

booklets

**ISLAM:
The crescent moon... waxing**



159

Jaume Flaquer

ISLAM: THE CRESCENT MOON... WAXING

Jaume Flaquer, sj.

1. ISLAM, WHERE ARE YOU HEADING?	3
2. WHAT TO DO TODAY WITH ISLAMIC LAW?	6
3. ISLAM, A PLURALIST WORLD	11
4. THE GRAN SCHISM: SUNNI AND SHIA	17
5. THE MYSTICISM OF EVERYDAY ISLAM	21
6. THE ARAB CIVIL WAR	25
7. MUCH REMAINS TO BE DONE	28
GLOSSARY	32
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION	32

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Publisher: CRISTIANISME I JUSTÍCIA - Roger de Llúria 13 - 08010 Barcelona
+34 93 317 23 38 - info@fespinal.com - www.cristianismeijusticia.net
Printed by: Ediciones Rondas S.L. - Legal deposit: B 7639-2016
ISBN: 978-84-9730-373-6 - ISSN: 2014-6566 - ISSN (virtual edition): 2014-6574
Editor: Anna Pérez i Mir - Translated by Joseph Owens
Cover illustration: Roger Torres - Layout: Pilar Rubio Tugas
Printed on ecological paper and recycled cardboard - March 2016

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1. ISLAM, WHERE ARE YOU HEADING?

Islam, the religion of the crescent moon, is expanding in numbers, and it is everywhere present in the mass media. Islam is in turmoil, however, engaged in a profound internal debate where deadly weapons are the only arguments used by some and where words are like razor-sharp swords. This debate is an ideological civil war which involves an infinity of political, social, and economic components.

Contrary to what we may think, Islam is not waging a war against the West. Rather, it is primarily engaged in an internal debate about how Muslims and majority Muslim societies should live in the 21st century. Consequently, even though religious minorities in the Arab world are sorely oppressed and even persecuted, most of the victims of terrorism are Muslims. In the same way that Europe is experiencing an identity crisis and asking itself what it is and what it wants to be—and this independently of the desire of the immigrant Muslim population to practice its religion openly—so Islam as a civilization is experiencing an ideological crisis even as it expands greatly in numbers—and this independently of what is happening in the Western world. The foreign policies of the West are no doubt influencing and short-

circuiting these intra-Islamic debates, as can be seen in the disastrous consequences of the Iraq war, but the real dilemma is an internal one. Muslims feel impelled not only to respond to modernity but to create their own version of it so that it is not experienced simply as westernization.

The main question, then, is what to do today with medieval Islamic law in social contexts that are becoming more pluralist and more interrelated with global forces. This question of Islamic law has political, juridical, and social aspects and is also conditioned by economic factors. However, this question must be given a religious answer before it will be calmly accepted by a majority of the Islamic community. Given the weight of the religious component in these countries, the long tradition must be reinterpreted

in a way that is inspired by faith and not just agnosticism or secular criticism. This is the only way that will allow Islam to assume a modernity that is more than just the construction of skyscrapers and the adoption of the most advanced technology, as is happening in the Gulf states.

Saying «The Islamic State is not Islam» is not really a solution

The debate is essentially an intra-Islamic one. The failed Arab Springs sprang up when these Middle Eastern societies stopped projecting all the blame for their underdevelopment on the colonial epoch and U.S. interventions. Unable to deny their own share of the blame, the Arab world asked itself: what if the situation in which we find ourselves is mainly of our own making? What if the ones most responsible are our own leaders? Societies with dictatorial regimes tend to lapse into a psychological infirmity which projects the societies' own deficiencies and difficulties outward, onto others. Islam will be able to reform itself only to the extent that it begins to acknowledge that it has a problem and that it must solve the problem itself. That is why the endless declarations of Muslim leaders condemning the terrorist attacks and proclaiming that «Islam is peace» sound so empty to the ears of well-intentioned non-Muslims, even when the declarations are sincere. Stating that the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda is not truly Islamic

does not even begin to move toward the solution.

The philosopher Abdennour Bidar, who resides in France, recently wrote one of the most truthful statements I have ever read:

Dear Muslim World,

I am one of your far-off sons who view you from outside. [...] And what do I see? [...] I see you giving birth to a monster that presumes to call itself the Islamic State. [...] And what have you to say to this monster? You shout: «That is not me! That is not Islam!» You refuse to accept that the crimes of this monster are committed in your name. You oppose the monster's usurpation of your identity, and certainly you are right in your opposition. [...] But that is simply not enough! [...] You are content simply with expressing your indignation, but this moment would have been a truly historic occasion for radically questioning your own state of being. Instead of accepting your responsibility, you make accusations: «You Westerners and everyone who hates Islam, stop associating us with that monster! Terrorism is not Islam. That is not authentic Islam; the true Islam that wants peace, not war!» [...] Is all this the fault of the West? How much precious time are you going to keep wasting, my dear Muslim world, with this stupid accusation which you don't believe yourself and behind which you hide in order to keep lying to yourself? It is now time for you to recognize that you have been incapable, especially

since the 18th century, of responding to the challenge of the West, either because you have childishly and lethally taken refuge in the past with the obscurantist regression of Wahhabism, which continues to wreak havoc everywhere within your border—a Wahhabism that you propagate from the holy places of Saudi Arabia like a cancer coming from your very heart—or because you have followed the worst aspects of the West, making an idol of nationalism or producing a modernism that is a caricature of modernity. I want to talk with you about all that technological development which clashes with

the archaic religiosity that turns your super-wealthy Gulf state «elites» into complacent victims suffering from a worldwide disease: worship of the god money. What is admirable about you today, my friend? What do you have left that is able to arouse the respect of other peoples and other civilizations of the earth? [...] Who are your Mandelas? Who are your Gandhis? Who are your Aung San Suu Kyis? Where are the great thinkers whose books should be read around the world, as in those times when Arab philosophers and mathematicians were renowned from India to Spain?

2. WHAT TO DO TODAY WITH ISLAMIC LAW?

The main problem confronting Islam today is identical to the force that contributed to its splendor in the Middle Ages: Islamic law. It was Islamic law above all that gave Muslim civilization the juridical stability that was essential for every type of economic, social, and cultural development.

2.1. Islamic law: the key to past success but a drag on present progress

The development of law derived from revelation placed a limit on autocratic arbitrariness in juridical matters. This distinguished early Islamic society from other societies. If God had revealed the law, then caliph, king, and sultan were all subject to the law; they only power they had was interpreting the law (which was no small power!). Consequently, the subjects of the caliphate at least knew the rules of play, even if they were not always in agreement, and they could be confident that the ruler would not change the rules at his whim. This confidence brought about the stability that was necessary for economic progress and thus contributed to the development of the arts and sciences.

Today, however, Islamic law constitutes a great limitation in a world that has other coordinates. In some countries it is still applied integrally, and in most countries it serves at least as the source of matrimonial legislation and as the inspiration for certain laws of the penal code. In Morocco, for example, homosexuality is punished with prison but not with the death penalty. Leaving the Muslim faith and proselytizing (by a religion other than Islam) are condemned, but people are not killed for those offenses. Likewise, stoning of adulterers no longer appears in the legislation.

2.2. Law as a «way» that leads to salvation

But what is Islamic law? The first surprise is that you cannot go to any

bookstore and buy a copy of it! In a certain sense, Islamic law does not exist as such; rather, it is a theoretical concept. As Pakistani reformer Fazlur Rahman stressed, it is necessary to distinguish Islamic law (*sharia*) and juridical codes (*fiqh*). What we can actually hold in our hands are the codes, especially those of the 9th and 10th centuries, which attempted to give concrete form to the divine law that was revealed. But those codes already involve juridical interpretation! They are not the revealed law in itself. It is for this reason that Islamic reformers are calling for a reopening of the doors of juridical interpretation which will allow Muslims to return to the Quran and elaborate legislation adapted to the present time. In other words, although the revealed law may be immutable, the juridical formulation can never be such. For example, the commandment «You shall not kill» is a basic principle, but then the state must determine whether there are exceptions or attenuating circumstances, and what their punishments are for those who violate the principle.

Islamic law should be conceived as a set of principles which jurists need to discern in order to apply them concretely to each time and space. Etymologically, the word *sharia* means «path that leads to a source of water.» Accordingly, *sharia* is not so much a law as the set of principles which believers should follow in order to reach the waters of paradise. The main sources describing this path are primarily the Quran and secondarily the *Sunna*, or the Tradition of the Prophet Muhammad. The *Sunna* relates all

the activity of the Messenger of God that has been considered normative for Muslims and that has been written down in the form of *hadith* or short accounts.

This distinction between Islamic law and juridical concretion is one of the key points of the reformist currents within Islam because it frees Islam from medieval juridical codes that are incompatible with many human rights.

One interpretative method used by the reformists is that of analyzing the intentionality of Quranic text in order to «follow the arrow» toward what it would mean for our time. One of the scholars using this methodology is the Tunisian Mohammed Talbi. If, as many Muslims argue, Islam gave women more freedom and more personal dignity than they had under polytheism, that means that it is necessary to keep moving in the direction of greater freedom for women.

2.3. A definitive law that synthesizes, invalidates, and tolerates Christianity and Judaism

The reformist attempts to legitimize a different form of Islam are praiseworthy, but the fundamentalist current still has many apparently valid arguments. According to the theology of revelation of the Sunni Muslim majority, it was the Prophet Muhammad who finalized legislative revelation; it was he who perfected, completed, synthesized, and universalized the earlier revelation given to Jews and Christians. Islam believes that, just as God revealed the Quran to Muhammad, so also he re-

vealed a legislative Book to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses, and to Jesus. To the degree that humankind kept advancing, God provided legislation appropriate for its stage of development.

In stating that God has given a Law to each of the great prophets, Islam understands not only that God revealed to each prophet certain articles of faith, certain moral norms, and certain instructions about how God should be worshiped, but that God has also given them a civil law code that regulates family matters, economic affairs, and criminal justice. Islam holds that the basic content of faith revealed to every prophet is the same, namely, that there only one God, that he communicates to the world by means of angels and prophets, and that he judges each person according to his or her works on the Day of Judgment. The precepts of prayer and almsgiving are also present in all the revelations, but the manner of their observance and other concrete legal prescriptions are different in each revealed religion, according to the divine will.

Islam does not recognize the concept of Covenant (which entails a commitment by both parties, with rights and duties of mutual defense and assistance), but it does recognize a pact of vassalage by which God's lordship is acknowledged. God is the only Lord, and human beings are his servants or slaves. Since humanity passes through diverse stages, it requires different types of legislation. For a Muslim, therefore, Judaism and Christianity are also divine religions, at least in their original form.

One of the principal leaders of the reformist current was the Egyptian

Muhammad Abduh, who held that God revealed to Moses the Torah, with its image of a severe God and its great profusion of norms, because it was the most adequate legislation for humanity in its infancy. When humankind reached the stage of adolescence, God sent Jesus with the Gospel, which emphasized love and suppressed the great majority of the Jewish norms. With the passage of time, humanity reached maturity, and God revealed a new, synthetic religion which surpassed the preceding ones. Just a mature man recovers the best of his childhood after having rejected it during adolescence, Islam recovered the normativity of Judaism but made it less severe and integrated it with Christian love in the form of mercy. Muhammad Abduh taught that the opposition between the severe God of Judaism and the loving God of Christianity finds a synthesis in the just and merciful God of Islam. No doubt Jews could reply that the Muslim concept of mercy (*rahma*, meaning «female womb») is completely Jewish, and Christians might protest at seeing the commandment of love described as a self-centered type of adolescent love, but it is vital that we understand that this is the way Muslims view their religion: they sincerely believe that it is less legalist and oppressive than Judaism and that it avoids the laxity of Christianity.

To understand present-day Islam we must appreciate its legalist aspect and not consider it a purely negative characteristic. Muslims believe that the Jews should have been converted to Christianity when Christ appeared, and that Christians should have recognized Muhammad as God's final Messenger.

Just as it does not make sense in a nation to observe a penal code that was abrogated in the last reform, so Muslims do not understand why Christians and Jews do not embrace Islam. Out of respect for Moses and Jesus, Islamic law grants a protected status to Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, but it requires them to pay a tax and show proper submission and humility. Also, they are expressly prohibited from converting Muslims. In a traditional Muslim nation there can be religious tolerance but not religious liberty. Islam in this regard is not original; it simply adopted the Byzantine Christian legislation that was used for Jews and other religious minorities. As with other legal dispositions, these prescriptions of Islamic law are applied only in some countries, while in others there persists «only» a certain legal inferiority and tacit forms of discrimination against non-Muslims.

What authority do human beings have to «invent» a new law adapted to the 21st century?

Given this situation, one can understand how powerful is the temptation to consider Islamism as the «true and original» Islam. What is the logic behind this view? If Muhammad came to bring the definitive Law, what authority do human beings have to «invent» a new law adapted to the 21st century? If it were true that a new law was needed, that would mean that Muhammad was

not really the last of the prophets and that the Quran is not the definitive Book. How is it possible to confront the fundamentalist assumption of this argument?

2.4. Legislative revelation closed but juridical interpretation open

If the law of Muhammad is definitive, if God is not going to reveal any new law, and if all juridical novelty (*bida'*) is condemned, then the only alternative is juridical interpretation. That is, even though some of the Quran's verses lay down specific juridical norms (such as Surah 4, on women), most of the book is exhortatory and sapiential in nature. An interpretative juridical effort (*ijtihad*) is therefore needed in order to elaborate legislation based on the Quran. Likewise, the hadith about the prophet Muhammad need this same kind of interpretative effort in order to translate the stories of the prophet's prohibitions or recommendations into concrete dispositions. This is so because claiming that something which Muhammad prohibited in one context should continue to be prohibited in other contexts is already a juridical interpretation.

This main work of juridical interpretation was carried out basically in the 10th and 11th centuries, but it continued for a century or two more. This effort produced numerous juridical schools that undertook to translate the Quran and the hadith into codes of law. When it is said today that a country has imposed Islamic law, what is meant in reality is that the country has imposed one of the schools of those earlier cen-

turies. This is true even of the medieval *Salafi* school, which claims that it is not interpreting but taking the original material in its purest form.

Because of the profusion of schools of interpretation and the many arguments among them, Islam decided to limit the number of official schools to

four, thus closing itself off to every effort at juridical innovation and condemns itself to an «eternal return» of the same.

Today the reform movement within the Sunni world is calling for Islam to open the door once again to juridical interpretation.

3. ISLAM, A PLURALIST WORLD

There have always been literalist interpretations of the Quran that do not take context into consideration, but present-day Islamic fundamentalism has some traits that are very modern. Such fundamentalism is basically founded on medieval authors like Ibn Hanbal or Ibn Tamiyyah, who rejected what they called the speculations of reason and advocated returning directly to the Quran, taking it just as it is.

3.1. Fundamentalist Salafism

Modern Salafism appeared before the colonial era in which Islamic countries were subjected to Western powers, and before any awareness of the distance that exists between contemporary Islam and the original faith.

«*Salaf*» means «ancestor» in Arabic. Muslim fundamentalists see any «evolution» of Islam in a negative light. Such «evolution» means that the religion has deviated illicitly from its origins and that it is necessary to return to the religion of the community of Muhammad's time. This fundamentalist current has a neurotic-obsessive character insofar as it seeks to imitate every aspect of the Prophet's behavior, even the most prosaic details of everyday existence. Opinion polls that ask about topics like polygamy, stoning, etc. indicate that 10-15% of Muslims

in Spain and France are in favor of this type of Islam. On the face of it, who can deny that wanting to be like the first community of believers is a praiseworthy effort?

Salafism is not synonymous with terrorism although some individuals who embrace it may engage in terrorism. Most Salafists are simply pious ultra-conservatives who preach that Muslims must avoid becoming Westernized. A good number of them are apolitical; their priority is helping wayward, lax, or sinful Muslims to return to the strict practice of Islam. The Salafists consider mainstream Islam to be its primary enemy. They unreservedly condemn both «traditional» Islam, which they believe has progressively deviated from its origins, and mystical or *Sufi* Islam, which they believe is influenced by animism and Christianity. Since Salafism is a pietistic form of Islam that

condemns democracy. Salafists have no interest in politics and refuse to take part in elections when they are held.

In some cases Salafism becomes «political» and seeks power by such «illicit» means as democracy, but it does so, naturally, only for the purpose of suppressing democracy. This is what happened when the Salafi party took part in the Egyptian elections after the fall of Mubarak.

Finally, there is the jihadist current of Salafism, which enters into the political realm with such a great sense of urgency that it legitimizes violence as a way of achieving its objectives.

The principal exporter of the Salafist ideology is Saudi Arabia. For fear that the movement might turn against it, Saudi Arabia defends only the apolitical forms of Salafism, even though it also produces very undesirable offspring, like Al Qaeda.

3.2. Traditional Islam

In order to understand contemporary Islam, we need to speak about the mainstream traditionalist positions. There really does not exist any structured current that calls itself «traditionalist,» but the concept is a necessary one to help us understand the rise both of Salafism and of reformism. In every religion (and in every culture!) we find traditionalist postures that strive to maintain rites and customs that are considered essential to the religion's identity. Both the Salafists and the reformists denounce mainstream traditionalism as a force that has gradually distorted the original purity of the Islam. They both assert

that certain traditions, prohibitions, and allowances that the traditionalists claim to be important or even essential to Islam are actually products of history. The Salafists and the reformists want to return to the purity of Islam, although in different ways and with different results. The former denounce all innovations, while the latter deplore the lack of rational thought in the faith of Muslims. They also criticize the superstitions of the simple folk and the animist or pagan influences in the practice of Islam in some countries.

On occasions reformist (and even Salafist) women denounce traditional Islam's neglect of certain compensations that were formerly provided women by strict Islamic law. In this way they defend the rights of women.

3.3. Reformism

The reformist current (*islâh*) arose mainly in Egypt toward the end of the 20th century, as many Muslims came to realize that Islam had lost its preeminent position in the world and had let itself be colonized by the West. Responding to the crisis, Muhammad Abduh asserted that Islam had lost its scientific, reasoned approach and that the West, by assuming and developing such an approach, had surpassed Islam. This author, after returning from a stay in France, reportedly declared: «In the West I have seen Islam without finding Muslims. Here at home I see Muslims, but I don't find Islam.» For Abduh, this European Islam without Muslims was science and reason. Abduh helped to propagate an interpretation of history which taught that the death of Averroes

(1198) and the earlier burning of his books by the Andalusian caliph symbolized the definitive decline of Muslim culture, whereas the influence of Averroes' work at the University of Paris marked a new beginning for intellectual development in the West. The Muslim world's return to science and reason during the 20th century has paradoxically combined unconditional acceptance of technology with a cultural mentality fixed in the past. The Gulf states especially are suffering from a severe case of schizophrenia.

Another strange manifestation of this return to science is the abundance of contemporary apologetic studies that meticulously dissect every verse of the Quran solely for the purpose of seeking prophecies of modern scientific discoveries: the invention of the light bulb, the theory of the Big Bang, the flatness of the planet at its poles, etc. There is ample literature on these themes today.

Probably the most significant current of reformism is the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna and is much more conservative than the spirit that guided Muhammad Abduh. Abduh claimed that his project was inspired by the Protestant Reformation: just as Luther wanted to return to *sola Scriptura*, thus rejecting all church tradition that had no explicit biblical foundation, so Abduh wanted to maintain the Quran as the only normative book for Islam. We have already seen that the sources of Islamic Law are the Quran and the Sunna, Abduh raised questions about the reliability of the whole textual corpus of the hadith. We know, in fact, that this literature

narrating the history of the beginnings of Islam was written in the 9th century even though it based its authenticity on a «sound» chain of transmitters of the stories. Since there were literally thousands of stories and sayings attributed to the Prophet, and since it was suspected that many of them had been created by persons who wanted to add authority to their own opinions, Islam at a very early stage developed a «science of hadith» in order to analyze and evaluate their content. This science also verified the integrity of the lives of the transmitters who had handed on each story orally, from the original eyewitness account to the moment when it was written down. Islam canonized seven collections of hadith which it considered authentic. Muhammad Abduh cast doubt on these collections, but few other reformist Muslim writers followed him in casting such a wide net of suspicion. The application of the methods of modern criticism to this body of texts has yet to be undertaken. It is important to note the practical consequences that such a procedure could have on Islamic law. Since a major portion of its norms have no Quranic support but rely solely on the corpus of hadith, casting doubt on them means calling into question a large part of Islamic law.

Reformism calls for a
re-opening of juridical
interpretation

Reformism calls for a re-opening of
juridical interpretation in order to

create new laws for today's world. Such fresh interpretation would be based on the distinction between the Islamic Law (*sharia*) as revealed principles and the juridical codes (*fiqh*) as creative human interpretation. This distinction is the best means reformism has for fighting against Salafism. While Salafism may convince many Muslims because of its «apparent» truth, reformism can say: «That God has revealed a definitive, immutable Law is one thing, but the juridical codes (*fiqh*) were elaborated through the efforts of human interpreters, and they are not definitive and immutable.»

Let us take an example. In the case of adultery, classical Islamic law dictates stoning for guilty persons who are married and flagellation for those who are unmarried (single, divorced, widowed, etc.). For such an extreme sentence to be passed, four eyewitness testimonies are needed, something extremely difficult to get. Unfortunately, in some countries enforcement of the law has resulted in the stoning of mostly women offenders, considering them guilty even when they are raped after finding themselves alone in some remote place. In such cases, Salafists would demand that the penalty be imposed equally, insisting that both the man and the woman be stoned.

In contrast, the reformists consider the following elements. First, nothing about stoning appears in the Quran. Second, although Muhammad ordered both men and women to be stoned, he did do so on no more than five occasions according to the hadith. Moreover, in several of those cases Muhammad was doing no more than

imposing on Jewish adulterers the punishment dictated by their own Jewish law. The reformists therefore conclude that, given the scarcity of cases and the difficulty of find four witnesses, the punishment of stoning was formulated by God to indicate the seriousness of adultery but was not to be practiced. Some reformists, such as Mohammed Diakho, go still further. Considering the strange fact that stoning does not appear in the Quran and yet Muhammad ordered people to be stoned on several occasions, these reformists conclude that the Prophet was probably just applying the Jewish law until the moment when the Quranic verse was revealed to him. Accordingly, stoning was effectively abrogated by the Quran and should therefore be prohibited in Islam and replaced by flagellation.

3.4. Modernist reformism

Right now there are a great many Muslims who are active in the reformist movement or who are convinced that a reform of Islam is necessary. They are especially active in India and Pakistan, but also in Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries.

There exists still another current of thought that seeks to reform Islam, but it does by focusing on the need for modernity, democracy, and human rights. We can call this the «modernist» current of Islam.

Since the focal point of ordinary reformism is fidelity to revelation, it maintains itself perfectly within «orthodoxy.» It seeks reform in order to be more faithful to the origins and

thus to achieve a «renaissance,» an «awakening,» or a new «flourishing» of Islam in the world. Thus the name of the Tunisian party that is closely related to the Muslim Brotherhood is *Ennahda* (=renaissance).

In contrast, modernist reformism focuses on the need for religion to respond to the imperative of human rights. These two types of reformism agree on many points, but the modernist current is sometimes criticized by the other one for «forcing» the ancient texts in an effort to make them compatible with the modern Western world. The modernist understanding of Islam allows for a true feminist movement and even open acknowledgement of homosexuality. Its arguments allow for reinterpretation of creation; for example, it holds that God did not first create the man and then extract the woman from his side, but rather God created human unity in the world as a reflection of his own unity and then dissociated it into male and female. Also, the sin of the people of Lot is condemned not as a sin of sodomy but as the violation of a guest.

Logically, modernism needs to go beyond interpretation based solely on «the author's intention.» It needs a hermeneutics that conceives of interpretation as the «fusion of the horizons» of the author and the reader; even though separated by centuries of history, author and reader find themselves being projected mutually toward one another. The Egyptian exile Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd clearly expressed the need to adopt Gadamer's style of hermeneutics.

The modernist current does away with the prohibition of juridical inno-

vation (*bida'*) that is still maintained by ordinary reformism. If Islam once succeeded in creating an empire, the modernists argue, it was precisely because of its ability to innovate and to adopt what was best in the Byzantine and Persian worlds.

3.5. Sufism: the vivifying spirit

Although it is situated on a very different plane, we must not forget the current of Islam called Sufism. Sometimes called «mystical Islam,» Sufism is an esoteric spirituality that was born at the crossroads between the Islamic, Persian, Christian, and Neo-Platonist worlds. It shares many coordinates with the Jewish Kabbalah.

Sufism wants to be
«the heart of Islam»

Sufism wants to be «the heart of Islam.» Just as a physical body dies without a heart, Sufism seeks to impart life and spirit to the superficial, ritualistic, and literalist practice of Islam. In Sufism, a person places himself beneath the tutelage of a spiritual master (*sheif*) who possesses knowledge of the occult and who guides him on his path of spiritual ascent.

Strictly speaking, there are relatively few Muslims who belong to a fraternity and have this type of master-disciple relationship, but there is an important minority of persons who sympathize with this spirituality. Sufis may even constitute a majority in countries of

sub-Saharan Africa like Senegal. While Saudi Arabians, and Salafists generally, call the adherents of Sufism heretics and persecute them, ordinary reformism views them with a certain suspicion because of the heterodoxy of some of their positions and also because of some of their ritual practices (such as the use of drugs in some groups in the Far East for the purpose of achieving ecstasy). Certain countries, such as Morocco, support a type of moderate, reformed, and apolitical Sufism as a way of struggling against Salafism.

Despite certain excesses that Sufi groups have committed in their history, the mystical literature of Sufism is a valuable spiritual patrimony for humanity; its esthetic beauty and its profundity produce great peace in the soul. In Sufism the profession of faith, «There is no god but Allah» becomes «There is not Other apart from Allah.» In Sufism, Islam's passion for unity is carried to its ultimate consequences: any affirmation of the existence of something outside of God, any belief that something has being apart from God implies a certain degree of «associationism» or polytheism. Rather than a form of pantheism, Sufism is a kind of *pan-en-theism*: everything is *in* God. For the Sufi, the hidden, invisible God appears as a «theophany» in creatures. The world is the appearance of God, who can be seen only by covering or veiling himself. Like the light of the sun, which can be viewed directly only through thick veils, the infinite clarity of God can be seen only through the veils of earthly bodies. The Platonic myth of the cave is still completely valid in Sufism. We can

understand the suspicions that many Muslims have regarding Sufism: does not making humanity a manifestation of God contradict God's transcendence?

Despite all this, Sufism declares that it is entirely Islamic. Ibn Arabi (d. 1240) explained that he did not believe in the incarnation. For him, creatures always maintain the status of servants of slaves (*'abd*), and God never ceases to be the Lord (*Rabb*). According to Sufi belief, creatures reveal God because they «vest» themselves with his attributes, but the garment never affects the essence. In reality, it is not that God «appears» humanized but rather that human beings «appear» divinized, vested with divine attributes. Without that garment a human being (like a ghost without a sheet) would not appear at all because human beings in themselves are pure nothingness. They are something only insofar as they *are God*.

The path of the mystic is a path of spiritual ascent which follows the steps of the Prophet's «night journey.» This journey is both transformative and gnostic (leading to an increase in profound knowledge). Little by little the Sufi becomes more truly what he already is, letting his hidden essence blossom externally. Since all creatures are simply the manifestation of some divine quality, the disciple continually discovers, with the help of his master, what the essence of his soul is, and once he discovers it, he draws on its deepest qualities and makes them visible in his attitudes and actions. The One whose essence is to be the All-Merciful irradiates all the disciple's being with mercy.

4. THE GRAN SCHISM: SUNNI AND SHIA

This presentation of the various currents of Sunni Islam frees us from the idea of a superficial, monolithic, ritualistic religion that has not changed since the Middle Ages. The depth of the discussions among Muslims is something about which most Westerners have little knowledge.

4.1. The conflict over political-religious leaders

Nevertheless, we must still present the major division in Islam, the one between Sunni and Shia. Like Christianity, Islam has not only different currents of thought and spirituality but also doctrinal differences that are important enough to divide the religion into distinct denominations. There are three main confessional groups in the Islamic world: the Sunni, the Shia, and the Khariji (or Ibadi). According to tradition, the dispute that fractured the community began right after Muhammad died in 632. Differences arose about who should lead the community, and the situation became explosive after the assassination of the fourth caliph. The Kharijites maintained that the

caliph should be chosen from among the holiest and most virtuous men of the community, while the Shia argued that the leader should come from the family of the Prophet. Ali claimed this dignity for himself since he was Muhammad's cousin and was married to his daughter. The Shia also claimed that Muhammad had designated Ali as his successor. The Sunni, on the other hand, defended the traditional pre-Islamic Arab way, which consisted in having the new leader chosen by consensus among the tribal leaders. The history of this period still needs to be examined critically.

In any case, Muslim historiography dates the split to the assassination of the third caliph, Uthman (d 656). Muhammad's widow, Aisha, and the governor of Syria, Muawiyah, blamed

Ali blamed for the murder. Although Ali succeeded in being named the fourth caliph, he was not recognized by his accusers. When war broke out, he peacefully retired to his own city. He and his son Hassan (d. 661) were subsequently killed by some of their followers who were demanding direct confrontation with Muawiyah. A confrontation finally took place in 680 in the battle of Karbala, where Ali's second son, Hussein, died. Hussein is remembered even today in a bloody celebration that is the principal feast of the Shia. From that moment on, the followers of Ali, the Shia, had to live separately from the Sunni.

4.2. The primitive and esoteric mysticism of the Shia

The memory of this violent confrontation and the persecution of the Shia by the Umayyad caliphs of Damascus still feeds the tensions that are felt today. However, we should not think that these tensions have been caused only by the ambition for power, without any ideological, cultural, or religious background. If we examine the zones of Shia influence, we see that they coincide with the areas in which the ancient Persian empire held sway. Moreover, it is surprising and significant that Iran has preserved the Persian language despite having been Islamized so early. The Shia movement claimed its authority in Persia with the help of a narrative that asserted that Ali's son married the daughter of the last Persian king. The Shia form of Islam, therefore, could actually be the result of the inculturation of Islam in a region with a

millennial culture and with two other important religions: Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism.

Shiism is the inculturation of Islam in Persia

In fact, primitive Shiism has many of the same elements that we mentioned with regard to Sufism. It conceives all reality in a bipolar, two-dimensional way: hidden and revealed, invisible and visible, esoteric and exoteric, profound and superficial, interior and exterior, spiritual and material. Every reality is like a coin with two sides, one looking toward heaven, the other looking toward earth.

The hidden dimension of reality is inaccessible to most people. It requires a special illumination of the intellect, a gift conceded to a spiritual elite which allows them to penetrate the superficial aspect of reality and reach what is most profound in it. In Sufism these «gnostics» are saints, and often they serve as spiritual guides for the fraternities. They know the souls of their disciples better than the disciples themselves do. In the case of Shiism, those who receive this gift are called *imam* (not to be confused with the «imans,» the ones who guide the prayer of Sunni Islam!). The imam receives illumination from a divine Light that is continually transmitted as tradition from generation to generation, from imam to imam. The divine Light originates in the Adam of Light, who is the visible image of the invisible God. This Adam is known in Judaism as the

heavenly Adam, he is known in Sufism as the Reality of Muhammad, and he was known in Arian Christianity as the Logos.

For Shiism everything has two dimensions, and this applies as well to the Quranic revelation and every other revelation. When God revealed the text of the Torah to Moses, he also revealed to an imam (whom they identify with Aaron) the hidden meaning of the Law. When God revealed the Gospel to Jesus, he revealed to John the Baptist or to Saint Peter (depending on the Shia tradition) the esoteric content of this book. Finally, when the Quran was given to Muhammad, its inner meaning was given to Ali.

One of the many groups that have arisen within Shiism carried this philosophy to its ultimate consequences, asserting that if Ali received the hidden meaning and Muhammad received the text, and if the hidden meaning is the essence and the literal text is only the appearance, that means that Ali is superior to Muhammad. This group even talked about the indwelling of God in the spiritual elite. So we can well understand why this form of Shiism was condemned by the Sunni!

In any case, Ali transmitted his Light to his sons, inaugurating a chain of transmission that lasted seven generations (for the Ishmaelite Sevener Shia) or even twelve generations (for the Twelver Shia). The last imam disappeared while still alive and left no descendents; he is expected to reappear as a messianic figure at the end of history, along with Jesus. He is called the «Mahdi.»

This theology confers on Shiism a strong clerical character, and the

clerical establishment has the power to create jurisprudence since it receives visitations from the angel Gabriel

4.3. Is a Shia state a betrayal of the origins?

Just as Sunni Islam is rife with different currents of thought, so also Shiism experiences intense debates within its ranks. The most important debate is linked to the political shape that Shiism has taken in Iran. Even though it has been especially influenced by the Khomeini revolution, the type of Islam practiced in Iran actually originated in 1501, when the Safavid dynasty established Twelver Shiism as the official religion of the country. This decision put a brake on the Ottoman empire, which already controlled a large part of the Mediterranean. Many Shia, however, interpreted this identification of religion with political power as a betrayal of their religious origins. The Shia community had been obliged to live their first centuries by using *taqiyya* or dissimulation since they were unable to manifest their beliefs openly. Living in «hiddenness» became identified as the very soul of Islam. Indeed, Sufism even claimed to be the heart of Islam! The Shia accused the Sunni of living at a superficial level and restricting themselves to visible practices and literal interpretations. Shiism also prohibited its members from holding political posts because that would mean dealing with the visible world and collaborating with persecutors. When the persecutions ceased, this prohibition naturally became less meaningful, but some Shia still saw close identification

with a regime such as that of Iran as being unfaithful to their roots.

Shiism prohibits the holding of political posts

At the same time, even though Iranian society is largely conservative, the fusion of clerical power and political power is making many young people adverse to religion, a situation similar to what was experienced in Spain during the Franco era.

4.4. Shia clericalism vs. Sunni secularism

It makes no sense to ask whether Shiism is more open and tolerant than Sunnism, just as it would be hard to answer a similar question about Catholicism and Protestantism. Still, at the risk of over-simplification, it may be said that Shiism is more «Catholic» and Sunnism is more «Protestant.» Sunnism has religious leaders, but they are not clerics. The Sunni imam, who directs the prayers in a mosque, is simply someone who knows well the foundations of Islam because he has received formation and in some

cases has earned a university degree in Islamic law. However, he is not a «sacred» person, nor does he have any special participation in divinity. He simply exercises a function. The Sunni imam serves for a time and then changes to another job.

Many Islamic countries have a government ministry of religious affairs which regulates religious practice and contracts imams to serve as functionaries in public mosques. In order to avoid the propagation of Islamist radicalism, many countries (such as Morocco) have gradually closed down private mosques. In Turkey any person can finance the construction of a private mosque, but the imams who preside in them must graduate from a public faculty of Islamic theology.

Sunnism represents about 85-90% of all the Muslims in the world. Ibadism is significant only in Oman. The rest of Muslims are Shia. Most Shia live in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon (Hezbollah), but there are many groups that have split off from the main trunk, such as the Ishmaelites of Agha Khan, the Zaidi of Yemen, the Alawites of Syria, the Alevi of Turkey, and the Druze of Lebanon. These last two groups have relatively few elements in common with the rest of Islam.

5. THE MYSTICISM OF EVERYDAY ISLAM

Despite the divisions, all Muslims share some basic pillars that they agree upon.

5.1. «All eyes converge toward the One»

The first pillar is the profession of faith in the oneness of God and in Muhammad's role as the final prophet and legislator. The oft-repeated exclamation «*Allâh-u Akbar*» defines a monotheism that is removed from all anthropomorphism. It should not be translated simply as «God is greater» (which would be «*Allâh-u al-Akbar*») but as «God is (always) greater.» It is very similar to the traditional Latin phrase «*Deus semper maior*». God always surpasses any image we can have of him. That is why Islam prohibits all images of God, but it does not reach the iconoclastic extremes of the earliest Buddhism, which prohibited even mental images.

Unfortunately the exclamation *Allâh-u Akbar* has been perverted by being used as a war cry. It is used by angry crowds when they feel offended, it is used by jihadists waging «holy war,» and in the past it was used by

those who tore down the walls of Constantinople. Taking the name of God in vain while committing an assault should be considered much more offensive than simple cartoons. Attacking innocent people while holding up the Quran should be seen as a much greater blasphemy than the act of a crazy American pastor in burning a Quran, because if there is anyone who reduces the image of God to his own ideology, it is the terrorist.

To this transcendent God are attributed all the perfections that Greek philosophy could imagine; no limitation can be placed on God. The Muslim God may seem distant or absent, but he is a God «who sees everything»; he is a God who is «closer to man than his own jugular vein.» He is a God to whom can be applied the mystical description of Saint Augustine: «*Intimior intimo meo et superior summo meo*», «more intimate to me than my innermost being, and higher than my highest reach».

God surpasses all creatures both within and without; he can never exist at the same level as creatures. Islam expressly denounces the Christian concept of «God-with-us.» Only Sufism has developed a mysticism which stresses a unitive, spousal relationship with God.

This does not mean that Islam has a problem with mysticism. Despite its juridical image, Islam has developed a mysticism of complete and absolute dedication to God. Certainly, anything «absolute» must be discerned carefully in order to avoid totalitarianism, but Islam is capable of generating enormous acts of generosity in believers. They are moved by their passion for the One, and this passion unites them into a close community. The prayer on Friday, when all believers look toward the same focal point and bow down together, produces in Muslims a profound sense of communion. Similarly, the coming together of three million Muslims in the annual celebration of the pilgrimage to Mecca is an unparalleled experience, even from just an anthropological point of view. Although racism has sometimes existed in the Arab world, the movement of African American converts in the U.S. known as the Nation of Islam arose precisely out of their experience of universal communion, at a time when the races were segregated in that country. Malcolm X confirmed that the reason for his conversion was seeing all the races united in Mecca.

5.2. Like monks in their everyday lives

The second pillar of Islam is prayer (*salat*) recited five times a day. It is

a kind of ritual prayer, not simple meditation. It has strict conditions for validity, just as a Christian sacrament does. That is why, when a group organizes some kind of «interreligious prayer,» Muslims never translate it into Arabic as «*salat*». Ordinarily they would call it «*liqâ'*» (encounter) although the most correct term would be either «*dhikr*» (invocation or calling on God) or «*ta'ammul*» (meditation).

A Muslim city appears to be an immense monastery

The opportunity of praying at dawn, at midday, at mid-afternoon, at sunset, and at night offers Muslims the experience of a life completely devoted to God. The One God unifies the whole day without distinguishing the profane from the sacred, just as he unifies the social sphere without distinguishing the political from the religious. Political life is also religious life, and that is why Islamic law also affects the political dimension. When a society lives entirely by this rhythm of prayer, the city takes on the appearance of an immense monastery.

Each period of prayer lasts about five minutes so that in most cases fitting into one's daily schedule is not a problem. There is no obligation to go to the mosque except at midday on Friday. During Friday noon prayer, the imam delivers a long sermon, in which he often mentions events that happened during the week. Women are not obliged to go, but if they do

go, they stay in back. It is claimed that men cannot concentrate if they have a woman prostrate before them.

5.3. Alms as justice

The third pillar is alms (*zakat*). Islam is a religion for this world. It does not command things that are impossible or that are only for a select minority. The precept of giving alms is one that can be followed by anyone who has a minimum of economic solvency. The term *zakat* literally means «purification.» The faithful are purified by means of their alms, which they donate in the mosques at the end of Ramadan. In Spain the normal donation is five Euros per person. The donations are used to propagate Islam and to help the poor. In Islam alms are not simple charity, nor are they something that depends just on the believers' generosity. They are obligatory because they are a matter of justice. Muslims are continually being educated about the need for generosity and the need to dethrone money as an idol (even though the Gulf states seem to contradict this ideal).

Traditional Islam has a structure for collection of taxes based on a certain percentage of the economic return that a Muslim has during the year.

5.4. Fasting from everything in order to be filled with the Quran

The fourth pillar is fasting (*sawm*) during the month of Ramadan. The people take no water or food from sunrise to sunset. Even though this practice

was inspired by the strict Lenten fast of the Eastern Church, Ramadan is theologically and anthropologically equivalent to the Christian Christmas. According to tradition, this is the month when the Quran descended from heaven. Believers must fast from everything that is not the Quran in order to be filled with its Word. The companions of the Prophet said that he appeared to be a living Quran. Fasting in order to receive the Quran from heaven is similar to the gesture performed by various Old Testament prophets who were told to «eat» the sacred book. It is also reminiscent of the Christian tradition of becoming more Christlike by welcoming the descent of the Word, Jesus.

Ramadan is the equivalent
of the Christian Christmas

The month of Ramadan is celebrated by decorating and illuminating the streets, by Christmas-like family feasting, and by practicing generosity. Many Muslims are very scrupulous in their observance of the fast, believing that even the tiniest introduction of liquid into the body, such as eye drops or mouthwash, breaks the fast.

During Ramadan there is a change in the hours of social life. When possible, people try to sleep in the morning and work at night. The practice of fasting becomes much more complicated in non-Muslim countries, especially when the ninth lunar month falls during the summer of our solar calendar.

5.5. Pilgrimage to the center of the world

Finally, the fifth pillar of faith for all Muslims, including Shia and women, is the precept of making a pilgrimage to Mecca once in one's life if health and finances make it possible. Over the course of several days the pilgrims perform diverse rituals related to the life of Abraham, his slave Hagar, and his son Ishmael. The most important rituals are walking seven times around the Ka'aba, the stoning of some columns that symbolize the devil, and the sacrifice of a lamb in commemoration of the lamb that was substituted for the son of Abraham. During those same days the Muslims who have remained at home celebrate the Feast of the Sacrifice by slaughtering an animal.

Since it is impossible to welcome at once all the pilgrims who wish to come

to Mecca, Saudi Arabia has to assign quotas for each country. Meanwhile, gigantic construction projects have been initiated to increase tenfold the capacity of the Grand Mosque of Mecca. The Ka'aba is a cube-shaped building covered with a black cloth; it was venerated even before the birth of Islam. It is said that Muhammad ordered the divinities inside it to be destroyed. At the present time the interior is empty and has marble decoration of questionable taste.

For Muslims the Ka'aba is the center of the world. The circles they trace around the small building are thought to resemble the orbits of the planets or even the circling of the angels around the Throne of Mercy. Profound emotion is awakened in the pilgrims by this earthly representation of cosmic and celestial movement.

6. THE ARAB CIVIL WAR

Having presented the foregoing background, we are now in a position to understand better the drama of the Near East. The various Arab Springs have become not only Arab winters but Arab hells.

6.1. Syria: one drama, many actors

The causes of the present situation are manifold: ideological, religious, economic, political.... The invasion of Iraq was certainly the principal cause of the chaos now being experienced in Syria and Iraq, but the turmoil has also been fueled by religious fundamentalism, political extremism, and generalized corruption.

The rise of the Islamic State has been helped both by the Shia sectarianism of the Iraqi government installed after the U.S. invasion and by the contagion of the Arab Spring in Syria. France and Turkey believed that Basher al-Assad would fall as quickly as had other Arab leader: Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, Ali Abdullah Sale in Yemen, and Gaddafi in Libya. The president of Libya chose resistance, whereas Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Ali Abdullah

were removed easily. The international community (including Arab countries) had too many accounts to settle with Gaddafi to refrain from intervening in the conflict. If Saddam Hussein had continued in power, he also would have been affected by the uprisings. All the presidents fell, but the kings survived.

Turkey completely sealed its borders against the passage of Islamists, arms, and petroleum. It initially supported the moderate rebels, the Free Syria Army, but this force was soon eclipsed by the entrance on the scene of two other forces: the various armed groups linked to Al Qaeda and to the Muslim Brotherhood, and more recently the Islamic State. Because of the staying power of the Assad regime, the disastrous situation in post-Gaddafi Libya, and the growing power of Al Qaeda before the Islamic State split off

from it, the U.S. and France delayed their decision of to launch an attack to overthrow al-Assad after his forces used chemical weapons.

Basher al-Assad appears to
be the lesser evil

The Basher al-Assad regime has striven to present itself as the defender of the country's minorities and as the lesser evil compared to the barbarities of the Islamic State. That is perhaps the reason why al-Assad at first concentrated his attack on the moderate rebels. He knew that the growth of the Islamist threat would, paradoxically, give him more possibility of continuing in power. If the fear of radical Islamism's taking control of Syria were to disappear, the West and with the Gulf States would bring his regime down. For its part, the Islamic State has been especially virulent in its fight against the Free Syria Army and has not yet sought to launch a frontal attack to conquer Damascus. Is it because gaining such a victory would be very difficult? Is it because the West would feel obliged to intervene if the "greater evil" triumphed? Or is because there are obscure ties between these two opponents?

Let us recall that the Islamic State was born in Iraq out of the remnants of Saddam Hussein's army and secret services. The deposed government had belonged to the Baath party, the same one that Basher al-Assad belongs to. The puzzling question is this: if the Islamic State was born of the huge mass

of military men and ideologues who were rejected after the Iraq invasion, why have they produced such a cruel and violent form of Islamism? After all, the Baath party has always tended to socialism and was secular rather than religious.

Some important Western thinkers, who favor the fall of al-Assad since they consider him a key piece of the problem, consider the radical Islamism of the Islamic State to be a pure façade, a propaganda device for recruitment purposes. To be sure, Saddam Hussein, before he fell, made many religious appeals (as Bush did), but his discourse rang hollow. It is possible, all the same, that there will be a progressive Islamicization of a part of the Syrian army for the sake of gaining greater legitimacy. However that may be, propaganda based on Islamist terrorism will appeal only to people who already have extreme religious convictions.

What is certain that there are presently in Syria seven armies all fighting against one another, in a kind of game of Parcheesi in which unnatural alliances are formed for the sake of defeating a third foe. The five principal armies in the war are the government army, the Free Syria Army, Al Qaeda (al-Nusra Front), the Islamic State, and the Kurdish army.

6.2. What country provides us hope?

The panorama presented by the other Arab League countries is also disheartening. Libya is a failed state with two governments, and the one recognized by the international community is not

in the capital. Moreover, the Islamic State and other terrorist groups control several zones of the country.

Egypt, with President el-Sisi, is experiencing a period of political repression that is greater than it was in Mubarak's time. Paradoxically, the country is being sustained economically by Saudi Arabia. Egypt's fight against the Muslim Brotherhood (which is supported by Qatar) is of vital interest to Saudi Arabia since the Brotherhood questions the Saudi political regime. A delegation of the Islamic State is also present in the Egyptian Sinai.

In Yemen the civil war continues between Sunni supporters of the president and an important minority of the country's Shia. Even though the Shia form part of Zaidism (one of the first breakaways from Shiism), they are supported by Iran. Saudi Arabia, for its part, has been providing military support to the government.

Algeria remains calm even though the country has seen confrontations between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. The nation certainly does not want to return to the state of civil war that it experienced in the Nineties.

Morocco succeeded in curbing the Arab Spring protests by adopting some reforms, but much still needs to be done. The country has managed to keep the Islamists at bay by closing many private mosques. It is possible, though, that attacks against tourists could hurt the profitable business of tourism.

Tunisia is a country that is dealing admirably with the serious problems it is experiencing. Its small size, its secular tradition, and its high education level compared to Egypt have helped it to avoid that country's errors. The moderate Islamist party, though close to the Muslim Brotherhood, was more intelligent than the Brotherhood: it knew enough to renounce its power, thus making a smooth transition possible after several politicians were killed. Because of recent terrorist attacks, however, tourism (a key piece in the economy) has disappeared. Moreover, there are terrorist groups (some coming from the war in Mali) camped on Tunisia's open borders with Algeria and Libya, and thousands of Tunisians have gone to fight as jihadists with the Islamic State! When they return, they will be extremely dangerous.

If we continue around the map of Africa, we see even more reasons for pessimism. Somalia is another failed state with a fearsome terrorist group, Al Shabaab, as well as various bands of sea pirates. Nigeria is not much better. Its poor governance has allowed Boko Haram (meaning "The book [Western education] is forbidden!") to grow, and the group has recently affiliated with the Islamic State.

Fortunately, stability reins in Senegal despite a level of poverty that causes many to migrate. Their Islam is of a tolerant Sufi-animist type and marks the culture of the country.

7. MUCH REMAINS TO BE DONE

Given this situation, what solutions can we propose—or dream of—for the future?

7.1. An immediate international peace conference

The conflict in Syria will probably remain stalemated for a long time. Lebanon's civil war lasted fifteen years! It is perhaps for that reason that Lebanon is handling its present difficulties well, despite receiving a half-million Palestinian and a million and half Syrian refugees.

Without a peace conference among the countries involved, it will be very difficult to find a solution. It must first be agreed that there are serious problems with the borders established by France and England after World War I. Iraq is now exactly divided into the three parts where borders *should* have been drawn: the south-central part is mainly Shia, the central part (now dominated by the Islamic State) is mainly Sunni, and the northern part is mainly Kurdish. After the Gulf War there could be no thought of splitting

the country since that would mean turning Baghdad over to Iran, which was then still part of the «axis of evil.» The problem today is that the Kurds are one of the largest ethnic groups without a state of its own. There are Kurds in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran, but none of those countries wants a free Iraqi Kurdistan for fear that the Kurds in other countries, especially Turkey, will want the same. Turkey's passive stance toward the Islamic State stems from its continuing fight against Syrian and Iraqi Kurds.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey are fearful of the consolidation of a great zone of Shia domination, from Iran to Lebanon on the Mediterranean, passing through Iraq and Syria. Not only do the Gulf states resent Shia expansion to the north, but they are fearful that the important Shia minorities in their own territories will rise up and claim their rights as well. Saudi Arabia is about 10% Shia, but the most dangerous

situation of all is that of Bahrain with its Sunni monarchy and a population that is 70% Shia.

The forces that are struggling most vigorously against the Islamic State are the Shia brigades of Iran and the militias of Hezbollah, the Shia politico-military group in Lebanon. These groups, however, are not much more tolerant than the Islamic State! Turkey has finally agreed to join a coalition to bomb the Islamic State. Already participating in the coalition are Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates. In its search for other allies, the U.S. has drawn closer to Iran.

Military intervention alone
will not resolve the problem
in the long run

If, as we said, one of the causes of the conflict has been the Arab people's rebellion against poverty, corruption, and dictatorship, then military intervention alone will not solve the problem in the long run. New protests are already occurring in Iraq and Lebanon. Yemen is still considered a kleptocracy, a government of thieves.

7.2. Europe's obligations

Europe is experiencing an unprecedented wave of immigration. New conflicts are arising around the world without any resolution of the existing ones. In all justice, Europe cannot fail to respond.

The terrorist attacks on European soil are aimed at stigmatizing Muslims and persuading Europe to consider them dangerous. If they have their religious liberties restricted, then Muslims will have to decide either in favor of Europe or in favor of Islam. Many of them will feel obliged to migrate to the Islamic State. In Europe we need smart politicians and sensible citizens who will refuse to take part in this game of false dichotomies.

The rights of Muslims must be recognized concretely and practically and not just on paper. At the same time the Muslim community should condemn the terrorist attacks unequivocally (they are already doing this, though the media take little notice) and should also vigorously oppose this scourge, both at the ideological level and in active cooperation with the intelligence services.

Europeans should not doubt that most Muslims firmly reject the Islamic State. There are thousands of examples that never reach the attention of Europeans. In April 2015 the second Peace Forum of Muslim Societies was held in Abu Dhabi, with the presence of 350 Muslim leaders from all over the world; the purpose of the forum was to refute the ideology of the Islamic State. Before that, in December 2014, some 600 Muslim and Christian leaders met in Cairo to condemn jihadist violence. Also, right after a Jordanian pilot was burned alive by Islamists, the supreme religious authority in Egypt declared that «the Quran dictates that anyone perpetrating such a cowardly act, which goes against the word of God, deserved to be executed or crucified

or have their arms and legs amputated.» The sentence could hardly be more decisive, but we have a right to ask whether this type of violent denunciation does not perpetuate a spirit of violence in the society.

Careful study of public opinion reveals that these meetings of leaders are representative of people in the street. In October 2014 the Fikra Forum of the Washington Institute published a study on how the Islamic State was viewed in three Arab countries. Only 5% of Saudi supported it (2% strongly and 3% moderately). Support in Egypt was even lower (3%), and in Lebanon it was nil. Despite these extremely low levels of support, there are many millions of people whose security is potentially at risk.

This same study showed that there was significant support for more moderate Islamist groups. In Saudi Arabia 52% supported Hamas, the group which controls Gaza, and 31% supported the Muslim Brotherhood. In Egypt 33% supported Hamas, and 35% the Brotherhood. In Lebanon Hezbollah received the support of 92% of the Shia Muslims, 39% of the Christians, but only 8% of the Sunni Muslims.

7.3. Strengthening the reform of Islam

It makes little sense for Saudi Arabia to be waging a military battle against forces whose ideology has long been fostered by the country. It is therefore essential to examine the religious causes of the conflict.

The reformist movement should move ahead in its efforts to purify

Islam of its retrograde elements. It should develop a theological basis that gives religious legitimacy to human rights, an issue that still meets great resistance in Muslim countries. In many cases tradition has aggravated the dispositions of Islamic law which in their time were fitting but are no longer so. In early Islamic society, which was still patriarchal, special compensations were made to Muslim women, but these have been forgotten. The laws on inheritance, for example, were unequal, favoring male heirs more than female ones, but compensation was made by making the male responsible for all the expenses of his family. The woman of the family was not obliged to contribute to the expenses, not even to her own. Whatever money the woman could save was kept «safe» in case she should be widowed or divorced. It makes no sense today to maintain the inequality in inheritance laws while requiring women to work outside the family and to contribute to household costs. What is even worse is allowing a man to have several women whom he puts to work in order to support his children.

Likewise, the Quranic verse that allows polygamy has a historical context that has been forgotten: it was originally aimed insuring that no orphans would be lacking a father to protect them: «If you fear that you cannot do justice to orphans, marry such women as seem good to you, two or three or four» (Quran 4,3). Moreover, the same verse goes on to say: «but if you fear that you will not do justice, then marry only one.» The tradition (developed by males) interpreted these lines as giving men

the right to polygamy and counseling them simply to treat all their wives equally. Why has this verse not been interpreted as giving men the right to more than one wife only as a way of fulfilling a strict duty? There are many other examples like this one.

7.4. Future assignment: refounding history

There is, however, another important task that even Islamic reformism has not yet begun: rigorous study of the Islam's beginnings and the history of the composition of the Quran. Such study would use all the modern exegetical, philological, rhetorical, and other types of analysis that have been available since the 19th century. I understand perfectly the fears Muslims have in undertaking such a task. Indeed, Catholicism did not assume this task for itself until the beginnings of the 20th century. There are countless books that record traditions about Muhammad's life and explain the Quran (the *tafsîr*), but all of them seem to be based on the same sources that were canonized three centuries after the Prophet's death. These sources must be subject to careful criticism.

In Europe at the present time there are many researchers (including Muslims) who are studying these questions. Some scholars point out that the «collecting» of Quranic verses could have lasted a very long time and that the Quran of the third caliph (Uthman) was still not definitive. Other researchers speak of the importance of a Syriac-speaking messianic Jewish group which created a type of «proto-Islam.»

It was only much later that this embryo developed into the form of Islam we know today. Researchers also stress other factors, such as the contribution of Christian Arab communities living east of the Jordan, the existence of Manichaean sources, and the influence of Arab communities in eastern Arabia that were in communication with the Persian world.

These studies are still of a very hypothetical nature; there are no definitive answers. Some extreme theories call into doubt all the history that has been proposed thus far; others are much more nuanced. Some seek to discredit Islam, while others meet every standard of academic rigor.

There is no question of proposing an anti-Islamic apologetic. Our goal must be to develop knowledge that weakens the bases of fundamentalist movements like Salafism. There is a need to challenge those who think they have detailed knowledge of the Prophet's every gesture and those who have forgotten the (at times insuperable) distance that separates us from the origins of Islam. Intellectual humility can do no more than transform the intransigent certitude of the fundamentalists into the confident surrender of believers to a God who surpasses us all.

If this task is carried out faithfully, the future panorama of Islam can be completely different even though Muslims will still express the same passion as always for the unity and uniqueness of God. If Christianity has survived historical and exegetical criticism, then Islam can do so as well, being reborn in a new and purified manner.

GLOSSARY

Ayatollah. The highest authority in present-day Shiism.

Hadith. Short narratives about Muhammad's life and the decisions made by him. Attributed to the Prophet's contemporaries, the hadith were transmitted orally until written down two or three centuries later.

Ibadism. One of the three forms of Islam resulting from conflicts among the early Muslims. It exists mainly in Oman.

Imam. Enlightened spiritual leader in the Shia tradition.

Iman. The leader of prayer in the Sunni tradition.

Islam. The name of the Muslim religion. It means «voluntary submission» or «dedication.»

Islamism. Political current of Islam.

Jihad. Literally means «effort» or «struggle,» whether against the inner enemy of the believer (the passions) or against the exterior enemy of the community.

Modernist reformism. Current of opinion that seeks to make Islam compatible with human rights.

Mufti. Jurist who has authority to issue fatwas and give juridical advice.

Mullah. A person proficient in Islamic law.

Muslim Brotherhood. An Islamist association originating in Egypt. It seeks to «Islamize» society without reaching the literalist extremism of Salafism.

Salafism. Anti-traditionalist Sunni current that advocates imitating the life of the first generation of Muslims, down to the last detail.

Salafism, political. Movement seeking to impose Salafism on state structures.

Salafism, jihadist. Movement seeking to impose Salafism by means of armed struggle.

Reformism. Current that seeks to reform Islamic tradition by purifying it of historical and cultural «innovations.»

Shiism. Islamic confession with a clerical structure, representing 10% of all Muslims. It was developed in Persia by followers of Ali.

Sufism. Mystical current of Islam with close links to the Jewish Kabbalah and Neo-Platonist philosophy. It is present in most Sunni countries and is structured in fraternities around a spiritual leader. It is persecuted by Gulf Islam.

Sunna. The normative tradition of the life of Muhammad and the first Muslim community as related in the narratives called «hadith» (similar to the sayings of Jesus). It is the normative equivalent of Jewish oral law set down in the Mishnah.

Sunnism. Islamic confession representing 85-90% of all Muslims.

Wahhabism. Rigorous current of Gulf Islam. It is similar to Salafism and the medieval Sunni school of interpretation called Hanbalite.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Explain the difference between the different currents of Sunni Islam: Salafism, traditionalism, reformism, modernism, and Sufism. Try to understand their debates by comparing them to the debates within Christianity. Think also about the debates within Shiism.

2. Discuss the various factors —political, economic, geostrategic, religious— contribut-

ing to the development of the present-day Islamist groups. To what extent is the West responsible? To what extent is the Islamic world itself responsible?

3. What should European policy be with regard to refugees and immigrants?

4. What hope is there in confronting the challenges presented by this theme?

Cristianisme i Justícia (Lluís Espinal Foundation) is a Study Centre under the initiative of the Society of Jesus in Catalonia. It consists of a team of university professors and experts in theology and different social and human sciences, who are concerned with the increasingly important cultural interrelations between faith and justice.

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N. 159, March 2016

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