

ISLAMISM AND CHRISTIANISM

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The peace of the world in the future largely depends upon the relation between Christians and Muslims. Given the inevitable encounter of the two religions, there seem to be only two possibilities: either they will learn to cooperate, coming to some mutual understanding or else they will engage in violent activity, harmful to both religions and to the whole world. On Nov. 6, 2007, Saudi King Abdullah met with Pope Benedict XVI and presented him with a golden sword which did not seem to be a helpful symbol of their relation. But at least it was a more hopeful step than the Pope's ill-advised comments in his speech at Regensburg the previous year that set off a worldwide Muslim protest.

Christianity and Islam are not the only religions of the world. But with more than a billion followers in each camp and with passionate commitment demanded in each of them, the Christian church and the Muslim ummah dwarf other religions in size and in the power to do both good and bad. World leaders – that is, political and intellectual world leaders – tend to dismiss the importance of religion and as a result they are usually ignorant of the history and organization of any religions. They also underestimate the power of religion. During the Iran hostage-taking in 1979 it was said that everyone in Washington was speed reading the Quran; today there is still a profound lack of understanding of Islam.

Occasionally, when a terrorist acts in the name of religion there is a rush by some people to condemn the religion; that action is followed immediately by other people who wish to distinguish between the genuine form of the religion and a few dissidents. This sequence has occurred many times in recent decades with reference to Islam. The intention to make such a distinction is admirable. A few days after Sept. 11, 2001, George W. Bush gave a speech at the National Cathedral that defended Islam while condemning the bombers. It was one of Bush's better offerings and it may have had some good immediate effects. But is there anyone who thinks that Bush knew Islam well enough to distinguish between genuine and false developments or to understand why disaffected Muslims are outraged at the United States?

Christians and Muslims tend to see their own religion as the opposite of the other. A visitor from another planet might first be struck by their similarity. The two religions emerged from reform movements allied with Jewish religion. Each conceives of itself as a capping stone to the true religion that runs from Adam through Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Islam, of course, has one extra prophet, Jesus, before the final "seal of the prophets," Muhammad. The Christian claim to be the last word was overruled by the Quran.

Muslims did not negate the Christian religion. In fact, Muhammad saw Torah, Gospel, and Quran as a single narrative. But what is intended as a complement may be received as an insult, something that is a regular occurrence when one religion claims to complete another. Nevertheless, in lands under Muslim control, Jews and Christians were "protected peoples." Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived peacefully in medieval Spain under Muslim rule. It is not a coincidence that when Ferdinand's Christian army drove the Muslims out of Spain, the expulsion of the Jews followed a few months later.

The other shining example of Muslim-Christian cooperation was sixteenth-century India. While Christians in Europe were killing one another, the Muslim Emperor Akbar presided over a court composed of Christians, Hindus, Zoroastrians, and Muslims. Akbar invited Portuguese Jesuits to his palace and sponsored lively debates with Muslim mullahs. Akbar, and his son Jahangir who succeeded him, were fond of Christian paintings and statues. Akbar was an unusual ruler but

Christians and Jews generally lived without oppression under Muslim rule. The Christian record is not so positive.

Neither Islam nor Christianity looks much like the reform movements begun by Jesus and Muhammad. Both reformers were considered dangerous because they upset the social, economic, political, as well as the religious establishments of their times. Each reformer gathered a small group – apostles or companions – who carried on the message of the founder and aggressively missionized the surrounding world. Both movements became “religions,” institutions subject to internal conflicts and a struggle over who has legitimate claim to the founder’s mantle. In the Christian church, the reform of the sixteenth century gave birth to Protestants and Roman Catholics. At first, they were called different religions but very quickly became two versions of a religion called Christianity. Muslim struggles for reform issued early in Shi’ite and Sunni versions of Islam.

Early in its history, Islam was out in front of Europe in philosophy, science, and social reform. Medieval European philosophy was dependent on Arabic translations of Greek philosophers. Thomas Aquinas was in respectful dialogue with the great Muslim thinker Ibn Rushd. The center for medicine and studies of the human body was Baghdad where the genius Abn Sina carried out his work. Islam, however, became frozen under the impact of the jurists called the Ulama, and that was followed by the onslaught of European colonialism. (The term “holy war” was coined by Christian crusaders; in the Quran there are just wars and unjust wars but no war is holy).

Both religions remain vulnerable to would-be reformers who turn the religion into a hard-edged ideology which brooks no opposition. Only the perfectly pure members who conform to the code are on God’s side; everyone else in the world is a real or potential enemy. These religious reformers call for an end to intermediaries between God and the people. But the obvious intermediaries are the reformers themselves who can justify any violent tactics because these are carried out in the name of God.

The Muslim division of the world during the Crusades into dar-al-Islam (the world of belief) and dar-al-Harb (the world of unbelief) is understandable for the times but no longer accepted by responsible Muslim leaders. As Islam has struggled in modern times to emerge from colonial oppression, it has produced some angry reform movements. A typical and powerful example is an eighteenth-century movement led by Abd al-Wahhab. In the early twentieth century this intolerant and vicious Wahhabi sect made allies with the new Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and has since been a powerful force in that country. (The sect was supported by the United States as an ally against Soviet communism; a young Saudi named Osama bin Laden was hired by the U.S. to oversee the successful campaign against the Soviets in Afghanistan).

Another reform movement in Islam was led by Sayyid Qutb who during two years in the United States was appalled at the materialism of the country. He returned to Egypt in 1950 and was determined to establish a total Muslim system. Qutb was hanged in 1966 for his subversive activities but his Muslim brotherhood is still very active. Out of this reform was born the term “Islamism,” a political, economic, religious ideology. It is in deadly opposition to non-Islamist attitudes within Muslim countries and its counterpart ideology in Christian countries.

I have suggested in the title the term “Christianism” as the parallel to Islamism. Within Europe and North America it may be difficult to recognize Christianity but outsiders know it well. European countries think of themselves as post-Christian but Christian ideas and attitudes are present just below the surface. A secularized Europe has not left behind Christian ideology. What saves Europe these days from aggressive Christianists is exhaustion from twentieth-century wars.

European countries do not know how to deal with Muslims but they would like to find peaceful ways.

The same is not true of the United States. Almost no one doubts that the chief Christianist country in the world today is the United States of America. The exception, of course, is the United States which sees itself as a peaceful nation intent on spreading freedom to the rest of the world. A missionary stance has been present since the planting of the British American colonies and the founding of the nation of the United States. This modern experiment has always been an uneasy combination of evangelical Christianity and secular enlightenment. These two forces see themselves as deadly opponents but they are in full agreement that “America” has a mission to the world.

“America” is the name of a dream with Christian and secular variations. Secular enlightenment brought the Christian dream from the endtime to the middle of time, but the dream America still has an apocalyptic tinge. In both cases, we are, in the phrase of Madeleine Albright that was endorsed by Hilary Clinton, “the indispensable nation,” the beginning of the Kingdom of God or the beacon of freedom, democracy, and peace. To much of the rest of the world, the American dream is a frightening nightmare. The cry of “Death to America,” which has been popular since the Iranian hostage-taking, properly identifies the enemy not as the United States but America as the political/religious ideology easily manipulated by U.S. politicians.

The missionary impulse of the country deserves the name Christianity, an ideology whose roots are a distortion of the Christian religion. Catholics and Protestants in the United States should be concerned that the news media now identify the term “Christian” with a political/religious minority who think of themselves as the only true Christians. Like Islam, Christianity can be a powerful force for good. But also like some Muslims, Christians who think they have a direct line to God can be the source of violent conflict. Their attitude to other nations is similar to the nineteenth-century British schoolmaster who said: “Boy, you will believe in the Holy Ghost by five o’clock today or I will beat it into you.”

England has provided the template and the United States government seems intent on repeating every mistake of imperial Britain, including the democratizing of Iraq. Christianity is not simply a religion. Like Islamism, it is a social, political, economic set of ideas fueled by religious passion. Its obvious proponents are preachers who wish to reestablish “Christian America,” which thankfully has never actually existed. Fortunately, these ideologues who use Christian language do not have their own army and air force.

The really frightening people are government leaders who have absorbed Christianity from their childhood and are oblivious of its condescension and aggression. The U.S. president is the pope of Christianity but unlike Pope Francis he has an army, an air force, and an obscenely large military budget. With all good intention and culpable ignorance, he has wreaked havoc with other people’s lives. According to Robert Draper, in his ironically titled biography, *Dead Certain*, George W. Bush had no doubts about his policies.

For religious ideologues, the struggle between good and evil cannot be distracted by collateral violence. In 2004 when George W. Bush’s proclivities were fully evident, fifty-eight million voters endorsed him. And beyond that, many on the political left agreed with his ends while wishing to have different means. Voting to give Bush the power to do what was necessary to remove a foreign dictator was a recipe for disaster. Bush launched his “crusade,” a word he innocently used because it is a central category of Christianity. Nothing so unifies Islamism as the Christianist crusader’s cry “God wills it” or the contemporary version “America says so.”

The most frightening thing that has happened since 2001 is that the United States has almost disappeared into America. Throughout the history of the country there has always been a tension between the existing nation-state and a dream that has biblical origins. "America" was Europe's dream of the promised land. The dream sustained poor immigrants who believed that life in the United States would be better for their children. It sustained the country through a savagely fought internal war "testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure." It remains a wonderful and hopeful idea so long as it does not become the religion of the nation.

A nation-state that thinks of itself as God's chosen people destined to lead the world can do unimaginable damage. The secular left is oblivious of its own complicity in the Christianity of the American idea. The progressive movement in the United States had its origins in evangelical preaching.

The most important force for restraining Christianity has always been the Christian churches and Jewish communities who have benefited by the pull of America but who must not let themselves be absorbed by an idea that becomes an ideology. The 500 year-old religious idea of America needs to be restrained by older religious traditions. The dream of freedom and justice for all has to be anchored by 2000 years of Christian, 3000 years of Jewish, and 1400 years of Muslim beliefs and practices.

Catholics and Jews had a difficult time finding acceptance in a country that proclaimed religious tolerance. Eventually they could find a place under the aegis of America because they are biblical religions. As a non-biblical religion, Islam has a more difficult task. Nevertheless, the future of religion in the United States largely depends on whether Muslims can find acceptance here, bringing both new energy and a new mirror of self-criticism for religions that are already present. Unfortunately, Christianists have had no place for Islam. Christians and Jews have the responsibility of recognizing Muslims as siblings in the family of Abraham (Avraham, Ibrahim). The three religions have to present a united front in creating a world of religious diversity that is dedicated to peaceful cooperation.