaning of this circumcision? It is the meaning of the covenant, that is it means that Isma'il is not remote from or out of the covenant, but rather he is within it and in its core.

It is clear that the Book of Genesis uses the same expressions in the circumcision of Abraham and Isma'il, and they are the same expressions which will be used later upon the circumcision of Isaac. There is no difference here between Abraham, Isaac and Isma'il. For all of them are the children of the covenant which circumcision represents an eternal sign for it.

2) The promise

The Book of Genesis is the books of promises. Abraham and his progeny were the subject of these promises (see Genesis 15; 4-6, 17:16, 26:24....). The promises mean that the covenant has a future and continuity. What is the matter of Isma'il and the promises?... Isma'il was not deprived of the divine promises. It is suitable that we draw the attention to them to understand their meaning. When Hajar fled for the first time from Sarah "The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness" and he told her: "I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude."(Genesis 16:10). He adds: "Behold, you are with a child, and shall bear a son; you shall call his name Ishmael...."(Genesis 16:11). He continues saying: "He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."(Genesis 16:12), and this is a sign of the wars and raids between him and his kinsmen throughout the history of salvation. An interpreter of this verse in the Jesuit edition of the Bible: "The grandsons of Isma'il are the Arabs of the desert, and their life is a nomadic life and a life of independence: and this reminds us of the Jahili (period before Islam) era and its poetry."⁶

After the birth of Isaac, Hajar and her son Isma'il were expelled to the wilderness. So God said to Abraham: "And I will make a nation of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring."(Genesis 21:13). In the wilderness also, the angel of the Lord caught up with Hajar once again and told her: "What troubles you, Hajar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation."(Genesis 21:17-18). It is true that the implementation of divine promises will be done by Isaac, but these promises to Isma'il do not make alien or excluded from the divine promises, specially that the expressions which are used by the Bible are the same in the two cases of Isaac and Isma'il.

⁶ Footnote number 4, p.91.

3) **The Blessing:**

We come to the blessing which also forms one of the constants of the history of salvation. In the Book of Genesis, this blessing is directed to our first parents (Adam and Eve), whereby the writer says: “And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...”(Genesis 1:28), in addition to blessing the animals which God had created (Genesis 1:22), and also the seventh day (see Genesis 2:2-3). This blessing was repeated for all of the creation with Noah: “And God blessed Noah and his sons” (Genesis 9:1). Then the blessing of God for His creation continued through Abraham: “and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2), and then with his progeny: Isaac, Jacob and Joseph...Did Isma'il have a share in this blessing? The Book of Genesis says in the mouth of God: “As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation” (Genesis 17:20).

What is the meaning of the blessing? The blessing is a free grant from God, the giver of life and the generous; it expresses His generosity, His love and His care. He grants it to whom He wants and according to His long-term salvation scheme. For God is the source of the blessing, and it is dynamic and effective and it has a salvation value with no return from it. As for the topic of this blessing, it is connected with life, and it has various forms: prosperity, strength, life and salvation. It includes the earthly bounties (the offspring, the big progeny, the land and its bounties). However, it also includes the salvation bounties. Before everything, the blessing indicates a special relationship between God the one who blesses and the human being the one who is blessed. This is what makes the blessed human being a place of radiation, that is, the one who is blessed becomes a source of blessing for the others: “All the tribes of the earth shall be blessed by you” God tells Abraham. Concerning the human being or the community, the subject of the blessing, they respond to this blessing with gratitude and thanking God. From here come the expressions of the prayers of blessing in the Bible, specially in the Psalms (see for example Psalm 103). Since Isma'il was the subject of a blessing from God, all these meanings apply on him.

In summary: Isma'il appears to us in the Book of Genesis as the son of the covenant, the focus of the promises and the subject of blessing. The relationship of God with Isma'il, through all of this, is a prophetic sign which heralds upcoming times, which makes for this name and his progeny a certain future. Nobody knows the thoughts of God, but these signs indicate that Isma'il has a future in the salvation scheme of God, and we do not know when, where and how. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"(Romans 11: 33-35). For God is the Lord of history and the Lord of His unity.

V. Isma'il in the New Testament

The New Testament does not mention Isma'il except accidentally as we shall see. For the New testament is a continuation of the Old Testament, and the writers of the New Testaments accept the narrative of the Old Testament as it is without a discussion. Accordingly, the New Testament follows the footsteps of the Old Testament, and sees in Abraham the focus of the promises, and his progeny after him which is represented in Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.... (See Hebrews 11:8-22). Nevertheless, we may mention some texts which refer, in one way or another, to Isma'il.

1) The Children of Abraham:

Who are the children of Abraham?... The question is posited in the New Testament, and that is in the framework of the arguments among the religious groups, such as the Pharisees and the Saddouqis. The Jews used to declare loudly that they are the children of Abraham. Subsequently, salvation is guaranteed for them by merely belonging to Abraham bodily. John the Baptist, during his preaching, faced this mentality, which expresses itself by this declaration: We are the children of Abraham. So he answered them saying: "and do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father," for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."(Matthew 3:9-10). By this he means that the progeny of Abraham

are those who do the actions of Abraham, and not those who boast of belonging to Abraham bodily.

This argument returns with all of intensity between Jesus and a group of Jews, who also confronted him by saying that they are the progeny of Abraham, subsequently, they are not slaves and they do not need anybody to liberate them (see John 8:31-33). Jesus answered them: "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ...I know that you are descendants of Abraham...if you were the Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this not what Abraham did."(John 8:34-41). Jesus goes as far as describing them as being the children of satan: "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires."(John 8:44). The interpretation of the Jesuit edition of the Bible adds by saying: "The progeny of Abraham" is not merely an inherited or a social truth, but rather it also requires harmonization between their position and the position of Abraham in lifetime. It is inevitable that this harmonization be accompanied by action. For the attempts to kill Jesus are the evidence which does not accept argument that those who attempt to kill Jesus are not Abraham's children except in a pure human way."(See the footnote 22, p.316). From here came the expression in the New Testament that Abraham is "The Father of the Believers."

Here it is possible also to mention the parable which Jesus said. It is the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). In this parable we see poor Lazarus in the lap of Abraham while the rich man, who is the son of Abraham bodily, went to "the place of torture," whereby he is separated from Abraham by a great abyss.

2) Sarah and Hajar in the Epistle to the Galatians:

There is a text which we find in the epistle of Saint Paul to the Galatians, whereby Saint Paul, in the context of his presentation, mentions Hajar and Sarah and subsequently Isaac and Isma'il without naming this latter even if he implicitly mentioned. The text is the following:

“Tell me, you who desire to be under law, do you not hear the law? For it is written in the book that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise. Now this is an allegory; these two women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem slave is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: ‘Rejoice, O barren one that dost not bear... So, brethren, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

The scientists of the Bible acknowledge that this text is the most ambiguous text in the epistle to the Galatians. Suffice it for us to mention the general framework in which this text is mentioned and its meaning, without entering into details at which we do not stop and which do not interest us in this hasty work of this kind. In order to understand this text, we must go back to the circumstances in which this epistle was written. Saint Paul writes to Christian communities in Galatia (in the middle of Turkey today). Most of their members are from the rightly guided pagans, and they are a group whose members did not remain faithful to the evangel the good news of which he told them. It seems that other evangelists came to this community after him, and taught that believing in Jesus Christ is not sufficient to attain salvation, rather they have, and they are rightly guided pagans, to follow the Law of Moses if they wanted full salvation. Paul breaks out in anger with those “stupid persons” and sees that the attempt to impose the Law of Moses is treason for the evangel.⁷

In this framework, Saint Paul searches for a symbol in the Old Testament which helps him to clarify his idea. So he came upon the story of Sarah and Hajar in the Old Testament. He views in “Sarah and her children” an image or a symbol of the freedom which the evangel came up with, and in “Hajar and her children” an image or a symbol of the slavery of the law. “A Symbol”: this word clearly indicates the aim of Paul’s interpretation: It is not a logical evidence,

⁷ See: The Jesuit father David Neuhaus, We get acquainted with Saint Paul and his epistles, “The Door of Faith” series, Jerusalem, 2016, pp.44-46.

rather it is an example. If the human being is Abraham's son according to the body, on the example of Hajar's son, he remains in slavery which the Old Testament is characterized by. And if he is Abraham's son according to the soul, on the example of Isaac, he is liberated and was able to enter Jerusalem which is above, to the promised kingdom.⁸ In this presentation, Saint Paul remains faithful to what was mentioned in the Old Testament. For he walks in a line which considers the Old Testament as inspired by God, as is the case in the Christian tradition which is constant throughout the generations, and he is enlightened by it in order to clarify his idea. It is noticeable that this epistle also comes in the framework of the pagans entering upon faith. Saint Paul wants to emphasize that this entering upon faith is from the salvation scheme of God. Her Father Michel Hayik adds: "If the doors of salvation are open for the pagans, the more so they are open to Hajar's children, and that is within a comprehensive vision of salvation.

3) The Woman in the Book of Revelation:

There is an exciting text in the Book of Revelation which does not directly point out to Hajar and her son, but it includes insinuations which justify going back to Hajar and her son. First we mention the basic sections of this text:

"And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon ... And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth. She brought forth a male child... but her child was caught up to God and to His throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished... And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had borne the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle that she might

⁸ The Bible, the Jesuit edition, foot note number 16, p.580.

fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourishedin security from the serpent. The serpent poured water like a river out of its mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river which the dragon had poured from his mouth...” (From Revelation 12:1-18).

Firstly we must mention that this text belongs to a special Biblical kind and it is “the kind of revelations.” It is considered pictorial by the writer who had the revelation and it is not a description of events which took place. Then, as we had previously said, the text does not explicitly point out to Hajar and her son, but it includes several signs which justify such an approach. For it can be said that the text came, in its literary formulation, on the background of the story of Hajar and her son. For Hajar wandered aimlessly “in the wilderness” (Genesis 16:7). “And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.”(Genesis 21:14). The woman who is mentioned in the Book of Revelation also “fled into the wilderness” (Revelation 12:6) and “she was given the two wings of the great eagle to fly by them into the wilderness” (Revelation 12:14). In the same way that God took care of Hajar in the wilderness, so He takes care of the woman in the wilderness, and save the two of them from the ordeal in which they found themselves. If we move to the son, we see that the son of Hajar is exposed to perdition due to the persecution by Sarah, and also the woman’s child is exposed to perdition due to the dragon who wants to devour him. However, both of them were the object of care from the Lord, for God saved Isma’il from death, and also God provided for the woman’s child too salvation from the dragon. Can we go further than this? We believe so.

Who is this woman who is mentioned in the text?...The text does not specify her identity. This is what opened the door wide for the interpreters to specify the identity of this woman. Some of them see Eve in her, others see Zion or the people of the Old Testament and others see the church⁹. However, the most common and continuous interpretation in the history of the church and by the Church Fathers, the ecclesiastic tradition and the iconographic is that the woman who is mentioned in this text is the Virgin Mary, and this is what we too

⁹ See: Father David Neuhaus, *We Get Acquainted with the Book of Revelation*, “The Door of faith” series, Jerusalem, 2014, pp.50-53.

believe in. From this starting point, we can make a comparison between Hajar and the Virgin Mary to end up saying that Hajar is an image for the Virgin Mary. Father Michel Hayik develops aspects of similarity between the two of them: Hajar is a “slave woman” and Mary says about herself that “I am the slave woman of God,” and also “God looked at his humble slave woman;” both of them were visited by the divine messenger, who promised Hajar with the birth of a son who would be a father of a great nation, and Mary with a son “...who will reign over the house of David forever.”(Luke 1:33). ; the Virgin Mary stands by the cross to see her son dying from thirst before her eyes, and Hajar too watches her son dying from thirst in the desert, and she cried; the son of Hajar is exposed to the ordeal, so she fled with him into the wilderness, and Jesus, the son of Mary, is exposed to persecution, so she fled with him to Egypt across the wilderness¹⁰. I believe that all of this justifies that we see in Hajar an image for the Virgin Mary.

VI. Theological Notes

After this tour which is related to the character of Hajar and her son Isma'il and the destiny of the two of them across the Bible in the Old Testament and the New testament, we would like, in this last section, to stop at some general concept its which are connected, in one way or another, with the topic that we are dealing with. Our dealing with these concepts sets out from a collective and comprehensive vision which might restore to the marginalized and the wronged persons, across all the history their place and their status in the history of salvation. This approach from a Christian viewpoint might shed some light on some aspects of the history of salvation which might be misunderstood, and may lead to negative results.

1) The Choosing and the Exclusion:

The history of salvation is penetrated by a successive series of personalities who were called by God to a certain message in the history of salvation. We might not understand anything from the intentions of God if we do not take this fact into consideration. But

¹⁰ See: Michel Hayek, *the Arabs or the Baptism of Tears*, Paris, 1972, pp. 212-213.

does choosing a certain person mean casting off another person and excluding him?...unfortunately, human thought is a contradictory thought, meaning it considers that choosing a certain person is excluding another person. This leads to negative results which are quite different from the intentions of God. For the sinning human being refuses the grace of choice which is enjoyed by others, and he considers it as belittling him. This leads to jealousy with all of its consequences, as was the case with Cain versus Abel (see Genesis, chapter 4) where the matter ends with Cain killing his brother. When a certain person is himself the object of God's choice, he is exposed to the experience of considering this choice as a right for him, a privilege and a reward. This leads to his feeling superior over others, with the negative consequences included in this towards those who did not enjoy this choice. Unfortunately, the Bible was very often understood from this angle. So Cain was understood as being against Abel, Isaac against Isma'il, Jacob against Esau and Joseph against his brothers....All of this had led to injustice, fighting, competition, and the desire to cancel and even killing.

Unfortunately, this is the experience which the followers of the different religions fell into. So the Jews consider themselves "god's chose people," The Muslims "the best nation among all human beings," and the Christians "God's new people." This led them to despise others, excluding them, cancelling them or become tyrannical over them and feeling superior and haughty over them, with all the detrimental results of this wrong understanding of God's choice. In reality, the choosing is not a privilege, and it is not the result of human achievements or personal characteristics or traits (see Deuteronomy, chapters 5-11), rather it is a free and unconditioned choosing by God. For it is a favor from God and a grace and an expression of His generosity towards human beings. And it is a commitment and requirement on the believer to endeavor to be deserving the grace of God and His choosing. This is seldom achieved in all the religions. Rather in all of them the human being remains weak, without the divine choosing for which God calls him. For choosing is a message which the called person is entrusted with. This choosing is a service, and it is not controlling or feeling proud (see Mark 10:41-45). Choosing is a divine initiative which does not follow the measures of human beings, their specifications and their criteria. Thus, very often choosing came contradictory with these measures, criteria and

specification. So God chose the youngest and the weakest instead of the strongest or the one who has pedigree and lineage (see 1 Corinthians: 1:26-31). This is what we attempted to explain when we read the story of Isaac and Isma'il. Choosing the one does not mean casting off the other or cancelling him or excluding him. Choosing is a message and a service before everything. For God chooses Abraham, not to enjoy the blessing for himself, but so that all the tribes of the earth are to be blessed by him. In the evangel, the verb "called" is always followed by the verb "sent", because the choosing is for the message. When we look at the choosing from this angle, we consider it a care which we share the others with, a blessing by which others are blessed and generosity from God by which we overwhelm others.

The image which is adopted by the New Testament is the image of the body (see Corinthians 12:12-30). For the head, despite all its importance, is in the service of all of the body. And so are the smallest and most humble organs. For the hand cannot say: I am not a head, so I am not from the body, and neither the hand: I am not an eye, so I am not from the body. Rather all the organs are in the service of each other for the sake of the common structure and the general welfare. In the evangel of Luke there is a proverb which was mentioned by Christ and which indicates this truth, and it is the proverb of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The father went out to meet his son who returned home after his ungratefulness and his recklessness. So his elder brother became angry and envied him. However, the father went out to meet his elder son too, to tell him that "you are my son too, like your younger brother," and to tell him: "This is my son, and you are my son, this is your brother and you are his brother." God chooses all human beings and manifests to them His generosity, each according to his position and his situation, and He does not exclude anyone.

2) **The Injustice:**

Father Michel Hayik sees in Hajar and her son a beginning of a wide series of injustices, to which human beings and human groups were exposed throughout the holy history and throughout the general history (including the injustice done to Al-Hasan and Al-Husain). After he had seen in the tear of Hajar the first tear in the Bible, he sees the same tear in the first Arabic verse of poetry which is known in Al-Jahiliyyeh (the period before Islam) (Umru' Al-qays: "O You two,

stand and weep...". He continues his search to see in the contemporary Arabic poetry a continuation of this pain and injustice. He cites the symbolism of the cross in the modern Arabic poetry (Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab, Salah Abdul-Sabour, Mahmoud Darweesh....)¹¹. This brings us back to the statue of "Hajar's tent" in the Garden of the Municipality of Nazareth which tragically and expressively depicts all the injustices of history, including the marginalized, the rejected, the cast off and the deprived, individuals and groups.

When we open the evangel, we are faced by a wide group of those wronged one, marginalized and rejected, including women, children, sick persons, lepers, handicapped, poor persons, and those having modest professions. What Jesus does is that He takes out these people from ambiguity, marginality and injustice in order to put them at the forefront and to direct to them His salvation message. Is not it a thing that draws the attention that the first blessing in the evangel of Luke is directed to the poor: "Blessed are you poor." (Luke 6:20). Jesus puts them at the forefront in order to integrate them in the history of salvation which the formal religious institution deprived them of. Among the examples which draw our attention is His behavior with the children. When the children came around Jesus, the disciples scolded them. However, Jesus was displeased with the conduct of His disciples, and told them: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God." (Mark 10: 13-16). The deprived, the wronged ones, the marginalized and the cast off have become an inseparable part of the march of salvation. The matter did not stop at this limit, rather Jesus Himself became the deprived, the wronged one, the marginalized and the outcast when He was hanged on the cross, "he had no form or comeliness....a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.... Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:2-8). In His resurrection, He transformed these pains and griefs into a resurrection, whereby He overcame the forces of evil, marginalization and rejection, as if He were saying to all of those: Get out of the grave (John 11:43-45).

¹¹ See: Michel Hayik, the above-mentioned book, pp.235-236. See also: Sahar Sami, The Religious Intertextuality in the Poetry of Mahmoud Darweesh, in "The Poets" Journal (Ramallah), spring and summer of 1999, pp.84-89.

If we look at the modern age, we see that the Palestinian people has been exposed to the greatest injustice which the contemporary history has known after the Second World war, whereby this people was expelled from its land to wander aimlessly in the wildernesses of the land of human beings. The tragedy is that this injustice came on the background of the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We also see that the Arab peoples are also exposed to a great injustice in recent years, whereby it is worked on removing them from the theater of history, as if the world is telling them: either you become slaves or you disappear from existence. These peoples are the image for all the injustices in modern ages and all ages, in all the continents from Africa to Asia to America and Europe.

Isn't it time for the moment of resurrection for all of those?

3) **A Comprehensive Vision:**

In Jesus Christ, all of the promises of the Old Testament are gathered. In Him they took a new direction which is more comprehensive and spiritual. Christ is "Yes" of God for all His promises: "For all the promises of God find their yes in him." That is why we utter the Amen through Him, to the glory of God." (2 Corinthians 1:20). With Christ, a new reign begins which goes beyond all the ethnic barriers and the material and geographical visions to build a comprehensive vision, the harbingers of which appeared in the Old Testament, and they were completed and were firmly established in the New Covenant. For Christians, the promises are the grants of the soul to which the ethnical promises and the material bounties symbolize. With Christ, the marriage with the land and the people became an image for the union of God with all humanity and with all the land of human beings. Accordingly, the progeny of Abraham is no longer the resultant of flesh and blood, rather it became a spiritual progeny which gathers the circumcised and the uncircumcised, in faith, those who were aliens from the covenants and the promises, that is the pagans, became participants in the promise and the inheritance. They participate in the promises of Abraham, who became a father to all of us (see Romans 4:9-16). Christ destroyed the barrier which separates between the two groups to make one group out of the two of them (see Ephesians 2:1-18). By this, He opened the horizons for a comprehensive reconciliation, in which there is no chosen one, rejected one or and outcast, and neither a Jew or a pagan, or a slave or a free person, rather

all, with no exception or exclusion become the progeny of Abraham and inheritors according to the covenant (see Galatians 3:28-29). Then God becomes “the Lord of all” (Romans 10:12). In this case, the earth becomes a symbol for the spiritual Christian bounties, and points out to a more sublime reality, which is the kingdom which forms “a new earth” (Revelation 21: 1), and also Jerusalem and the Temple (see John 4: 19-24). On this basis, there is no place for possession or exclusion, because all human beings are called to form in faith the great progeny of Abraham. And this is what opens the door for the comprehensive reconciliation in the last times.¹²

4) **Isma’il and Islam:**

We are not here concerning the presentation of the view of Islam about Abraham and Isma’il. This dealt with by another specialist in this booklet. What we would like to draw the attention to here is the theological vision of some Oriental theologians about Islam in the history of salvation. And here, we point out to three of them who approached the topic in a new and exciting way which calls for thinking, and they are Father Yuwakeem Mubarak, Father Michel Hayik and Father Fadi Daw. The three of them posit this question: Does Islam have a status in the history of salvation from a Christian point of view?... in order to answer this question, Father Yuwakeem Mubarak sets out from Abraham¹³. He views that Abraham integrates the Muslims in the peoples of the Bible more than he separates them from these peoples. As for father Michel Hayik¹⁴, he sets out from Isma’il, to emphasize that Islam has a function from the divine providence in the scheme of God. Finally, Father Fadi Daw¹⁵ goes further than this to emphasize that “in the tree of salvation, Islamk represents a special branch which grows on the Abrahamite graft, like Judaism and Christianity”¹⁶

All of this is not but a mere reference to this theological line which takes its course in the Oriental and Western theology. It is a line which deserves

¹² See: Father Michel Hayik, the above-mentioned book, pp.76-78.

¹³ See: A Quintuple in Christianity and Islam, volume 2, The Quran and Western Criticism, Beirut, 2011, pages 1-125.

¹⁴ See the two books which are mentioned in footnote number 1.

¹⁵ Fadi Daw and Naila Tabbara, The Divine Magnanimity: The Theology of the Other in Christianity and Islam, Beirut, 2011, specially pages91-121.

¹⁶ The above mentioned book, p.99.

contemplation in it and developing it. Islam is a theological question which is posited on our Arab Oriental sentiment. We have no right to neglect it under the pressures of the disturbed current situations. In the historical relations between the Muslims and the Christians in the Orient throughout the generations, we were used to argumentative writings, setting out from the mentality of mutual accusation and defense, and which did not lead to any result, rather it kept the hearts and the minds far away. It is time that Christians and Muslims in the Orient take a new theological orientation which works on comprising and not on exclusion. This is a task which in the first place is shouldered on the Arab theologians. The mentioned attitudes which were developed by these thinkers put us on the real road. What we hope for is continue going in depth in this furrow so that we reach a wide vision for Islam in the history of salvation. The Second Vatican Council opened the door in this domain, and what we have to do is to build on it.¹⁷

VII. Conclusion

The Christian vision of the last of times focuses on the reconciliation between God and human beings and among all human beings. If the tears were the share of Isma'il's progeny, the Book of Revelation emphasizes that the last of times are times of peace and life, whereby "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:4). In these new times God will be all in all. This bright vision of the last of times are transformed, among the believers in it, in this earthly life, into a message, which is working on reuniting the all the human beings. This applies to the followers of the three monotheistic religions, and it also applies to all human categories "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." (Revelation 5:9). Working on bringing closer the followers of the religions and the different human categories is an urgent necessity so that the

¹⁷ Here, we can mention what was said by Pope Francis in the press interview in the airplane which took him to the Holy Land, whereby he talked about "the common roots" among the religions and "the common among our origins", and this is what makes dialogue inevitable.

humanity from now be an image of the future bounties and the final reconciliation which will be enjoyed by all.

The Main References Used In This Article

- The Bible in its two Covenants the Old and The New, the Jesuit edition, 1989.
- The Biblical Dictionary of Theology, Beirut, at the words “Abraham” (pp.28-31) “choosing” (PP.47-52), “blessing” (pp.159-163), “covenant” (pp.856-860)
- The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, New Jersey, 1991, pp.21-28.
- Priest Boulus Faghali, The March of Faith, Beirut, 2004, pp. 45-53.
- Pierre-Marie Beaudé, La Bible de Lucile: Notre voyage de la Genèse à L’Apocalypse, Paris, 2014.
- Michel Hayek, Le Myère d’Ismaël, Paris, 1964
- Michel Hayek, Les Arabes ou le baptême des larmes, Paris, 1964.
- Youakim Moubarac, Pentalogie Islamo-chrétienne, Tome II, Le Coran et la critique occidentale, Beyrouth, 1972.
- Fadi Daw and Naila Tabbara, The Divine Magnanimity: The Theology of the Other in Christianity and Islam, Beirut, 2011, especially pp.65-121.
- Father David Neuhaus, We Get Acquainted with Saint Paul and His Epistles, “The Door of Faith” series, Jerusalem, 2016.
- Father David Neuhaus, We Get Acquainted with the Book of Revelation, “The Door of Faith” series, Jerusalem, 2014.

The Concept of Freedom in the Quran

Prof. Dr. Abdul Sattar Qassim
Political Science
Nablus, Palestine



Abstract

This paper provides new thoughts about the concept of freedom in Islam, but based mainly on the Quranic verses. Methodologically, it adopts the content analysis approach. It argues that freedom in the Quran is natural, and it supersedes any earthly laws and instructions. The Quran doesn't order governments to allow for freedom because natural built in power is above legislation, and need not to be asserted by law.

Freedom in the Quran means the unity of the objective and the subjective, the social and the natural, the individual and the plural, and the teachings in the Quran are in harmony with natural innate powers, and lead finally to self-fulfillment on the individual and social levels. And those who enact laws that contradict the natural will face trouble soon or later.

Man has the right to choose his/her faith, and express him/her self by different means. She/he has the right to introduce her/his thoughts and bring out any evidence seen fit. She/he has the right to organize, and receive the information needed for forming educated opinions and decisions. Suppression and repression aren't acceptable by Islamic teachings.

I. Introduction

This paper explains the concept of freedom in Islam as it is promoted in the verses of the Quran. The Islamic concept of freedom is a controversial issue on the level of intellectuals and clergy of different religions world-wide. So many people, particularly in the democratic countries argue that Islam establishes authoritarian social and political systems, and allows very little space for freedom of individuals and groups. There are very gloomy conclusions drawn about Islam from the side of western mass media, intellectuals and ordinary people. It isn't the intention of this paper to look into the reasons that led to such conclusions, but to introduce a scientific reading, to the best of my ability, to the concept.

The study of the concept is limited to the verses of the Quran. It doesn't concentrate on the sayings of Prophet Mohammad or his immediate followers. That is because: first, the Quran is the uncontested basic and prime source of Islamic teachings; and second, the overwhelming majority of the sayings don't deal with Islamic thought but with Islamic fiqh (teachings that have to do with daily life adherence with what is legitimate (halal) and illegitimate (haram). Islamic thought which hasn't been a rich field of research in the Islamic heritage deals with right and wrong on a universal level, but fiqh is limited to human daily behavior on piecemeal basis. Only the Quran talks directly and indirectly about issues of political and social thought, and an understanding of Islam should spring only from understanding the Quran.

Some intellectuals draw their conclusions about Islam from the behavior Moslems exhibit in their daily life, and from what they hear from Muslim clergy in the mass media, lectures and public discussions. This situation is similar to the time of Martin Luther who abhorred the then existing Christian teachings, and incited the Christians to read the Bible as the major source of Christian teachings. The situation in the Islamic countries is somewhat similar in the sense that tradition and the judgments (fatwas) of the clergy are the prime source of halal and haram. The Quran, to some extent, has been kept on the shelves and used mainly in occasions of joy and sadness. The Muslims refer to the Quran in general, but they concentrate primarily on the sayings of the Prophet, although the Prophet himself ordered the Moslems not to record his sayings.

This paper is divided into three parts: the basic Islamic philosophical assumptions concerning individualism and pluralism in Islam, the freedom of choice and freedom in general. Methodologically, the paper depends mainly on content-analysis of the verses of the Quran. It rarely resorts to writings of Muslim thinkers because they concentrate on issues of *fiqh* rather than thought. Comparison between Islam and democracy in this regard is made indirectly for the sake of clarifying certain points, but not for comprehensive comparison.

The hypothesis of this paper is that freedom in Islam is natural, and it means the unity of the objective and the subjective.

II. Individualism and Pluralism

Philosophers have shown diversity in their concepts of social organization and welfare, and most of them adopted either individualism or pluralism as basic theoretical assumptions in social building. Some of them such as Machiavelli (**Fischer, Lexington Book**) and John Locke (**Locke, Two treatises of Government**) adopted individualism depending upon that social behavior is individualistic in the first place, and any social togetherness is the outcome of individual decisions based on how individuals view their interests. The individual, as individualists say, is precedent to the society, and his/her social activity is the outcome of his/her personal experience in the development of interests and methods of realizing them.

Pluralists assume the contrary in the sense that the idea of the society is precedent to the individual, and the individual appeared to fit into a pre-ordained or an inevitably evolving social structure that stresses the common weal rather than the personal interests. (**Aveniri, the Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx**) Consequently, they argue that the individual realizes his/her interests through the realization of the common interests, and he/she cannot realize him/herself outside the society. The individual remains part of an organic social structure through which he/she gain meaning and can be fruitful. (**Boylan. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy**)

Islam differs in its basic assumption from the individualists and the pluralists, and as it is understood from the Quranic texts, Islam is both individualist and pluralist, and there are many verses in the Quran that assert the idea of individualism, and many others assert pluralism. But the Quran doesn't

approach both ideas as contradictory, but mutually dependent and constitute an integral whole in guiding human behavior. To illustrate this, verses from the Quran are brought to sight:

- ✓ **Pluralism:** it is evident from the Quranic texts that God didn't create man as an individual but as a couple, or created man as spouses. One of the verses says: "**That He did create in pairs, - male and female, From a seed when lodged (in its place);**". (al-Najm # 53, v. 45-6) here the Quran uses the Arabic word (Zawj) which means spouse. The male is a zawj and the female too; that is, the Quran doesn't differentiate linguistically between the male and the female in as far as creation is concerned. This is asserted in the saying: "**And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are Signs for those who reflect.**" (al-Rum #30, v. 21) the Quran doesn't say who was created first: the male or the female, but says that each was created from the other. This means that the female and the male are of the same origin, and both of them are organically connected.

From the organic theory, we learn that all parts of an organic entity or species are interconnected and mutually-dependent, and none of the parts can survive without being organically tied with the other parts. And the whole cannot survive without the organic natural cooperation of all the parts. This is true for men and women in as far as the teachings of the Quran are concerned. One cannot survive or continue to exist if living alone completely separated from the other. This kind of creation isn't limited to humans, but it includes all other creatures. The Quran says: "**And of everything We have created pairs: That ye may receive instruction.**" (Al-Dariyat #51, v. 49) here everything isn't limited to living creatures but to everything. This should be left to the physicists to educate us if natural things are created or made in pairs or couples, or positive and negative.

All are created from the same soul, or as the Quran puts it: "**Glory to God, Who created in pairs all things that the earth produces, as well as their own (human) kind and (other) things of which they have no knowledge.**" (Yasin #36, v. 36)

All have the same creation origin: **“He created you (all) from a single person: then created, of like nature, his mate; and he sent down for you eight head of cattle in pairs: He makes you, in the wombs of your mothers, in stages, one after another, in three veils of darkness. such is God, your Lord and Cherisher: to Him belongs (all) dominion. There is no god but He: then how are ye turned away (from your true Centre)?”** (Al-Zumar # 39, v. 6) {It needs to be noticed here that the translator uses the masculine form while this isn't the true Quranic expression. The Quran refers to the soul rather than to individuals and stresses the creation of the soul and its spouse from it}

The zawj or the spouse isn't a separate individual, but an integral to another. He or she isn't qualified naturally to stay alone or separate, and he/she cannot easily do that because of his/her natural creation. It is possible for somebody to live alone under a private ceiling, but this doesn't annihilate his/her nature, and remains under the material and psychological pressure of this nature.

The question of plurality isn't limited to pairs or spouse-ship, but extends to a larger scope. The Quran says that an-nass (mankind in general or the unidentified people) are made peoples and tribes. Before this is explained, two things should be clarified:

- a) The Quran uses the word an-nas when addressing human beings in general, and uses the word sha'b (people) when specifying.
- b) There are three stages of creation in the Quran: creation, making and constructing. These three stages mean that the will of God ordained the creation of something, but the first means the making from nil, making means adding things to something that already exist, and constructing means adding to something already made. For instance, man was created first, then made into people, then babies constructed in the womb.

Here the Quran talks about the making of peoples and tribes: **“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily**

the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (al-Hujurat # 49, v. 13)

This verse assures that man is naturally pluralist, he/she is created a spouse and an integral part of a people or a tribe. In this assumption, Islam differs completely from so many philosophers who assumed that societies develop due to need or necessity, and agrees with Aristotle who said that society as an idea is precedent to the individual, and the individual is created to fit into the application of the idea. This is a crucial point in constructing the Quranic theory of freedom.

- ✓ **Individualism:** Islam is also individualist because responsibility is individualist not pluralist. Everybody is responsible for his/her actions and doings both in this life and the life here-after. The Quran says: “Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds”. (Al-Moddathther # 74, v. 38) And says: “**Namely, that no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another. That man can have nothing but what he strives for.**” (Al-Najm # 53, v. 38-9)

That is why the Quran establishes rules of earth punishments, and describes recompense and punishment on the Day of Judgment. **“Every man's fate We have fastened on his own neck: On the Day of Judgment We shall bring out for him a scroll, which he will see spread open. (It will be said to him:) Read thine (own) record: Sufficient is thy soul this day to make out an account against thee.”** (Al-Isra' # 17, v. 13-4) This means that Islam doesn't dissolve the individual into the society but preserves the individual entity that doesn't separate itself from the whole. Dissolving the individual into society or tribe negates the personal responsibility, and personal freedom is consequently negated. To make clearer, the Quran establishes a way of human behavior in a way that the individual doesn't lose sight of the common weal, and doesn't lose the sense of personal responsibility. The one is responsible to the extent she/he is pluralist, and to the extent of fulfilling personal interests. The one observes the common good even in all endeavors including those of personal interests.

The person is pluralist and individualist at the same time according to the Quran. Is this combination of two contradictories or antonyms logically possible? The Quran explains that working within a community or a social group is a virtue that benefits both the person and the community. The community reaps goodness on earth, but the person reaps on earth because she/he is a member of the community, and in heavens because of good doings. Good deeds such as cleaning a street, helping the poor and the elderly, facing an enemy, getting education and doing scientific research are Islamically required, and they are an expression of deep faith and belief in God. Those who do good deeds will be recompensed in Heavens, and those who don't do will face punishment. It is inevitable to do work for the good of the society because the person is a natural member, and this inevitability is no different from the must toward oneself. This inevitability is also a right because through common achievement, a person can see him/herself materializing or self-fulfilled. To stress the natural integrity, the inevitability is legalized by the sharia as a must.

Working toward personal interest is an inevitability and a right too. The person has to work hard and be productive so as to make a living and achieve advancement, or that is the way she/he is created. Unless he/she be independent in making achievements, life becomes meaningless and loses essence. But while a person is promoting her/his personal interests, he/she continue to observe the common interests. He/she refrains from personal activity that does harm to the society, and elevates the one that is socially productive. All of these activities then are actually worshipping. Worshipping in Islam isn't only rituals, but includes all productive and virtuous activities.

Individualism and pluralism are integral, they bolster each other, and none of them prevails over the other, or of more importance than the other. This integration is categorized as worship that aims at abiding by the Islamic law (sharia) that depends upon a comprehensive ethical code whether on the level of faith, or the level of thought, or the level of daily conduct. (Faith is the belief in the supernatural; thought is the scientific examination of phenomena; daily conduct is the permitted behavior and the forbidden).

The Islamic basic assumption is different from both the democratic and the socialist or the communist. It is a one that integrates the personal with the plural, and doesn't deal with them as contradictory, rather they interact not to insure co-existence only, but to provide integrity that protects the human personality that doesn't feed on the common weal. It is the unity of the antonyms which is in harmony with the integral universe on the level of the species and the level of humanity. It provides for the distinction of the individual without separating him/her from the whole.

III. Freedom to choose

As it is noticed, the Quran establishes a dialectical mutual relationship between the subjective, the person or the soul or the individual, and the objective, the world outside oneself. To be in harmony with oneself and the universe, it is thought that the Quran sets rules and code of ethics that are compatible with creation; i.e., the rules of the sharia must be harmonious with the physical rules of creation, if these rules are truly descending from heavens. The God who creates doesn't order people to do things that are contradictory to nature. He wouldn't ask us to stop eating if we cannot survive without food. This doesn't mean that those who believe in God believe that God is subject to rationality and logical reasoning; rather, he is the source of both rationality and reasoning.

Before getting into the freedom to choose, I should point that so many Muslims don't believe that there is a freedom of choice in Islam, and even there isn't freedom in Islam at all. They argue that God has established his rules and codes of behavior in the Quran, and Prophet Mohammad explained and interpreted the verses, and the need to loom over them isn't there. The Muslim doesn't need to think of what is good and bad, or of what is virtuous and evil, but needs to look up the details of how to behave from the already established and clarified rules and codes. They paralyze the human brain, and always put it inside a circle of inability and deem it untrustworthy.

It is evident that these people don't differentiate between creation and instructions of behavior. The one cannot choose in the realm of creation, but can choose if he/she is ordered or advised. One cannot choose whether to use his/her teeth for eating, but can choose not to believe in God. Also there is a problem in the way they understand the rules in view of time and space.

(kilanee et. al, p 140) People of different parts of the world differ in understanding certain ideas due to cultural differences. In terms of time, the form and scope of understanding ideas and revelations differ according to the scientific and epistemological advancement.

However, there are Muslims who don't accept inherited and rigid forms of understanding the teachings of Islam, and call for changes that respect the human brain and rationality. Qardawi who is very well known in the Islamic world is just an example. (Qardawi, p. 14) He always calls for enforcing human reasoning in understanding the texts, and calls for open mindedness on all issues.

Back to freedom of choice, the Quran states: **“By the Soul, and the proportion and order given to it. And its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right. Truly he succeeds that purifies it. And he fails that corrupts it.”** (Al-Shshams # 91, v. 7-10) this means that man has been created with an ability to differentiate between right and wrong, and an ability to choose between purification and corruption. Man is endowed naturally with the power to know and distinguish between things and differentiate between ideas, and to make the choices she/he sees fit. This is asserted in the verse that says: **“And shown him the two highways”**. (Al-Balad # 90. V. 10) these two highways are the paths of right and wrong, and means that man is given the ability to know the two paths and choose the one or the other.

It is evident that the freedom to choose in the Quran isn't something that is learned or achieved by education, but it is natural, or an innate power built into man. The one doesn't develop the power to choose through education, but can improve her/his methods in making the choices. This is similar to the power of eating which isn't developed by education, while the art of eating could be developed through learning.

Man is rational and a thinking creature. That is why the Quran contains hundreds of verses that ask humans to think and look into things and ideas before deciding. One verse, for instance, says: **“Now let man but think from what he is created”**. (Al-Tareq # 86, v. 5) and another says: **“Then let man look at his food”**. (Abass # 80, v. 24) For more clarification on the status of human brain in the Quran, the following verses are helpful:

Behold! in the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the Night and the Day; in the sailing of the ships through the Ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which God sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth;- (here) indeed are Signs for a people that are wise. (Al-Baqara # 2, v. 164)

For the worst of beasts in the sight of Allah are the deaf and the dumb, - those who understand not. (Al-Anfal #8, V. 22)

With it He produces for you corn, olives, date-palms, grapes and every kind of fruit: verily in this is a sign for those who give thought. He has made subject to you the Night and the Day; the sun and the moon; and the stars are in subjection by His Command: verily in this are Signs for men who are wise. (Al-Nahel # 16, v. 11-12)

Man has memory also. The text says: **“The Day when man shall remember (all) that he strove for”**. (Al-Nazi’at # 79, v. 35) while another verse tells: **“We did reveal to Moses the Book after We had destroyed the earlier generations, (to give) Insight to men, and guidance and Mercy, that they might receive admonition”**. (Al-qasas # 28, v. 43) since man has a memory, he/she can reassess matters and evaluates what he/she is doing: **“Nay, man will be evidence against himself”**. (Al-Qiyama # 75, v. 14) man has the natural ability to weigh things and learn from his/her experience.

As long as man’s thinking ability is preordained or implanted in his/her structure, then he/she is free to choose; otherwise, this innate divinely implanted power is meaningless. When a believer talks about God, she/he has in mind that the talk is about a creator who acquires the ultimate wisdom, mercy, knowledge, might and comprehension, and who wouldn’t create things haphazardly. This power of reason is endowed to enable man to choose, but not to restrict him/her or forbid him/her from making the choices seen suitable.

This is not left in the Quran as a matter of abstract thought or a subject of debate among scholars, but is given a legislative status in the sharia code. It is stated clearly: **"The truth is from your Lord": Let him who will believe, and let him who will, reject (it).** (Al-Kahf # 18, v. 29) Adopting a religion isn't coercive, and people are free to believe or not. This is asserted in the following; **"Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out Clear from Error: whoever rejects Evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And God heareth and knoweth all things"**. (Al-Baqara # 2, v. 256) People are free to choose their own creeds and religion, and it is absolutely prohibited in Islam to oblige anybody on his/her religious beliefs. If Islam is so strict on the matter of belief, then it allows at large, as will be discussed later, of opinion.

It needs to be noticed that the freedom of choice is respected in the Quran for a couple of reasons: first it is an innate endowment that should not be resisted or quelled or suppressed, and undermining the freedom of choice is undermining human nature; and second, it is part of the legal code. Human nature shouldn't be suppressed because it is an expression of God's will, and it is made to express itself. If this nature is suppressed then trouble is expected for the suppressed and the suppressor. Historically, those who suppressed their own people caused so much pain for themselves and for their own people, and, at so many instances, led to atrocities and blood-shed. Suppressing human nature is a very grave crime that leads to chaos.

IV. The natural and the legislative

The natural, in Islam, is distinct from the legislative, but the legislative couldn't be separated from the natural. Since the natural is precedent to the legislative, then the legislative should be harmonious and compatible with the natural. One needs to notice that man cannot deviate generally from the natural because it is built in, but can deviate very easily from the legislative. The power of the natural is in itself, but the power of the legislative is ethical or coercive, which means that behaving according to the natural is expected and doesn't need legislations, while human behavior needs to be legislated.

To be clearer, the natural has to do with the species or the physical and immaterial construction of man, while human behavior is subject to human awareness that is related to the rational power. Natural behavior is inevitable

but could be cultured by human rationality. Talking to people is natural, but the way one talks to others is subject to many social and educational factors. However, human behavior is the one that is rationalized and expresses the will of the person. It is the outcome of evaluating different factors, and is determined willingly by people who are held responsible for their actions. Human behavior entails awareness, freedom and responsibility, while natural behavior entails the possibility of systemizing it into a culturally acceptable behavior.

Islam doesn't legislate on the natural, but on how to make the natural "civilized". It doesn't order people to eat, but tells them what to eat or what not to eat. It doesn't order people to get married, but tells them how to organize marriage. It doesn't tell them that they are free, but tells them that its message is to free humanity from slavery, and asks them to free slaves. And probably this is the point that attracts those who deny the freedom of the Muslims. They say that the Quran didn't mention freedom at all, and didn't legislate on it. They miss the point that natural matters aren't the subject of legislation, not only in the Quran, but also in all constitutions and judicial experiences.

Since the natural, according to Islam, is the creation of God, and the revelations are his orders, then these revelations are in complete harmony with the natural. God wouldn't ordain a code of behavior that would contradict nature that he created. Thus, man can achieve integrity, perfection and self-realization when the code of behavior he/she abides by compliments his/hers nature; I. e., when the subjective, human behavior unites with the objective or the natural code. This is what the Quranic teachings want to assert, it is the unity of the objective and the subjective, and man becomes free once he/she achieves this. Once man becomes united with God's creation, he/she becomes in harmony with the internal self and with the universe outside the self. This is freedom in Islam.

Freedom is achieved as long as one applies the sharia law. But what is the sharia law that one should apply or abide by? Although this paper doesn't delve into the details of the answer to this question, the researcher sees that this law, as it is in the Quran is divided into two parts: one that is clear-cut doesn't need interpretation such as the prohibition of adultery, loan sharking, and gambling. The other part is subject to discretion and jurisprudence such as consultation among Muslims, the scientific approach to understand natural phenomenon, marriage from more than one woman, and co-education.

The part that is put clearly in specified wording is of few teachings, and limited mainly to major and simple virtues that Islam share with other religions such as Judaism and Christianity. The majority of the teachings are subject to interpretations and different understandings due to difference in time and space, and to different levels of knowledge and scientific advancement. The Muslims, for instance, couldn't interpret the Quranic verse that talks about the growth of the embryo in the womb until scientists have explained the stages. And they couldn't interpret the oval shape of earth until the scientists discovered that.

Since perfect interpretation of the Quranic text unfolds through time and space, and since its gradual emergence is associated with scientific advancement, the unity of the objective and the subjective is in progress rather than a final reality. The unity is in a process of ascension as man ascends in scientific achievements, and his/her understanding of his/her freedom remains inseparable of the level of the awareness that scientific achievements incite. Since scientific achievement means the discovery of universal codes whether on the human level or the rest of things, freedom of man in Islam is associated with universal realities rather than mere abstract ideas. This explains why science and topics related occupy around 700 verses out of 6004 verses that constitute the Quran.

As man discovers more of the universal realities, she/he can develop the right legislation or ethical code that remains in harmony with the universe, and her/his comprehension of human freedom keeps ascending or rising. So, freedom in Islam is in a process of becoming as long as scientific progress doesn't come to an end.

V. Applications

Islam unites the objective and the subjective, the absolute and the relative, the social and the natural, the inner and the outer, the individual and the plural. This isn't only theoretical, but it has its applications in the Quranic teachings. Following is examples of these applications:

VI. Context of Freedom

✓ Freedom of Expression

There isn't any text or indication in the Quran that forbids the freedom of expression, or limits it to certain extents, or suppresses it by any means. On the contrary, the Quran encourages people to discuss matters openly, protest, accept ideas or reject them, and bring about all pretexts and evidences that might be available to contest the Islamic teachings. The Quran puts no restrictions on the freedom of expression what-so-ever, to the extent that Satan or the devil is allowed to speak up. The Quran says:

(God) said: "O Iblis! What prevents thee from prostrating thyself to one whom I have created with my hands? Art thou haughty? Or art thou one of the high (and mighty) ones? (Iblis) said: I am better than he: thou created me from fire, and him thou created from clay. (God) said: Then get thee out from here: for thou art rejected, accursed. And My curse shall be on thee till the Day of Judgment. (Iblis) said: O my Lord! Give me then respite till the Day the (dead) are raised. (God) said: Respite then is granted thee- Till the Day of the Time Appointed. (Iblis) said: Then, by Thy power, I will put them all in the wrong. Except Thy Servants amongst them, sincere and purified (by Thy Grace)." (Sad # 38. V. 75-83)

The Quran adds:

(God) said: Get thee down from this: it is not for thee to be arrogant here: get out, for thou art of the meanest (of creatures). He said: Give me respite till the day they are raised up. (God) said: Be thou among those who have respite. He said: Because thou hast thrown me out of the way, lo! I will lie in wait for them on thy straight way: Then will I assault them from before them and behind them, from their right and their left: Nor wilt thou find, in most of them, gratitude (for thy mercies)." (Al-Araf #7, v 13-17)

If Iblis or the Satan is given the freedom to speak up and try to convince people with "his" views, then one can easily conclude that

ordinary people have the freedom to do so. Ordinary people supposedly aren't as strong or mighty as Iblis, and they pose a modest danger to the system or the regime compared to the danger that Iblis might impose.

More than that, people are encouraged by the Quran to challenge the Islamic teachings, and bring verses or (suras) chapters of their own. The Quran says: **“And if ye are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant, then produce a Sura like thereunto; and call your witnesses or helpers (If there are any) besides God, if your (doubts) are true.”** (Al-Baqara #2, v,23) and says: **“Or do they say, "He forged it"? say: "Bring then a Sura like unto it, and call (to your aid) anyone you can besides God, if it be ye speak the truth!"**(Yunus # 38, v. 38) the Quran here doesn't provide for the freedom of speech only, but opens the door for everybody to write his/her Quran in challenge of the revelations, and to prove its truthfulness. Besides, the one can defend his/her beliefs in other gods without restrictions.

The Quran doesn't ask the believers or the Muslims to suppress non believers and none-Muslims, but to bring them to open discussions and debate, and let everybody bring out her/his pretexts and proofs. Everybody should have the chance to show the evidence she/he has without any kind of intimidation or frightening. The Quran asserts: **“O mankind! Verily there hath come to you a convincing proof from your Lord: For We have sent unto you a light (that is) manifest.”** (Al-Nisa' # 4, v. 174) and proceeds: **“Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance.”** (Al-Nahl # 16, v 125) and adds: **“Say: "O People of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than God." If then they turn back, say ye: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to God's Will).** (Al-Imran # 2, v. 64)

✓ Freedom of Belief

The Quran doesn't force people to adopt Islam, or oblige them to do so, or punish them if they don't. As pointed earlier, the one has the freedom to believe or not, and faith remains the one's choice. As seen so far, obliging people to a certain faith or the adoption of certain belief is contrary to God's tenets of creation, and incompatible with the sharia tenets. It is true that there are Muslims who coerce people or work toward that, but that isn't Islamic.

If it was to God's will, the idea of recompense or punishment on the Day of Judgment would be meaningless. Responsibility is associated with freedom, and those who are un-free couldn't be held responsible for their actions. The Quran says:

To thee We sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety: so judge between them by what God hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the Truth that hath come to thee. To each among you have we prescribed a law and an Open Way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute. (Al-Mai'da # 5, v 48)

And clarifies: **“If it had been God's Plan, they would not have taken false gods: but We made thee not one to watch over their doings, nor art thou set over them to dispose of their affairs.”** (Al-An'am # 6, v. 107) also adds: **“If then they run away, We have not sent thee as a guard over them. Thy duty is but to convey (the Message). And truly, when We give man a taste of a Mercy from Ourselves, he doth exult thereat, but when some ill happens to him, on account of the deeds which his hands have sent forth, truly then is man ungrateful”.** (Al-Shura # 42, v. 48) there are also many verses all over the Quran that assert this.

✓ Freedom to Form Opinion

Probably, the freedom to make opinion is a unique term in the literature on freedom. The Quran brings it out because those who don't have enough information or data about a particular issue cannot form an educated opinion. One might make an opinion although there is an information shortage, but that wouldn't be helpful in reaching the right decision toward a certain matter. Islam is very much assertive on the decision-making because faults and mistakes are very costly in the life of individuals and the community. That is why precision and research are essential in providing the necessary data required by rational and intelligent decision makers.

The Quran instructs: **“Those who conceal God's revelations in the Book, and purchase for them a miserable profit,- they swallow into themselves naught but Fire; God will not address them on the Day of Resurrection, nor purify them: grievous will be their penalty.”** (Al-Baqara #2, v. 174) and describes those who don't convey God's message: **“Those who conceal the clear (Signs) We have sent down, and the Guidance, after We have made it clear for the People in the Book,-on them shall be God's curse, and the curse of those entitled to curse.”** (Al-Baqara # 2, v. 159) and orders the Muslims to investigate before deciding: **“O ye who believe! If a wicked person comes to you with any news, ascertain the truth, lest ye harm people unwittingly, and afterwards become full of repentance for what ye have done.”** (Al-Hujurat # 49, v. 6)

By inference, this Quranic teaching means that information should be available to specialists and to ordinary people so as to be able to develop their own views. Governments, parties, institutions shouldn't be hiding a bit of information that benefits the decision-maker, and the Muslims are supposed to work hard on this in their own countries because Muslim governments aren't Islamic in their way they transmit information. Besides, Islam rejects thought terror, and gives space for all thoughts to express themselves freely even if they are thought to contradict Islamic teachings. Islam, as so many Muslim scholars argue, prevails through the establishment of justice, but not through thought terror. (Qotob, pp 34-37)

✓ Freedom to Organize

As mentioned earlier, the Lord gave Iblis the opportunity to organize “his” supporters, and mobilize “his” forces if “he” wishes to lead people astray and away from the straight path of God. The Lord gave him the permission and promised not to act against “him” until the Day of Judgment. And it was shown that people are given the chance to argue and bring out their evidence against the teachings of the Quran. This means that people have the right to organize themselves in order to achieve their goals. They have the right to organize to promote personal or private interest, and also for the sake of achieving a common good, or hold the government. If people don’t trust their government, they can organize themselves so as to put enough pressure that will produce change.

As stated above, if a Muslim government doesn’t gain the trust of the people through the establishment of justice, then it is hard to describe it as Islamic. Suppression and repression lead to chaos and revolution, while justice leads to trust and tranquility.

VII. Conclusion

The writer is sure that he is presenting something new in the Islamic political thought, and this paper will invoke a lot of controversy. The facts presented in this paper aren’t traditional, and they aren’t ritualistic; rather, they are scientific. But improvements in understanding the tenets of Islam start to roll once controversy starts to boil.

Islam came to free people, and there are strong evidences in the Quran that man is rational, responsible, and naturally capable of making choices. He/she is responsible to the extent that he/she is free, and he/she is creative to the extent he/she is free and responsible. The advancement of humanity is tied with freedom, and the Quran assures that freedom provides the wheels of taking off.

References

- ✓ The Quran
- ✓ Avineri, Shlomo. **The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx**. Cambridge University Press, 1968.
- ✓ Boylan, Michael. "Aristotle (383-322 BCE)". **Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy**, Oct. 21, 2005.
- ✓ Fischer, Markus (2000), *Well-ordered License: On the Unity of Machiavelli's Thought*, **Lexington Book**.
- ✓ Kilanee, Ibraheem, et al. **Dirasat fi Al-Fikr Al-arabi Al-Islami**, Amman: Dar A-Fikr, 1991.
- ✓ Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. The main idea in these two treatises is the contract which looks at people as independent individuals.
- ✓ Qardawi, Yusuf. **Al-Halal w Al-Haram fi El-Islam**, Beirut: Al-maktab Al-Islami, 1994.
- ✓ Qotob, Sayyed. **Al-Adalah el-Ijtimaiyya in Islam**, Cairo; Dar Ash-sgorouq, 1984.

Issues uniting or separating Christians of the East

Fr. Dr. Pierre Giorgio Giannaza,
Theology. Salesian Theological
Institute, Cremizan Monastery,
Jerusalem



In general, when talking about Christian unity, the tendency to highlight issues of disagreement tends to be a negative and pessimistic starting point, and therefore inaccurate. Why do we talk of the twisted lines before the straight ones? Rather, the many common issues to all Christians should be the starting stand. Pope John XXIII wrote: "Every man should think, not what divides us, but what brings us together"¹⁸. St. John Paul II wrote: "There are many common issues between us, and we have in common a sincere longing for unity"¹⁹."

I. Issues that Unite

In fact, we should recall always what St. Paul told us: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God the Father of all creation" (Ephesians 4: 5-6). We all believe in one God and Trinity, our creation and our love. We all recognize Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, Lord and Savior. We all accepted baptism itself in the Holy Trinity, and we are proud of the name "Christians", which makes us true brothers in Christ²⁰, and we bless the Lord for this great gift. We all share the

¹⁸ Pope John XXIII, to the throne of Peter (1959).

¹⁹ Nur al-Sharq, 3, also see the doctrinal constitution of the church, 15.

²⁰ The Synod says clearly about non-Catholics: "But they were not justified by the faith they received in baptism and became the sons of the body of Christ, they truly bear the

same code of faith ("we believe") and share in all its articles: God the Father and the Creator, the incarnate Son of God and His sacramental secrets, the Holy Spirit and His sacramental work, the Church, eternal life²¹. We all recognize the supreme authority of the word of God in the Bible.

All of us celebrate the two main pillars: the Baptism and the Eucharist. In some ways, we all recognize priesthood and service, albeit in different ways. We all honor Sunday and the Holy Cross. All Christians see the Ten Commandments and the Gospel of Jesus as the basis of their moral life. God grants to all Christians (not to one specific church) the life of grace, faith, hope, love, and other inner gifts of the Holy Spirit. What is common to us is also the honoring of many martyrs and saints, especially the martyrs of the early ages of the one and the same divided church, as well as the treasures of wisdom for many of the Fathers of the Church.

All Christians of different churches seek to live the Gospel and publish it in an apostolic spirit. It is the same spirit that sends Christians to evangelize the whole world, and stresses them to the point of self-sacrifice for Christ, knowing that all churches have martyrs, shed their blood for faith. It is right to speak today about the "old and modern" ecumenism of the martyrs, to the extent that some churches propose to celebrate together a common memory of martyrs one day of the year.

All this is a great treasure that all Christians share. If we want to talk numbers, we can say that Christians are united from 80% to 90%, and perhaps more. Certainly, Jesus Christ wants us united in everything to a 100%. It is important to remember that this complete unity includes only the fundamental and essential issues, not the secondary ones that are related to the traditions of each church. One of the Christian writers said: "Unity in fundamental issues that are necessary, freedom in secondary and controversial issues, while love in all issues."

Christian name, and rightly see the sons of the Catholic Church as brothers in the Lord" (Ecumenical Movement, 3).

21 In the Nicene-Constantinian faith, the Catholics and the Protestants, when they mention the Holy Spirit, usually add "and the Son".

Finally, no Christian should consider himself to be above others simply because he belongs to a particular church. This is not a merit, but a gift from God. St. Paul says to those who are proud of themselves: “*For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?*” (1 Corinthians 4: 7). This is what the Catholic Church itself warns of its own children when it says, “*May all children of the Church remember that they are because of the special grace from Christ, not by their own merits. They are what they are, and that if they do not respond to this grace in thoughts, words and deeds, they will not be saved, their judgement would be stronger²²*”.

II. Issues that Separate

Wandering about what could rift between us Christians in the East, one can identify the following issues that relate to four areas:

1. Faith and belief:
2. The church system;
3. Congenital life.
4. Ecclesiastical structures, *however this is a legitimate difference, and not, in fact, a subject of division.*

1) Faith and belief

This category of differences concerns the truth about Christian faith, and the perfection of interpreting the teachings of Jesus. These differences are central and surround the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the mystery of Christ, the mysteries of the Church, the personality of Virgin Mary, and eschatology.

✓ The Holy Trinity

With regard to the Holy Trinity and the relations between the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the controversy is that of the emanation of the Holy Spirit. On one hand, Easter

Church and Orthodoxy say that the Holy Spirit emanates from the Father (only). They base this on the saying of Jesus said to His disciples: "*And when the Proverb who sent it to you came from the Father, the Spirit of truth emanating from the Father*" (John 15:26). On the other hand, Catholics and Protestants say that the Holy Spirit emanates from the Father and the Son, which is expressed by the addition of the word "son" to the text of the Creed of Faith²³. They acknowledge what Jesus said in the above verse (John 15:26), but they also cite other verses of the Gospel and the letters they are invoked to confirm the emanation of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son. Some verses call the Holy Spirit explicitly, "the Spirit of Christ" (1 Peter 1:11), "the Spirit of the Lord" (Acts 5: 9), and "the Spirit of Jesus" (Romans 8: 9-11) Of the Son (cf. John 16:15). Jesus himself says that the Father will send the Holy Spirit upon His prayer (cf. John 14:16) and in His name (cf. John 14:26). Jesus, risen from the dead, breathes in his disciples and gives them the Holy Spirit (cf. John 20:22). The Bible speaks of the "river of the waters of life" (the symbol of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John), which "emanates from the throne of God and the lamb" (Revelation 22: 1). To this day, this controversy remains, although mutual understanding between Catholics and Orthodoxies is steadily increasing.

✓ Jesus Christ:

As for the person of Jesus Christ, all Churches affirm that Jesus is a true God and a true human being, but there is still disagreement over how to reconcile manhood with theology. In general, churches use this expression: Jesus Christ is a hypostasis (one person) in two natures. This is confirmed by Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. This means that Christ's divine nature and human nature are united in a way that makes them one entity or a single, indivisible entity. The Copts, Armenians, and Syriac Orthodox say that Christ is a person (emanating) from both divine and human nature. In the historical and real Christ, the two natures are united uniquely and indiscriminately, to the extent that they form one nature. In recent years, several conferences have been held on this

23

This proclamation was officially made for the first time in 1014, when Pope Benedict VIII introduced it into the Creed of Faith under the pressure of the German Emperor Henry II, crowned in Rome and then spread throughout the Western world.

subject, which ultimately led to the conclusion that all churches recognize the truth of one faith about Jesus Christ, the true God and the true human being, a unique divine-human being, but different from the expression of this truth. In other words, the essence of faith is one, but its expression is different. In addition, it is commonly said that the Assyrian Church of the East today follows the teachings of Nestorius, condemned by the Council of Ephesus (431), who seems to have gone on to say that Jesus Christ has two colors and two natures. This church defends itself and says that it is not a Nestorian, nor should it be called Nestorianism, because it, too, recognizes that Jesus is a complete God and a full human being, knowing that their theologians, in their interpretation of the unity of Christ's unity, Cultural and philosophical, while the essence of the doctrine remains one.

✓ Sacraments:

The sacraments are the most different points between Christians. It is known that the Eastern, Orthodox and Catholic churches believe in seven secrets and practice them as sacrosanct signs established by Christ Himself to sanctify all Christian life: baptism, asceticism, Eucharist, repentance, priesthood, marriage, and blessing of the sick. Some Protestant churches recognize two sacraments (Baptism and Eucharist), three (also priests), four or five, and distinguish between basic mysteries (baptism, Eucharist, and priesthood) and others which they consider minor. There is a problem with Christ's presence in the Eucharist, where many Eastern Orthodox, Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran Churches believe in the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and that the Eucharist is an offering, remembrance, sacrifice, and communion. But most of the Protestant churches confirm that this presence is a symbolic and living presence, and that the Eucharist is merely a reminder of the Lord's Last Supper.

✓ Eternal life:

There are differences between the Christian Churches about other life, the realities associated with life after death, specifically with regard to the individual destiny (death, special judgment, purgatory, hell, heaven ...), and the collective destiny Time, resurrection of the flesh, public judgment, eternal life). While the

Catholic Church recognizes the antiseptic, other churches (orthodox and Protestant) generally deny it. The Orthodox churches and the Eastern Churches recognize the special judgment, that is, the judgment of each one immediately after death, while others (especially the Protestant churches) reserve or reject them altogether. Protestant churches speak of the "king of thousands of Christ", of the first resurrection and of the second resurrection, and others do not recognize their wrath, because they believe that the wicked will destroy altogether and disappear.

✓ Virgin Mary:

There is another subject of doctrinal disagreement between the Christian churches: the personality of Virgin Mary. The old Eastern Churches, Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church declare that Virgin Mary is the Mother of God²⁴, the eternal virgin, the holiest and the most innocent of the original sin. While Catholics and Orthodox believe that Virgin Mary was moved to Heaven by body and soul, they disagree about the Immaculate Conception, or at least about its interpretation and manner of declaration by the Pope, Bishop of Rome. The Protestants recognize the greatness of Mary as the human mother of Jesus, but they do not honor or celebrate her²⁵. They do not pray for Virgin Mary and saints and do not ask for their intercession, because they do not believe that there are mediators or intercessors, according to the Bible, which says, "For God is one, and mediator between God and man, and one man, Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2: 5) . In general, Protestants recognize that Virgin Mary, or the Mother of God, had conceived and given birth to Jesus Christ immaculately. However, many churches do not recognize neither her post-Jesus Immaculate Conception nor her transcendence to Heaven.

✓ The Bible:

Finally, there are different opinions between Christian churches regarding the list of books of the Bible, and the way of their interpretation. All churches consider the Bible as the Word of God

²⁴ The Assyrian Church prefers to use the term "Mary, Mother of Christ, Son of God."

²⁵ The Anglican Church only (the Supreme Church) honors the Virgin Mary and prays to her.

which is revealed to the prophets, and which find its final incarnation in Jesus Christ: the voice of the Father. However, there is a difference between the churches on the Bible Law (that is the formal adoption of the books in it). While Catholics and Orthodox Christians hold 46 inspiring books in the Old Testament, Protestants acknowledge only 39 of them. They do not recognize books of which their inspiration was recognized at a later stage in Church's history. As for the New Testament, all churches recognize its 27 books. In addition, not all of them agree on the criteria and principles of biblical interpretation. Churches respond differently to these essential questions : *Who explains ? How to explain ?*

Catholics and Orthodox believe that the living church is the custodian of the Bible, and therefore call for the interpretation of the Bible in the Church, according to the tradition of the Apostles and the Fathers. The Protestants tend to rely on the personal inspiration given by the Holy Spirit to all believers in Baptism.

✓ Reference to Truth:

This is another point of disagreement which is very sensitive. It is about the reference of truth, namely, who is, in the name of Christ the teacher, the authority and decision maker on issues of faith and morality. In the Protestant church, there is no central or unified educational authority, which is why their doctrines of faith and stands regarding moral life often happen to conflict each other. The Catholic Church recognizes the supreme authority of the Ecumenical Council and the Supreme Roman Bishop the Pope. Such authority (under certain conditions) practiced by the Pope is related to matters of faith and moral life. The Orthodox Churches recognize the authority of ecumenical councils²⁶.

26 As the Orthodox Churches only recognize the first seven ecumenical assemblies, they like to define themselves as the "Church of the Seven Councils": Nicaea (325), Constantinople 1 (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople (553), Constantinople 3 (680-681), Nicaea 2 (787). The ancient Eastern Churches (Copts, Syriacs and Armenians) recognize only the first three, and the Assyrian Church only in the first two.

2) The church system

The questions to be thought off here are: What kind of Church Christ wanted? What structure the church would have? What authority assigned to it? What are the services assigned to the church on a permanent and consistent basis?

For these questions, the churches offer different answers according to their interpretation of the Bible and the different traditions of time and space. Thus, throughout history, Christian churches have developed an ecclesiastical model that differs and does not follow a single pattern though time and space. The fact of the matter is that each church was established in a certain geographic area and within a certain people with different cultures. So did the church live, in its own way²⁷ (**10**). Nevertheless, this cultural incarnation has not been resolved for generations without everyone considering the Church as the One Church of Christ and without regarding all churches as their sister churches. Some elements of diversity do not preclude unity of the Church, but rather emphasize its beauty and richness.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) recognized this diversity in concept and development of the ecclesiastical system in the East and West. In the document on the ecumenical movement, we read: "For a few centuries, the churches of the East and the West have followed their own path, yet these Churches were united in the brotherly communion of the faith and the life of the sacraments. In cases where differences in faith or in the ecclesiastical system between churches, the Roman Seat through the Pope would be the main reference of authority with the consent of all²⁸ (**11**). In particular, all Eastern, Orthodox and Catholic churches preserved the episcopate through episcopal ordination, making the church system or ecclesiastical constitution based on the patriarchal or episcopal structure. The bishop has the supreme priesthood, the priests are his assistants, and so are the deacons on the basis of the three levels of priesthood:

²⁷ This is what we call "the cultural incarnation" which involves two movements: the translation of the gospel in multiple cultures on the one hand, and the gospel being read with impact of these cultures on the other.

²⁸ Ecumenical Movement, 14.

bishop, priest and deacon. The bishops believe in the Apostolic Succession and transmit it to their successors when they are granted the degree of bishopric and entrust them Christian Faith. All these Churches were in truthful partnership with one another, through mutual recognition of the apostolic succession, and through the same secrets and faith of Christianity.

Unfortunately, this unity and understanding has been interrupted in more than one stage in the history of the Church. This is not because of the legal church privacy and localization, but because of heretics, schisms and tendencies of separation. It is true that all these churches recognize one law of faith and declare: "We believe in one church, holy, universal, apostolic," but differ on the meanings and applications of these words. The following is a review.

✓ Church Unity:

Churches interpret Church Unity in different ways. The Catholic Church and the Eastern and Orthodox Churches agree that the unity of the Church is based on three fundamental factors, which appear in a central passage in the Acts of the Apostles that affirm: (1) that the faithful were following the teachings of the apostles, (2) the parish participation and (3) the breaking of bread and the prayers (See Acts 2:42). Thus: the unity of faith, the unity of fraternal communion, and the unity of secrets.

Catholics, unlike other churches, explain that this brotherly community has its own visible center through the Bishop of Rome, who preserves the "priority in love" as the Vicar of Christ on earth, emphasizing that Christ is the eternal president of the Church. According to some Anglican theologians, the church is one, but as a tree with many branches. The different churches are the branches of the One Tree (which is Christ). According to Protestants, the unity of the Church is based on the One Christ, the only and infallible chief, because the Church is his only body (cf. Col. 1:18) and therefore does not need heads on earth. The Church priests are merely servants, invited and appointed to provide this service. However, some other Protestants see that the unity of the Church is an unseen unity, God alone knows who belongs to His Church.

✓ Holy:

Churches explain the sanctity of the Church in different ways. Catholics and Orthodox assert that the Church is always sacred, and remains so, even if its children are sinners. Saints and sinners live in the church, and sinners remain members of the church. They are confused and in need of healing and salvation. The Church, for its part, invites them so as to guide and help them. Protestants, however, assert that man is "at the same time, righteous and a sinner," even after baptism, and is in constant need of salvation. For this, the Church is in constant need of reform.

✓ Universal:

The universality of the church is interpreted in different ways as well. For Catholics and Orthodox, the Church is a universal in the sense that it has the perfection of faith and the means of salvation, conveyed to it by Christ. It is also universal meaning that it is sent to all peoples in all times and places. For the Protestant, the Church is a universal, because it brings together all who believe in one God and Trinity and that Jesus is the Son of God and the Universal Savior.

✓ Apostolic:

Finally, the Churches interpret the Apostolic Church in different ways as well. In general, the apostolic mission of the Church means the succession of the apostles, who are the pillars of the Church, and the faithful to their education, the communion, and the judgments of the Church. In particular, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches interpret the apostolic nature in a different way. The Orthodox say that all bishops are equal in power and dignity, because they are all successors of the apostles, and therefore all private and local churches are equal, without being one higher than the other. It is true that there are patriarchs at the head of the churches, but they have only legal authority (ecclesiastical administration) over their area of jurisdiction. The Catholic Church confirms the existence of the succession of Peter within the Apostolic Succession. In other words, as Peter was the head of the apostles, so the bishop of Rome, Peter's successor, was the first among the bishops of the whole church. This priority is a

priority of love and service of course, but also a priority of authority and jurisdiction. To this day, this universal authority remains a bone of contention between the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church. Finally, the Protestants believe that the Church is apostolic as long as it remains faithful to the Gospel and the teaching of the Bible. The ordination or consecration by placing hands on a bishop or on any parish priest is an outward sign of the bond with the apostles. Thus, most of the Protestant churches do not consider the ordination a secret or a consecration, but an appointment.

3) **Congenital life**

It is noted today that the dispute is growing day after day among the churches on the interpretation of Christian ethics and practice. It is true that all churches regard the Ten Commandments and the Gospel as the basis for Christian behavior. However, it is different when we reach practical applications in many areas that we do not find explicit reference to it in Church life. Churches have different solutions, and even contradictory in these cases. . Such conflict is especially evident in the following areas: human life, marital and family life, sexuality, social life.

✓ The Legacy of Life:

In the field of human life, there is no consensus among churches on birth control and abortion. As for abortion, almost all churches oppose it, condemn it as a murder and consider it a grave sin, because life is the property of God and God alone acts on it. Some churches (Anglican and Protestant) allow abortion in some cases of danger, and leave personal conscience responsible for this heavy decision. Some churches oppose the donation of organs and transplants. Other churches accept euthanasia. As for the death sentence, attitudes differ.

✓ Marital life and family:

There are also significant differences between the Christian churches on marital life and family. The number of churches (Protestantism and Anglicanism) in the West which allow gay

marriage is increasing. They bless it, and limit it to the integrity of men and women who profess to be homosexuals. There are churches that allow the use of artificial means of contraception, abortion and artificial insemination through various means. As for divorce, it is known that the Catholic Church is the only one that does not permit divorce, while all other churches, Orthodox and Protestant, accept some possibilities of divorce, which vary greatly from one church to another.

✓ Sexual life:

There are also many differences about sexual life in the field of sex. In particular, the churches view in a different way the virtue of chastity, masturbation, premarital sex, and the sexual relationship between homosexuals.

✓ Social life:

As for social life, some churches instruct their believers regarding the conduct of political, economic, and international relations, and dealing with the good of the earth (the safety of creation)²⁹. Others leave these areas to the personal discretion, conscience and commitment of each believer.

4) Differences in some customs and traditions

A major question to contend with:

Does the difference in customs and traditions contradict the unity of the Church?

Our quick answer is: no. We live in our churches many specific customs and traditions. These traditions and laws of each particular Church, which can be different (and are actually different), but they are not, in themselves, an element of divergence. Every nation, nation or environment accepts Christianity in its entirety, but applies it according to its own culture. This includes habits, language, and expression with some external movements, rituals, artistic and literary expressions, etc. The Second Vatican Council affirms that "the unity

²⁹ In the Catholic Church, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace published in 2004 the Summary of the Church's Social Education. In 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church issued a document on "The Foundations of the Social Concept".

of the Church is not at all contrary to the diversity of the approach and traditions, but that such diversity is an element that increases its beauty and helps it to carry out its mission³⁰." This is echoed in the words of Pope John Paul II: "The legitimate diversity does not at all contradict the unity of the Church, but rather develops its status and contributes generously to the fulfillment of its mission³¹."

✓ Celebration of sacraments:

The way the celebration of the sacraments (which we call the liturgical level) differ from the church to the other, in its structure, content, timing, venues, movements and languages. For example: With regard to baptism with water, it is done by dipping in some churches, and at other times pouring water or sprinkling it. These differences do not affect unity, on the grounds that all churches offer baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, and water is used for this purpose³². The confirmation, anointment or Chrism, it is granted in the Eastern churches immediately after baptism by the serving clergy, whether bishop or priest, while in the Roman Catholic Church, the bishop offers the Sacrament of Confirmation of the faithful at a later age (after 7 or 8 years of age). For the Eucharist, some new churches use fermented bread, while others use Unleavened such as Catholics, Armenians, Lutherans, and Anglican, etc. It is also acceptable to many churches to grant communion on the both forms (consecrated bread and wine) or in one (only bread). There is a diversity in the way the Eucharist is kept and placed, from one church to another: the house of the Eucharist, in a chapel, or in a dove-shaped vessel hanging over the temple. Concerning repentance, it is celebrated collectively or individually, in a confession chair or in a room adjacent to the church, or elsewhere (if necessary).

30 Ecumenical Movement, 16.

31 To be one, 50.

32 For this reason, churches do not consider Jehovah's Witnesses a Christian group, because they do not believe in the Holy Trinity according to the teachings of Jesus Christ. We can also note that Baptists (and others) give baptism only to adults, not to children, while all other churches give baptism for children.

✓ Priesthood

For the priesthood, following the law of the Latin Catholic Church, is granted only to the men who accept celibacy, while the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Orthodox accept the granting of the priesthood to married men. Bishops are chosen from among the celibate priests and monks. Marriages and weddings are celebrated in different ways in different churches.

✓ Popular piety and canonic art and others:

The expressions of popular piety is different: This includes prayers, movements, sign of the cross, kneeling or bending or kissing, icons, spiritual retreats, religious marches, fasting, etc.

The diversity of sacred art (churches, cathedrals, basilicas, crosses, Images, drawings, statues), they reflect the cultures of different peoples. There is also a variety of music and liturgical songs: some churches use musical instruments, others do not. These are not incompatible with the unity of the Church.

Arab Christians: *Citizens Not Minorities*

Prof. Dr. Nasser Rabbat
Aga Khan Professor of
Islamic Architecture
Massachusetts Institute of
Technology, Cambridge, MA



The reactions of Arab Muslim commentators to the last slew of hate crimes against Arab Christians in countries like Egypt and Iraq have been almost without exception beneath the gravity of the situation. Despite the variety of voices and opinions, most commentators fall back on the old and tired arguments of denial of responsibility and blame of others, usually external enemies either of the nation or of Islam.

Very few try to explain the crimes within the local context in which they were committed. Even fewer are those who see them in relation to their most direct and disquieting cause: the fading away of civil rights under the yoke of dictatorial regimes, military occupation, militant sectarianism, and disintegrating social fabrics.

Most outrageous is the reaction of the regimes' apologists. They contend that the regimes bear no responsibility for any aspect of the crimes committed under their usually watchful eyes and exacting security apparatus. Instead, the regimes are said to have been doing their best to protect the Christian minorities. They have even been granting these same minorities more privileges than before. All attempts to blame them either directly or indirectly for what is happening are therefore unwarranted.

The most ridiculous denial came from two high-level spokespersons for governments in these countries where atrocities take place. They both rejected out of hand any allusion to the fact that the government's excessive displays of Islamicity in its policies, media, and overall image may have played a role in the Islamic public's lukewarm condemnations of the crimes against the Christians if not in encouraging the criminals in the first place. For example, in Egypt, one of these high-level officials, usually careful in presenting his evidence, used the preposterous argument that the government is in fact partial to the Christians. As proof he pointed out that the government in the last ten years has "allowed" the Christians to build 150 new churches, as if building churches is a gift of the regime not a right of the citizens. He, moreover, chose to overlook the fact that 120000 new mosques were erected, with or without permits, during the same period in Egypt.

The second group is that of the conspiracy theorists. Most of them point to Israel as the real perpetrator of these crimes. Israel, they rightly reason, has set the stage for the rise of demands for religious states in the Arab world by insisting on its Jewishness as the basis of its statehood. Therefore, Israel is the premier potential beneficiary from any conflict that would split the Arabs into hostile factions so that its aberrant model of exclusive Jewish state can be seen as the norm in a region divided into ethnic, sectarian, or religious states. Since the hate crimes against Christians (and also those against Shi'ites, Sunnis, and Yazidis in Iraq) seem to lead in that direction, it follows that Israel is the most probable culprit, although of course there has been no material evidence of its involvement in the last few years' crimes.

Other conspiracy theorists propose Iran, the United States, or a sinister combination of the secret services of all three nations in addition to some Arab collaborators, which are supposed to execute the crimes either directly through secret agents or through naïve and angry young men who are manipulated by infiltrators. Of course the readiness of those recruited local angry men to kill their fellow citizens is never seen as an alarming phenomenon in and by itself. It is enough to lay the blame on the alleged foreign conspirators and cast the locals as misguided or brainwashed fringe groups.

The largest group of commentators, unsurprisingly, is that of the Islamic apologists. They all insist that "Islam" is innocent of the atrocities committed in its name by all the criminal organizations currently operating across the Islamic world from Morocco to Afghanistan that use Islamic names and Qur'anic quotations to justify their hideous acts. This argument is very problematic and hard to sustain, for who holds the legal right to represent "Islam" and deny other claimants such rights of representation? Why should the assertion by an Islamic faction that Islam is blameless be more correct than the contention of another faction that it is killing in the name of Islam? Who is the judge or the arbiter, and on what authority? These are old and unresolved questions. They go back to the beginning of Islam. Since the death of the Prophet in 632 C.E., Muslims in fact have never unanimously accepted one authority to represent them or to exclusively speak in their name or the name of Islam.

Historically, there have been many compelling examples that would support the claim that Christians have been collectively persecuted under Islamic rule, sometimes by angry mobs fired up by a real or perceived insult to Islam or Muslims, but at other times by the Islamic authorities themselves. Of course there have also been many examples of the opposite: Christian communities prospering under Islamic rule and living in harmony with their Muslim neighbors. The mere fact that Christian communities have survived for 1500 years under Islamic rule in contradistinction to the elimination of all Islamic communities from Medieval Europe is itself a proof of a higher level of tolerance of difference among medieval Islamic authorities than Western ones. But those were the medieval times, when regimes represented religions and acted in their names. Islamic regimes treated their non-Muslim subjects according to their understanding of Islamic law. They tolerated them, considered them defended minorities (*dhimmis*), taxed them higher than Muslim subjects (*jizya*), and occasionally exploited their weaknesses or took out their wrath against them. Christian European regimes, on the other hand, just eliminated or exiled their non-Christian subjects or converted them under duress.

Things, however, changed with the rise of modern states. Subjects became citizens and civil rights became universal law. Modern states too acquired a different mandate: they are supposed to represent the interests and respect and defend the civil rights of all of their citizens irrespective of their religion, sect,

or ethnicity. They have no business meddling in their religion. Nor do citizens have any rights to discriminate against other citizens because of their religion. Of course, in real life citizens discriminate against other citizens for a variety of reasons. But the state and the culture at large have a duty to punish and admonish all outward manifestations of such discrimination and to try to change the dominant discourse of discrimination through education.

This is the missing dimension in the Arab reactions to hate crimes today. Instead of debating whether this side or that is to blame or to exonerate, commentators should stress the direct link between the preponderance of hate crimes and the unpardonable failure of both modern Arab state and contemporary Arabic culture to uphold the principle of citizenship as the only measure to treat anyone, whether he/she belongs to a minority or a majority.

An outsider's view:

RELIGIOUS CHART AND DIALOGUE IN NABLUS

*Dr. Kian Reme
Centre for Interreligious
Dialogue
Stavanger, Norway*



Stavanger, Norway, 2017

I. Background

Centre for Interreligious Dialogue Stavanger (KdS) has from the start in 2012 assisted Stavanger Municipality in its relations with Stavanger's two official twin cities in the Middle East: Netanya in Israel and Nablus in Palestine. We have on two occasions participated in municipal delegations to the two cities, the last time in 2014.

I have as manager of KdS been on a short study visit to both cities in April 2017, where the main purpose has been to get an overview of the «religious scene» in the two cities, and especially local experiences with interfaith dialogue. This small study relating to Nablus will hopefully contribute to a broader understanding of the importance of and relations between religions in our twin city, thereby deepening the understanding of cultural and religious aspects of life in Nablus. A parallel study from Netanya is available.

The main article is in Norwegian. This English version has been presented to the participants in the interviews.

II. About Nablus

Nablus is situated north on the West Bank and competes with al-Khalil (Hebron) in the south on which is the biggest city after al-Quds (Jerusalem). Nablus has remains after original settlement dating back to

around 4500 BC. Just southeast of present day Nablus, the ancient city **Shechem** was situated, which was a political and religious centre in Canaan, and which is referred to many places in the Bible. Here we find the Tomb of Joseph and Jacob's Well, both between Shechem and village Sykar (in Arabic: Askar). The Romans expanded city building west of Shechem and gave it the name *Flavia Neapolis* in year 72 AC. 'Nablus' is the Arabic form of the Greek 'Neapolis' – meaning 'the new city'.

The great mosque in the centre of Nablus was previously a church, the Basilica of Justinian, but was reconstructed as a mosque after Salah Eddin conquered the city from the Crusaders in 1187.

The city was occupied by Israel during the Six Day War of 1967.

Present day Nablus has around 200 000 inhabitants, including more than 30 000 refugees from Israel in 1948, living in four refugee camps.

Nablus is predominantly a Moslem city – more than 99% of the population are Moslems. In addition, we find two other religions in Nablus with a long historic presence in the city: Around 400 Samaritans, going back to the eighth century BC, and 500 Christians. The Christian have been here since Jesus met the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well almost two thousand years ago.

III. Moslems

Abu Islam is perhaps the most influential Moslem leader in Nablus. I made an interview with him already in 1990 for our Twin City Magazine, and he met our bishop Erling with a large group of church ministers from the Stavanger diocese in 2013, where he participated in a dialogue session together with Christians and Samaritans at Jacob's Well in Nablus.

Most *Nabulsis* (inhabitants of Nablus) are Moslems. In addition, around 700 of the inhabitants are Christians and around 400 are Samaritans. Originally, there was also a Jewish congregation in Nablus. Through the history of Palestine there were a Palestinian Jewish community integrated in our societies, in many towns and cities, including Nablus.

The Zionist endeavour to create a separate Jewish state based on immigration unfortunately created problems. After disturbances and violence in 1929, which among other things resulted in a massacre of Jews in Hebron, the Jews in Nablus and many other cities, towns and villages moved out. Unfortunately we therefore lost one of the four historic religions in Nablus».



1 - Abu Islam: my host in Nablus

The main problem here is not frictions between religious groups. Here, we are still proud over the good relations between Moslems, Christians and Samaritans. The main problem we experience is American and European politics in this area of the world, with a one-sided support for the state of Israel, and the lack of initiatives to end the illegal occupation and the extension of the illegal colonies».

The main values are common for religions, even if there are differences in teachings, religious practices and dogmatic. But these are details!

I am a religious human being and a Moslem since I was raised in a religious atmosphere influenced by Islam. Others were influenced by Samaritan or Christian faith. But still, we are all One. We are one people living in the same realities, the same occupation, the same daily challenges».

Nobody has the right to enforce his own belief on others. Force is not allowed in Islam. A baker and a doctor are different and have different tasks, but they are both created by the same God. Different background and experiences create differences in faith and thinking. But still, it is what we can contribute with together which is the important thing. God does not separate us».

IV. Samaritans

There are only around 800 Samaritans living today, half of them here on the Gerizim Mountain above Nablus, and the rest living in Holon in Israel. They have all Israeli citizenship and have had the right to carry Israeli passports since 1967. The PLO has also secured the Samaritans representation in the

PNC (Palestinian National Council).and a seat in the legislative body PLC (Palestinian Legislative Council).

After the downfall of the twelve-tribe kingdom of David and his son Salomon in 920 BC, Jerusalem became the centre in Judah (the two-tribe kingdom), while Sebastia and Gerizim became the centre in the kingdom known as 'Israel' (the ten-tribe kingdom). Juda and Jerusalem was in the course of history the starting point of what we know as Judaism.

In 722 BC, the ten-tribe kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians, and large parts of the people were forced into exile, - while other people were forcefully transferred to Israel. This is the starting point for animosity and strife between Jews and Samaritans, where the Jews considered the Samaritans as heretics and 'unclean' (ref: descriptions of this in parts of the New Testament).

Today the Samaritans in Nablus have a synagogue both in the centre of the city, as well as on the top of the Gerizim Mountain. They consider only the Pentateuch as their Holy Scripture: «We are so few, so we don't need more than the books of Moses!», as one Samaritan told me. The children are taught Arabic as their daily language, as well as the ancient Hebrew, which is the language of prayer and liturgy.



2 – Prayers I attended with the Samaritans

Husney Wasef is a Samaritan priest, an author and manager of the Samaritan museum on the top of the holy mountain.

We live together – in a broad popular community with different religions.

We Samaritans are Nabulsi (inhabitants of Nablus) – but not

Palestinians. And we are Israelites, not Israelis. ('Israelites' is the term used for inhabitants of the ancient Israel, while 'Israelis' is the term used for inhabitants of the present state of Israel.)



3 Samaritan priest Husney Wasef

Some say that we moved up from the city of Nablus due to pressure from the Moslems. That is not true. We have always lived both in the city and on our holy mountain Gerizim. During the first Intifada most of us moved up to the mountain due to the fighting and unrest in the city between the Palestinians and the Israeli occupation force.

We all work in Nablus, we attend each other's fiests and celebrations and ceremonies. In Nablus, we have a strong tradition of supporting each other and being proud of the diversity between Moslems, Christians and Samaritans. We share good days as well as bad days».

In the Oslo 2 – accord, the parties divided the West Bank in A-, B- and C-areas: In the A-areas there is a form of self-determination including security, in the B-areas the Israeli occupation authorities maintain security directly, while they keep full control of both security and civil matters in the C-areas, which contain more than 60% of the West Bank. The original aim that the A-areas gradually would expand to all of the West Bank has not been carried out.

The occupation authorities does not like this shared community, and they try to break it up. They have made our holy mountain to a C-area. We consider this to be a criminal act. And they prevent especially Moslems from participating in our ceremonies.

We have been here for 3 500 years!

We are 'the good Samaritan' known from the Bible. Jesus met the Samaritan woman at our well 2000 years ago, here in Nablus. And now they deny us access to our holy mountain and they are making archaeological excavations on our holy grounds. We are only allowed access three times a year: At Easter, Pentecost and the Fiest of the Tabernacle. This is discrimination and a criminal act».

We Samaritans long for peace and reconciliation. To achieve this, we need two states. Occupation and illegal colonies does not bring peace. We are disappointed by the USA and Europe. They choose their own weapon industry before peace and reconciliation».

V. Christians

Meeting Abuna Leonius from the Greek Orthodox congregation, Aziz Ibrahim from St Philip – the Anglican congregation and Abuna Yousef from the Greek Catholic congregation



4 - Christian priests in Nablus

There are four different denominations and the eight churches in Nablus: The Greek Catholic congregation has one church in Rafidiya, with around 30 members. Abuna Yousef (to the right) has been a priest in Nablus since the seventies, and he is 77 years old.

The Greek Orthodox congregation consists of four churches: One in the Old City, two churches in Rafidiya – one new and one built around 1500 - and the church at Jacob's Well, where his colleague Abuna Stinius is priest, architect, church builder and iconography.

Abuna Leonius (to the left) has been here for 3 years, and is a Greek national raised in Jerusalem where he also received his theological education. The Episcopal (Anglican) congregation has two churches in Nablus: St Philip in the Old City and a new church in Rafidiya. Aziz Ibrahim has been a priest in Nablus for 10 years.

In addition there is a Roman-Catholic congregation in Nablus with their church in Rafidiya.

✓ **Aziz Ibrahim:**

There are now around 600 Christians in Nablus. The last 40 years we have experienced that very many have left. Previously they left for western countries; now most of those who leave go to Jordan.

✓ **Abuna Yousef:**

In 1984 there were around 2 500 Christians in Nablus. At that time we had 150 members in our congregation – now we are only 30. The main reason for the exodus is related to the political situation: Occupation, intifada and violence. In addition, unemployment plays a significant part. When young people between 20 and 35 cannot find work, they choose to emigrate. Many Moslems leave too, especially to Jordan, but the Christian families are smaller and more mobile, so they often find it easier to emigrate.

VI. Cooperation and tolerance:
«The Church meeting the Mosque»

✓ **Abuna Yousef:**

The big picture in Nablus and Palestine is mutual respect and tolerance between Christians and Moslems – in Nablus also including the Samaritans. But the regional situation often plays a role: During the Balkan war in 1860-62 strong anti-Christian feelings occurred, even in Nablus, and many Christians at the time chose to emigrate.

✓ **Abuna Leonius:**

Presently we have some problems in the schools regarding harassment of Christian pupils. Even though very few kids are involved, it creates some bad feelings.

1) Aziz Ibrahim:

Of course we can find individuals and small groups who are more extreme among the Moslems. We find this in all majority communities all over the world. Again, the big picture is this:

- 90% of the Moslems in Nablus are OK and accept us with no problems, even if they are not personally committed to or engaged in dialogue activities.
- 5% are fundamentalists and have a low tolerance of others.
- And 5% are very open minded and committed to activities of dialogue and cooperation. They are actively promoting good relations.

The last years we have actively and systematically worked to reach the 90%. Together with Abu Islam (interview below), we have organized a **permanent dialogue forum** between Christians and Moslems. We meet here in St Philip Church once a month. This forum is led by Abu Islam and Aziz Ibrahim. The forum is for priests and imams, and it is not unusual that 40 or 50 imams participate. While maybe 1 of 40 imams decline to participate in a church with the cross on the roof, - all the others attend. I believe this is a representative picture of the relations between Moslems and Christians in Nablus».

Outside of Nablus the situation can be more complicated. There are a few villages dominated by Hamas where it is not safe for Christians. But most of the Hamas people are also tolerant and create no problems for us. Some time ago we organized a common bus trip to Bethlehem and Hebron, with forty imams and two priests in the bus! Such common activities are important to build trust, knowledge and friendship.

2) **Aziz Ibrahim:**

Our dialogue is not on dogmatic issues. We acknowledge that we have differences in our faith, and respect each other's right to their own beliefs. In our dialogue, we deal with common challenges, difficult individual issues that might occur, and our common resistance against the occupation based on the principles of non-violence.

An example of such joint resistance: A small village outside Nablus is surrounded by illegal colonies. In cooperation the World Council of Churches and their program for protective presence, we launched a joint campaign between Moslems and Christians to protect the village and stop the harassment from the settlers. After some good media reports the harassment stopped – at least for a period.

3) **Abuna Leonius:**

The issues for dialogue in our meetings deal with different topics:

- a) School challenges
- b) Joint campaigns against the occupation
- c) Non-violence
- d) Friendship and mutual respect.

4) **Abuna Yousef:**

Our dialogue is an important contribution to solve problems even outside Nablus. Some years back there were some Moslem groups in Israel who made strong statements against Christians, as a reaction against an American pastor who burned the Quran on camera. I was contacted by my colleague in Nazareth, and discussed the problem with several imams in Nablus, asking them to try to influence their colleagues in Nazareth. They managed to stop these negative manifestations. Without mutual trust and good relations, such efforts to solve difficult situations would not have been possible.

Media operates often very destructive with 'fake news': In 1967 the BBC reported 'ethnic cleansing in the Christian quarter in Nablus'. First of all: There is no Christian quarter in Nablus. We live side by side. Secondly, there were no conflicts or unrest at all between Christians and Moslems. We were both victims of the Israeli invasion and occupation of the West Bank in 1967. Most probably, the Israeli propaganda apparatus planted such fake news to create an image that the Israeli occupation 'helped' the Christians. This is classic 'divide-and-rule'-tactics that occupation forces through history have performed.

The Americans are promoting a crusade, and we have to pay the price. They try to split Moslems and Christians. Our dialogue efforts are extremely important to push back such destructive force.

5) **Aziz Ibrahim:**

A last example of good dialogue through practical action is celebrating *Day of the Light*.

Every Saturday before Easter morning we celebrate "Day of the Light". We light candles in the Holy Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem (the Holy Sepulchre). Then we bring this flame with us and light it in all our eight churches in Nablus. In this ceremony many participate: Moslem leaders, the mayor and the governor, imams and many other non-Christians, who actively perform the lighting of our candles. This is interfaith dialogue in practice»!

VII. Wahhabism: *The ideology of the desert*

The vast majority of Moslems are decent and open minded people who recognize and accept the faith of others. But the dangerous and chaotic situation in the region has also a local contagious effect, even though it is small.

There are individuals in Nablus that have been influenced by wahhabism. Wahhabism is the ideology of the desert and is the leading version of Islam in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism does not recognize other believers, not even other Moslems, who are described as infidels. This fascist ideology is clearly in contradiction with Islam.

Media create many problems between us, they love split and divisions. The Palestinian Government and the Minister of Religion have been trying to stop this tendency by claiming that “Everything is OK!” But it is not that simple.

Wahhabism is one of the faces of the Salafists. Wahhabism and Salafism have very little support among the Moslems of Palestine. But there are some small and isolated groups who are trying to create problems. My concern is that we must stop this tendency in birth. Wahhabism is a cancer that should not be allowed to grow. But we must deal with them through words and enlightenment, not by violence.

VIII. Interreligious cooperation

Moslems and Christians, Samaritans and Jews are all called by the One God to follow the basic ethical values that are common to us. As the Holy Quran says: “*No one is a true believer before he wishes for his brother the same that he wishes for himself.*” The same principles apply also for other religions. The revelation from God for all of us is love and justice».

In Nablus, we have established a common dialogue forum for Christians and Moslems. In this, I cooperate closely with Aziz Ibrahim from the Anglican congregation. It is important that we meet. The Christians are naturally worried about what is happening in the region, especially concerning the tragic development in Syria and Iraq. Interreligious dialogue in this context is very important.

We visit each other during our feasts: Moslems greet the Christians in their Easter celebrations now coming up. We participate as guests in the churches, in the same way that Christians and Samaritans are guests in our mosques during Eid and other religious celebrations. So we have very good relations between us.

Abu Islam also participates in interfaith dialogue on a national level, especially between Christians and Muslims.

Al-Liqa' ("Encounter") is a very important forum for dialogue and cooperation. Al-Liqa' - is an interfaith dialogue centre in Bethlehem established in the eighties by the Greek Catholic philosopher Gerios Khoury. I have written several articles in the magazine "al-Liqa' Journal". This interfaith dialogue is based on the principle that we are one people under one God. We experience the same occupation. Therefore, unity especially between Christians and Moslems is decisively important.

IX. On politics

I belong to Fateh and I have been working for a peaceful solution based on two independent states. But I am disappointed by the development, also within Fateh. We need to develop a more creative ideology, not just repeating slogans from the past.

The setbacks for the peace process and especially the devastating growth of settler activities have led to too many destructive ideas, and opens up for violence. Violence leads nowhere. All believers must be against violence».

The Israelis have two problems:

- 1) First of all, there are 6.5 million Palestinians between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. And we will not be driven away – not again. Even though many Palestinians emigrate, the Palestinian population is growing steadily.

- 2) Secondly, the immigration to Israel has stopped. There are more Jews in the USA than in Israel, and they prefer to drive

Cadillac in New York instead of Merkava (Israeli tank) in Palestine. If the Israelis consider this carefully, they will find that they need a Palestinian state just as much as the Palestinian people need their state

X. Reflections Nablus

✓ *Political dialogue versus interfaith dialogue*

Whether in Palestine or in Israel, the term «dialogue» is first associated with politics: The so called 'Peace Process' and negotiations for a political solution between the two people. Many Israelis are still in favour of political dialogue and negotiations. Among the Palestinians, there is a more sceptical or hostile attitude to the political 'dialogue': They experience a need for concrete changes on the ground and an end of the occupation. While talks and dialogue and negotiations are on-going, Israel continues to build illegal colonies. When political dialogue replaces real changes, it becomes repressive.

Interfaith dialogue on the other hand has a strong support in Nablus.

In my conversation with Abu Islam, he regrets the fact that Nablus lost their fourth religion, which was an integrated part of the city's life and history: The Jewish community, who left Nablus after acts of violence and massacres in Hebron in the end of the twenties.

I recognize Abu Islam's attitude on this issue from many visits in Nablus and Palestine since 1984: The pride and joy, especially among Moslems, relating to the religious and cultural magnitude, - that the followers of several religions through history have lived together, side by side as good neighbours.

The interfaith dialogue, especially between Moslems and Christians, is very encouraging, and is much more stable and better organized than I was aware of before this study visit. On previous visits where religion and interfaith dialogue has been a topic, I usually met Moslems, Samaritans and Christians together. This time, I wanted to meet them separately, to

listen to nuances particularly from the smaller religious groups: The Samaritans and the Christians.

All those I interviewed, and especially the priests and Abu Islam, described the ‘big picture’: Good relations, cooperation, mutual respect, dialogue and unity as a people. At the same time, Abu Islam also contributed with critical remarks on a small tendency among some Moslems being influenced by Saudi Wahhabism. This concurs with some observations I made on the street: In the course of three days, I observed 8-10 women wearing niqab. Some years back, I only observed one or two, and in the eighties and nineties I never saw this.

It is important that Abu Islam commented on this small tendency and expressed his concern. At the same time, it is more important to underline and emphasise the big picture: Mutual respect, recognition and interfaith dialogue.

In Stavanger, Christian ministers and Moslem imams meet regularly four times a year. Our interfaith dialogue centre initiated this in 2016. It is remarkable that in Nablus – where the Christians constitute a much smaller portion of the inhabitants than the Moslems in Stavanger do – there have been regular sessions of interfaith dialogue for a much longer period of time, and with a much higher frequency. It is quite impressive to listen to the same description of these activities in separate meetings both from Abu Islam and from the Christian priests.

We can learn quite a lot from this local Nabulsi custom: That Christian churches invite Moslems and Samaritans to active participation by lighting candles at Easter, at *the Day of the Light*. They are not only guests, - they are what we might call “guest participants”. As one of the priests put it: “*This is interfaith dialogue in practice*”.

The interfaith dialogue centre in Stavanger and other places in Norway practice similar symbolic acts. Interfaith peace concerts and peace meals are examples of such a dialogue practice. Further down the road, it is important that such practices not only mobilize those with a special interest, but is integrated in the life of our churches, our mosques and the arenas of other religions and life stands.

AL- Liqa' Center

“Al-Liqa” is the Arabic word for “Encounter”. It was here, in The Holy Land, that the great Encounter between God and man took place, an Encounter enabling all peoples to communicate with each other. In the spirit of this Encounter, a local interfaith initiative led to the establishment of “Al-Liqa Center”, a unique place of research, study and dialogue on the religious and cultural traditions, and daily life of the people of the Holy Land and the region.

This Center, which was established in 1982 by a number of Palestinian Muslim and Christian academic and religious leaders, has created a lively dialogue and has fostered understanding between the people of these two religions, Christianity and Islam, and between them and Judaism. In addition, the Center has helped to define the role of the local church and to formulate a Contextualized Theology.

The program includes interfaith and cultural dialogue, Palestinian Contextualized Theology, youth activities, international activities, and the publication of journals, newsletters, books and occasional papers.

Board of Trustees

Patriarch Michael Sabbah
(Ph. D. /President)

Dr. Joseph Zaknoun
(Ph.D. / Director)

Bishop Dr. Atallah Hanna
(Ph.D.)

Prof. Thiab Ayyoush
(Ph.D.)

Fr. Dr. Rafiq Khoury
(Ph.D.)

Bishop Dr. Munib Younan
(Ph. D.)

Dr. Adnan Musallam
(Ph.D.)

Dr. Peter Qumri
(M.D.)

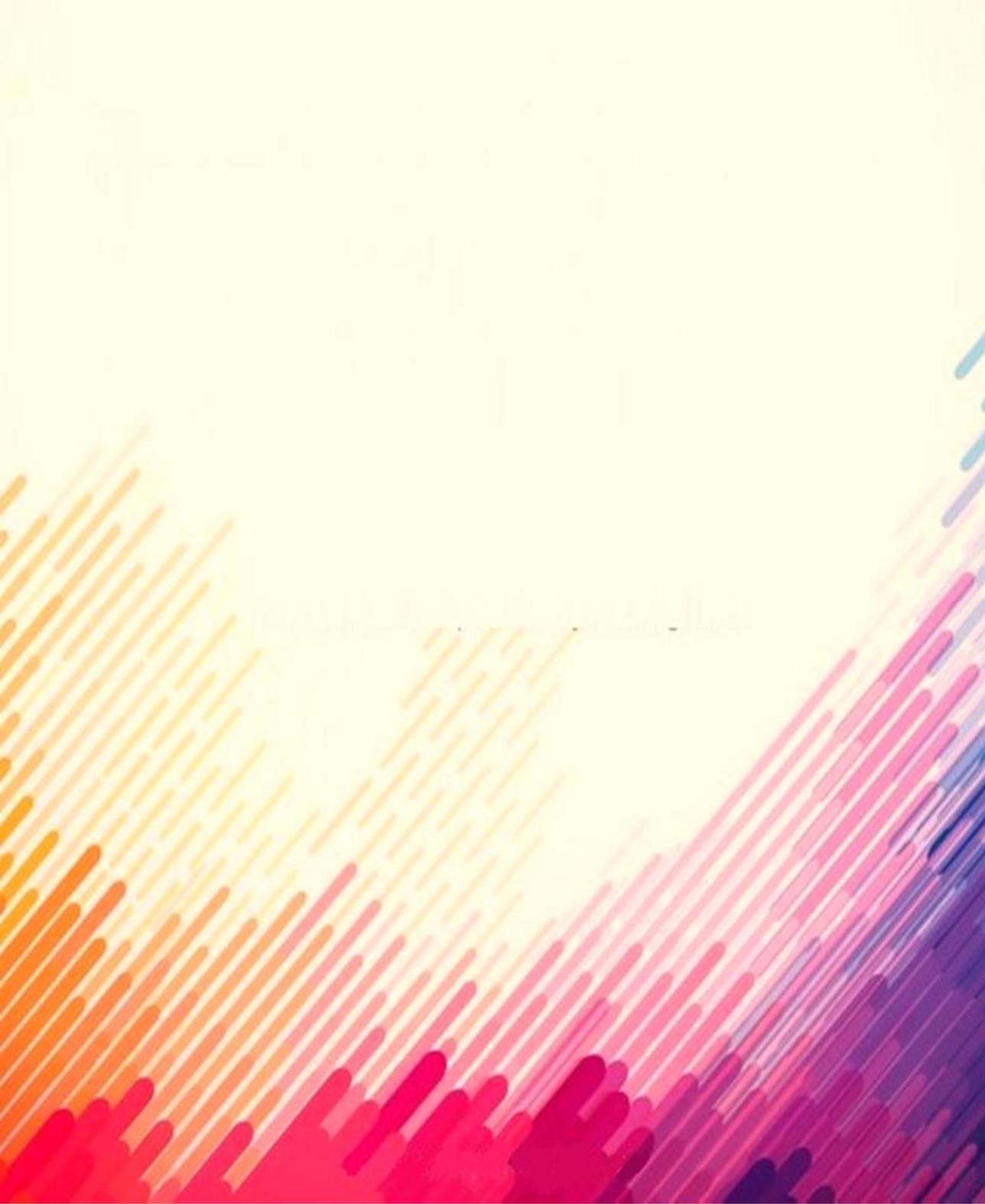
Mr. Lawrence Sammour
(B.A.)

Mr. Mousa Darwish
(M.A.)

Mrs. Hanadi Sudah Younan
(M.A.)

Miss Makarem Awad
(B.A.)

All correspondence and inquiries should be directed to the Editor,
Email: al-liqa@p-ol.com Website: www.al-liqacenter.org.ps
Tel: +972-2-2742321 / +972-2-2750134 Fax: +972-2-2750133
Bethlehem, Palestine



All correspondence and inquiries should be directed to the Editor,
Email: al-liqa@p-ol.com Website: www.al-liqacenter.org.ps
Tel: +972-2-2742321 / +972-2-2750134 Fax: +972-2-2750133
Bethlehem, Palestine