

Forty years after “*Nostra Aetate*”

The Christian-Islamic relations: is the clash of civilizations inevitable?

1. “*Nostra Aetate*”. The Declaration about the relation of the Church to other religions.

In 1965 the Second Council of Vatican issued a declaration on the relation of the Church to the other religions. This Declaration speaks about the relation of the Church to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism. In the section about Islam, the Council says:

“3. Upon the Muslims, too, the Church looks with esteem. They adore one God~ living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to men. They strive to submit wholeheartedly even to His inscrutable decrees, just as did Abraham, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself.

Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin mother; at times they call on her, too, with devotion. In addition they wait the Day of Judgment when God will give each man his due after raising him up. Consequently, they prize the moral life, and give worship to God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this most sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and, to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom”.

Dr. W .A. Visser’t Hooft, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, found this part of the document “very, very weak”, because it failed to “come to grip with essential questions raised by these religions”, and “confined to making polite remarks about them”.

Perhaps many readers found this section of the Declaration rather general and abstruse. However, some historical perspective can be provided by the recollection that it was the first time an Ecumenical Council has expressed such an open approach to the other great faiths of the world.

In the relations with the Muslims, there are two things to be distinguished: Islam as a religion and Islam as the foundation of states based on the Islamic Law (Shari’a).

This Declaration of the Vatican Council speaks of Islam as a religion, and does not deal with Islam as the foundation of states based on the Islamic Law (Shari’a). I think that the essential questions raised by the conflict between Muslim countries and the West today are not the recognition of the religious

commonalities and differences existing between Islam and Christianity, but the different ways to look at the relation between religion and state. The clash of civilizations does not derive from the difference of religions but from the different forms of structuring the society, and the relation between religion and state.

In spite of that, this Declaration gave a good religious point of departure to start a dialogue concerning the future of relations between Muslims and Christians, and a solid base to avoid the clash of civilizations which threatens the peaceful conviviality between Muslims and Christians in the world. This solid base is “to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom”.

2. The history of conflict between Islam and the West¹¹

The Council says that “in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims”. A historical overview of these quarrels and hostilities helps us to understand the present situation of mistrust between Islam and the West.

Some Westerners have argued that the West does not have problems with Islam but only with violent Islamist extremists. Fourteen hundred years of history demonstrate otherwise. There were through centuries a continuing and deeply conflictual relation between Islam and Christianity. At times, peaceful coexistence has prevailed; more often their relation has been one of intense rivalry and of varying degrees of hot war. Their historical dynamics, John Esposito comments, “... often found the two communities in competition, and locked at times in deadly combat for power, land and souls”.²

The Initial Arab-Islamic sweep outward from the early seventh to the mid-eight century established Muslim rule in North Africa, Iberia, the Middle East, Persia, and Northern India. For two centuries or so the lines of division between Islam and Christianity stabilized. Then in the late eleventh century, Christianity reasserted control of the Western Mediterranean, conquered Sicily, and captured Toledo. In 1095 Christendom launched the Crusades and for a century and a half Christian potentates attempted, with decreasing success, to establish Christian rule in the Holy Land and adjoining areas in the Near East, losing Acre, their last foothold in 1291. Meanwhile the Ottoman Turks had appeared on the scene. They first weakened Byzantium and then conquered much of the Balkans as well as North Africa, captured Constantinople in 1453, and besieged Vienna in 1529. “For almost a thousand years”, Bernard Lewis observes, “from the first Moorish

¹ Cf. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 1996, pp. 209-218.

² John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, 1992, p. 46.

landing in Spain to the second Turkish siege of Vienna, Europe was under constant threat from Islam”.³

By the fifteenth century the tide had began to turn. The Christians gradually recovered Iberia, completing the task at Granada in 1492. Meanwhile European innovations in ocean navigation enabled the Portuguese and then others to circumvent the Muslim heartland and penetrate into the Indian Ocean and beyond. The Ottomans made one last push forward besieging Vienna again in 1683. Their failure there marked the beginning of a long retreat, involving the struggle of Orthodox peoples in the Balkans to free themselves from Ottoman rule...In the course of a century or so the Ottoman Empire” that was “the scourge of Christendom” was transformed into “the sick man of Europe”. At the conclusion of World War I, Britain, France and Italy administered the coup de grace and established their direct or indirect rule through the remaining lands except for the territory of the Turkish Republic.

The causes of the conflict between Islam and Christianity through history flow from the nature of the two religions and the civilizations based on them. Conflict was, on the one hand, a product of difference, particularly the Muslim concept of Islam as a way of life transcending and uniting religion and politics versus the Western Christian concept of the separate realms of God and Caesar. The conflict also stemmed, however, from their similarities. Both are monotheistic religions which, unlike polytheistic ones, cannot easily assimilate additional deities, and which see the world in dualistic, us-and-them terms. Both are universalistic, claiming to be the one true faith to which all humans can adhere. Both are missionary religions believing that their adherents have an obligation to convert non-believers to that one true faith. From its origins Islam expanded by conquest and when the opportunity existed Christianity did also. The parallel concepts of “jihad” and “crusade” not only resemble each other but distinguish those two faiths from other major world religions.

There is today a renewed conflict between Islam and the West. What are the reasons of this renewed conflict?

First the fundamental different conceptions between Islam and Christianity concerning the relation between religion and politics remain. Second, there is now an Islamic Resurgence that gives Muslims renewed confidence in the distinctive character and worth of their civilization and values compared to those of the West. The West’s efforts to universalize its values and institutions, to maintain its military and economic superiority, and to intervene in conflicts in Muslim world generate intense resentment among Muslims. Third the collapse of communism removed a common enemy of the West and Islam and left each the perceived

³ Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, 1993, p. 13.

threat to the other. Fourth the increasing contact between and intermingling of Muslims and Westerners also stimulate in each a new sense of their own identity and how it differs from that of the other. Interaction and intermingling also exacerbate differences over the rights of the members of one civilization in a country dominated by members of the other civilization.

The Muslims today more and more mess the differences between their civilization and Western civilization, the superiority of their culture, and the need to maintain the integrity of that culture against Western onslaught. Muslims fear and resent Western power and the threat which this poses to their society and beliefs. They see Western culture as materialistic, corrupt, decadent, and immoral. They also see it as seductive, and hence stress all the more the need to resist its impact on their way of life. Increasingly, Muslims attack the West not for adhering to an imperfect, erroneous religion, but for not adhering to any religion at all. In Muslim eyes Western secularism, irreligiosity, and hence immorality are worse than the Western Christianity that produced them. In the Cold War the West labeled its opponents “godless communism”, in the post- Cold War conflict of civilization Muslims see their opponent as “the godless West.”

The problem for the West is Islam itself as a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power. The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the U.S. Department of Defense. It is the West, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture, and believe that their superior, if declining, power, imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world. These are the basic ingredients that fuel the conflict between Islam and the West.

3. The Muslim extremism⁴

The “Islamic threat” is, in the eyes of the West today, especially after Sept. 11, 2001, posed particularly by Muslim extremism. Islam is seen as a source of terrorism in the world. American leaders allege that the Muslims involved in the terrorism are a small minority whose use of violence is rejected by the great majority of moderate Muslims. This may be true, but evidence to support it is lacking. Protests against anti-Western violence have been totally absent in Muslim countries. Muslim governments, even the governments friendly to and dependant on the West, have been strikingly reticent when it comes to condemning terrorist acts against the West. On the other side, European governments and publics have largely supported and rarely criticized actions the United States has taken against its Muslim opponents.

⁴ S. Huntington, *Ibid.*, E. 263-265

The West sees Islam as a terrorist religion. There are many reasons that the one can advance to explain this view.

First the argument is made that Islam has from the start been a religion of the sword and that it glorifies military virtues. Islam originated among “warring Bedouin nomadic tribes” and this violent origin is stamped in the foundation of Islam. Muhammad himself is remembered as a hard fighter and a skillful military commander. No one would say that about Christ or Buddha. The doctrines of Islam, it is argued, dictate war against unbelievers, and when the initial expansion of Islam tapered off, Muslim groups, quite contrary to doctrine, then fought among themselves. The Koran and other statements of Muslim beliefs contain few prohibitions on violence, and a concept on nonviolence is absent from Muslim doctrine and practice.

Second, from its origin in Arabia, the spread of Islam across northern Africa and much of the Middle East and later to central Asia, the Subcontinent, and the Balkans brought Muslims into direct contact with many different peoples, who were conquered and converted, and the legacy of this process remains.

A third possible source of conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims involves what one statesman, in reference to his own country, termed the “indigestibility” of Muslims. Indigestibility, however, works both ways; Muslim countries have problems with non-Muslim minorities comparable to those which non-Muslim countries have with Muslim minorities. Even more than Christianity, Islam is an absolutist faith. It merges religion and politics and draws a sharp line between those in the *Dar al-Islam* and those in the *Dar al harb*. As a result, Confucians, Buddhists, Hindus, Western Christians, and Orthodox Christians have less difficulty adapting to and living with each other than any of them has in adapting to and living with Muslims.

Fourth, there is another explanation advanced by Muslims is that Western imperialism and the subjection of Muslim societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced an image of Muslim military and economic weakness and hence encourages non-Islam groups to view Muslims as an attractive target. Muslims are, according to this argument, victims of a widespread anti-Muslim prejudice comparable to the anti-Semitism that historically pervaded Western societies. This argument of Muslims as victims, however, does not explain conflicts between Muslim majorities and non-Muslim minorities in countries such as Sudan, Egypt, Iran and Indonesia.

Fifth, Islam is a source of instability in the world because it lacks a dominant center, and there was from the first century of the foundation of Islam, a conflict between Sunnites and Shiites, and there is a great diversity of interpretations of the true Islam. Some Muslims today criticize the Islam of Bin Laden and say that it is not Islamism it is rather Ben-Ladism.

Sixth, the demographic explosion in Muslim societies and the availability of large numbers of often unemployed males between the ages of fifteen and thirty is a natural source of instability and violence both within Islam and against non-Muslims.

Islam calls itself a religion of peace. Yet Islamic reaction to those Danish cartoons was anything but peaceful. How can we explain this violent reaction from Muslims all over the world?

The word “Islam” in Arabic means “surrender”, that is surrender to God, and the word ‘peace’ in Arabic is “salam”. Sometimes there is confusion between both terms. They say “Islam” is a religion of “salam” of peace. In fact Islam preaches “peace”, but not any human peace based on human agreements between human beings. The peace in Islam is based on the surrender of all peoples to God and to God’s law as expressed in Islam. That’s why they call the countries conquered, even by war, the land of Islam or the land of peace, while the other countries that are not conquered to Islam “*Dar al harb*” (land of war).

So peace in Islam is the final goal, the final state Moslem struggle for. And when other countries attack the Moslem countries, the Muslims must defend the cause of Islam and impose the peace of God. And when people insult the Koran or the prophet Muhammad, the insult is considered by Muslims as an attack to the peace of God. They have to defend this peace of God even by force, and they allow the murdering of all those who dare to insult the Koran or the prophet Muhammad, as did Salman Rushdi in his book “Satanic Verses”.

In these cases, war or murdering those who insult the Koran or the prophet Muhammad, is considered as a war of self-defense against Islam and against the peace of God. This is, according to Muslims, a case of “legal defense”. It is the same as in Christian theology one can have recourse to “legal defense” when one’s life is in danger or when our country’s security falls under the threat of the attacks of enemies.

What is the position of the Muslim leaders in such violent reactions? The voices of religious leaders calling to the death of people who have insulted Islam are the loudest voices, because they speak in the name of the pure Islam and they are defending the cause of pure Islam. It is easier for leaders to stimulate the religious emotions of Muslims by telling them that Islam is attacked by infidels, There is also another reason, which is political: When Muslim leaders see that their power are in danger to collapse they call to the “Jihad” against infidels. In that way the leaders, political and religious, strengthen their position among the population of Muslims who see them as “defenders of Islam” against the infidels. In general, and especially the Muslim population, the religious considerations are much stronger than any other consideration.

4. From the clash of civilizations to the building of a Civilization of respect and love.

Is the clash of civilizations between Islam and Christianity inevitable? Nothing is inevitable. The clash of civilizations can be avoided by mutual respect and by love.

The Western civilization cannot pretend to be a universal civilization, and impose itself to other countries. The West has to respect all other religions and all other civilizations. “The principal responsibility of Western leaders is not to attempt to reshape other civilizations in the image of the West, which is beyond their declining power, but to preserve, protect, and renew the unique qualities of Western civilization. Because it is the most powerful Western country, that responsibility falls overwhelmingly on the United States of America”.⁵

So it is in the interest of the U.S.A. and European countries: **first** to achieve greater politics, economic, and military integration and to coordinate their policies so as to preclude states from other civilizations exploiting differences among them; **second** to recognize that Western intervention in the affairs of other civilizations is probably the single most dangerous source of instability and potential global conflict in a multicivilizational world; **third** to collaborate with all the other countries to spread the justice in the world. There will be no peace without justice.

We are now in “an age when different civilizations have to learn to live side by side in peaceful interchange, in patient dialogue, learning from each other, studying each other’s history and ideals and art and culture, mutually enriching each other’s lives. The alternative, in this overcrowded little world, is misunderstanding, tension, clash, and catastrophe”.⁶

Can we find in Islam a basis for this collaboration between civilizations? I think we can. But there must be a new interpretation of Islam. With the Islam of Bin Ladin calling to kill “the Crusaders and the Jews”, there is no possibility of understanding. With the Islam of the extremists who see in the West in general “Dar al-harb” as opposed to “Dar al-Islam”, there is no hope of peace, but a permanent threat to peace in the world.

To avoid the clash of civilizations between Islam and the West, the first condition is to solve the Palestinian problem. Here we have a central problem which is related to the relations between Muslims and Jews.

The enmity between Muslims and Jews goes back to the seventh century to the first years of the foundation of Islam. When Muhammad started in Mekka his preaching and pretended that he was a prophet sent by God to the Arabs, the Jews

⁵ Ibid, p 311

⁶ Ibid., P 321

refused to recognize him as a prophet. And when he started in Medina the Islamic state, the Jews also refused to obey him, and there was a war between Muslims and Jews. So on both religious and political levels the enmity between Muslim and Jews goes back to the first years of Islam.

But through centuries, during the Muslim Caliphate in Damascus and in Baghdad and in Spain (Andalous), there was a peaceful collaboration between Muslims and Jews, as far as Jews accepted the rules of the Islamic government and did not plot against it. So we see through centuries Jews living in peace with Muslims in all the Arabic countries: in Syria, Irak, Palestine, Yemen, Egypt, North Africa.

The enmity was ignited in Palestine with the creation of the State of Israel. So it was not a war between religions. Because the Judaism as religion is recognized by the Koran as a religion of revelation, like Chistianity. Both Judaism and Christianity are called by the Koran “Religions of the Holy Books” (The Torah and the Gospel). And the Koran does not impose on Jews and Muslims to follow the Law of Islam (shari’a). It tells them to follow their own holy Books revealed to them by God.

The war in Palestine is not a war of religion, but a war of politics, a war of struggle to occupy Palestine. Fighting is between Arabs (Muslims and Christians) and Israelis, not between Muslims and Jews.

The Muslims say now that they have nothing against the Jews as members of a religion, the Judaism, but they are fighting the Israelis as occupying a Muslim land. And they are fighting the Zionist movement that decided, with the help of the West, and now with the support of the United States of America, to have a Jewish State in an Arabic and Muslim country which is Palestine.

The solution for the peace in the Middle East is to have two States: one Israeli and one Palestinian, both recognized by the United Nations and by all the Arabic and Muslim countries, included Iran.

Conclusion:

In her Declaration on her relation with the non-Christians religions, the Church affirms that all peoples of the earth with their various religions form one community (1); Further more the Church affirms that she respects the spiritual, moral and cultural values of all the other religions, and sees them as a ray from the Truth which illumines every human being.

The dialogue in an atmosphere of mutual respect and Love is the only way to avoid the clash of civilizations. Instead of the clash of civilizations in plural, the civilized world has the obligation to build a Civilization (in singular) of peace and love.

Our guide in this goal is not the will of one nation to dominate the other nations, or of one religion to eliminate the other religions, but the recommendation of our Lord Jesus Christ: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbors and hate your enemy’. But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for He makes His sun rise on the bad and on the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust... So be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:43-48).