When Islam and Christianity clash, and when they don't

Muslims and Christians can live peacefully together. I've seen it.

by Patrick J. Ryan in the November 22, 2017 issue

A Muslim woman and friends in Lagos, Nigeria, after Eid al-Adha. AP Photo / Sunday Alamba.

More than 50 years have passed since I first encountered Muslims. I was teaching English at a Catholic school in Akure, a provincial capital in southwestern Nigeria, when one of the Muslim students at the school took me into town for one of the two great festivals of the Muslim calendar. In Arabic that festival is called Eid al-Adha, the Feast of the Oblation. It occurs at the climax of the annual hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca.

The oblation referred to is the sacrifice that Abraham was willing to offer of his only son, a story told in the Qur'an as well as Genesis. The relevant verses in the Qur'an are from Sura 37:

> [Abraham] said: "My son, I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice you. Look, now, what do you think?" [The son] replied, "Do what you have been commanded. God willing, you will find me among the patient." When they had both surrendered themselves [to God] and [Abraham] had laid his son face down, We [God] called out to him, "O Abraham, you have proved true to the vision." Thus do We reward those who do good. (Qur'an 37:102–105)

A particularly important phrase in this passage is "when they had both surrendered themselves." In Arabic that is only two and a half words: *fa-lammā aslamā*. Literally it says (in the dual form of the verb from which the verbal noun *islam* derives) "when [the two] submitted." The submission or *islam* of both Abraham and his only son, thought to be a fully grown man in later Jewish tradition and in Islamic tradition as well, is the ideal of faith for all Muslims.

The Qur'an does not give the name of Abraham's only son, but nearly every Muslim is certain that the period in which Abraham had an only son predated the time when Abraham's wife Sarah conceived and bore him the son named Isaac. The son Abraham had earlier, by his wife's female servant, Hagar, was Ishmael (or Isma'il in the Qur'an), and he is looked upon as the ancestor of the Arab people. A similar tradition is also attested in Genesis.

On the feast of Eid al-Adha, Muslims in Nigeria and in many other parts of Africa make an effort to go home and visit relatives, much the way Nigerian Christians do at Christmas. The Yoruba name for that feast is Odun Ileya. Given the folk etymology of the second word, the feast could be translated as the "Feast of 'Let's Go Home.'"

Akure, a majority Christian town, was bustling with members of the large Muslim minority the day I went there with my student. What surprised me most was the procession to the outdoor prayer field, led by the paramount chief of Akure, Oba Adeshida II, whom I had met sometime earlier. My surprise was because Oba Adeshida II was an Anglican Christian. He was borne in a litter to the Muslim praying ground because, as the father of all Akure people, he was also the father of the Muslim minority in Akure. There he sat, swathed in white, waving an elephant tail

switch and greeting all of us who lined the streets that April day in 1965.

I trace to that day my desire to learn more about Islam and more about the African societies where Islam has taken root. The Yoruba, 30 million or more in number today, half Muslim and half Christian, are able to live together peacefully despite religious differences. They have fascinated me ever since that early encounter. And southwestern Nigeria is not the only place in Africa where Muslims and Christians live together in peace; I have seen this happening in Senegal and the Gambia, both 90 percent Muslim, as well as in Ghana, where at least two-thirds of the population is Christian.

Many non-Muslims who today are counted as experts on Islam in the United States began their intellectual journey into Islam at the time of one or another clash between the West and the Islamic world, especially in the Middle East. These clashes over the past 50 years include:

- The Six-Day War between Israel and its Arab neighbors in 1967.
- The Arab Oil Embargo of 1973 in response to the so-called Yom Kippur/Ramadan Arab-Israeli War in October of that year.
- The Iranian hostage crisis of 1979, when over 60 American diplomats were kidnapped and held hostage in Iran for more than a year.
- The Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, during which the United States armed the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistanis who were resisting the Soviets.
- The Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988, in which the United States backed and armed the government of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.
- The rescue of the absolute monarchy of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, leading to the First Gulf War of 1991 during the presidency of George H. W. Bush.
- The devastating attack by Muslim airplane hijackers on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, as well as the potential attack on the White House thwarted in rural Pennsylvania by brave passengers, on September 11, 2001, an event that finally led to the Second Gulf War of 2003, when the United States and a “Coalition of the Willing” went after weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Those weapons turned out not to be there. Most of the hijackers on September 11 were Saudis; none were Iraqis, but the United States attacked Iraq.
- The collapse, after the Second Gulf War, of Iraq and then Syria, states that were created in the wake of World War I when the European powers carved them out of the carcass of the Ottoman Empire. Other states carved out at that time

include Jordan, Kuwait, Greater Lebanon, British Mandated Palestine, various plutocratic but tiny Gulf emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Sultanate of Oman, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and last but not least, Yemen, divided, united, and then divided again.

My own interest in Islam began before all that recent history, and in a very different setting—one where Muslims and Christians live as brothers and sisters, sometimes in the same household. There are hardly any Christian Yoruba who do not have Muslim relatives, and there are hardly any Muslim Yoruba who do not have Christian relatives. They celebrate each other's feasts. Some parts of the Middle East used to be like that too—for instance, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. But that coexistence, sadly, is waning.

I have taught Islamic studies for many years and am often asked by my students why things have gone so badly in the Islamic world over the past 50 years. The answer is complex, but it begins with understanding that Muslims believe that Islam, submission to God, like the submission to God of Abraham and Ishmael, should eventuate in success in this world. The Islamic call to worship (*adhan*) issued five times daily invites Muslims not only to formal worship, *salat*, but also to *falah*, a term that includes the notion of flourishing in this world. It is sometimes also translated as *prosperity* or *success*.

In a book first published six decades ago, *Islam in Modern History*, the late Canadian Islamicist Wilfred Cantwell Smith made a sage observation about the difference between later Islam and Islam in its historical origins in the seventh century CE: "Of the early history of Islam on earth, a salient characteristic is overt success. This is in sharp contrast with the early Christian counterpart as well as with the late Islamic." Early Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries spread throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Southwest Asia like wildfire. In a much later era, from the time of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 until the mid-20th century, Islamic societies found themselves colonized by European powers.

Although oil wealth has enriched some Muslim countries, it has not enriched very many people, and some of the most populous countries in the Middle East have virtually no oil wealth at all: Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco. There is more natural gas than oil produced in South Asia, especially in countries with large Muslim

populations like Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. The wealth derived from these extractive industries, however, has not benefited the majority of their citizens. South Asian Muslims manufacture many things useful to the rest of the world, such as clothing and electronics, but the remuneration for the average worker in those enterprises is scandalously low. All too many South Asian Muslims have had to eke out their existence as domestic servants, often badly exploited, in the oil-rich countries of the Middle East.

The lack of a theology of suffering derived from the Qur'an, especially in the majority Sunni tradition, marks that faith tradition off from Judaism and Christianity, and even from Shi'ite Islam. Job, the quintessential man of sorrows in the Hebrew Bible, plays a very minor role in the Qur'an, and the Qur'an pays more attention to his ultimate prosperity than to his suffering (Qur'an 21:83–84; 38:41–44). The Qur'an is normally understood by Muslims to deny that Jesus died on the cross (Qur'an 4:157–58); there is no sense in Islam that God has shared the sufferings of human beings.

Sunni Muslims expect and hope that the upright will be vindicated both in this world and in the world to come. Had Muhammad been killed by his Meccan adversaries while he was an exile in Medina, Sunni Muslim theology of history might have been very different. Muhammad's victory over Mecca in the year 630 and the overturning of the idols in that city's central shrine, the Ka'ba, paved the way to a Muslim theology of success. Muhammad and his loyal companions—confederates from his Meccan days and allies made in Medina—succeeded in this world. At death, Muhammad and his loyal disciples entered into the ultimate success, the ultimate flourishing of the world to come.

Shi'ites (who are less than 10 percent of the world's Muslims but the majority of Muslims in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan, as well as substantial minorities in other Middle Eastern and South Asian countries) experienced many more reversals in their foundational era. As a result, Shi'ite Muslims have a place in their political theology for suffering and defeat. They have developed a sense of tragedy derived from the martyrdom of the Shi'ite imams descended from Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, especially the sufferings of Ali's younger son, Husayn, killed with his family on the battlefield of Karbala in Iraq by Sunni Muslims in the year 680.

This history helps explain the anger of many Muslims, who react against the apparent historical failure of Islam. *Salat* may continue but *falah* has not always

been achieved. Sunni Muslims in particular feel that the caliphate, the political (but not prophetic) succession to Muhammad, has failed, despite a few eras of splendid florescence. For them, the Turkic domination of the Sunni Muslim Arab caliphate after the tenth century, the Mongol destruction of the Sunni caliphate in Baghdad three centuries later, the Ottoman usurpation of the caliphate in 1517, and the secularist Turkish abolition of the caliphate in 1924—are tragedies that add up to more than a series of unfortunate events.

The Khomeini era of aggressively militant Shi'ism in Iran (1979–1989) was very different from the more piety-centered faith of Shi'ites in previous eras. Khomeini, a crafty politician, had learned from Sunni as well as Shi'ite militant thinkers. It is a pity that American politicians are still obsessed with the capture and detention of American diplomats in Tehran between late 1979 and early 1981. Iran has changed dramatically since the death of Khomeini; President Rouhani, recently reelected by a large majority, is gradually undermining the authority of Khomeini's successor as Supreme Guide, Ali Khamanei. The aging tyrant is kept relevant only by his control over the thuggish Revolutionary Guards. That the Trump administration has sought to ban Iranians from traveling to the United States but not Saudis is a triumph of senescent memory over present realities. Contemporary Iran has, indeed, sided with the murderous Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, an apparent adherent of a heterodox subvariety of Shi'ite Islam, if he has any faith at all. But the Iranians do so in the hope of countering Saudi backing of Assad's enemies, the Arab Sunni majority of Syria and the Arab Sunni minority of Iraq.

The calamities experienced both by Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims over the past 50 years cast a shadow over Islam as a religio-political venture. I have not even mentioned in this catalog of reversals the humiliations that Muslims suffered at the hands of Crusaders from Europe, or the long-term results of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, or the subjugation of most Muslim peoples of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa to colonial rule by Europeans in the 19th and the early 20th centuries.

Christianity has had its own string of religio-political disasters, stretching from the time of Constantine to the modern era. The list would include the official establishment of the church in the late Roman Empire, with consequent deterioration of the church's spiritual authority; the fabrication of the Holy Roman Empire; the growth of national churches in Europe after the Protestant Reformation, some of them unable to distinguish their Christianity from their nationalism (notably in Nazi Germany); the distortion of conscience encouraged by the forced auto-da-fé

of the Spanish Inquisition; the loss of faith typical in European and American countries, which are now descending into moral anomie.

But there is this difference between the Christian failure to flourish in the sociopolitical realm and the Muslim failure. Christianity, at least as presented in its original, canonical sources, never set out to succeed in that way. The kingdom of Christ is not a kingdom of this world, according to the New Testament. When at its most authentic (historically not always achieved), Christianity has recognized that the secular realm has a powerful semiautonomy. Neither the New Testament nor the mainstream Christian churches dictate the details of political life, although a handful of Christian extremists still sometimes suggest that the millennial rule of Christ will soon replace current political regimes. Whatever may have been the case in earlier Christian eras, there are no longer Christian forms of hygiene, politics, economics, education, diet, and mode of dress. (All this does not mean, however, that what Christians and others do politically and economically does not stand under the judgment of God.)

We who are not Muslims can do little to repair the damage that Muslims have done to themselves over 14 centuries of their history, nor can they undo the harm we Christians have done to ourselves. But we who are not Muslims must realize that the humiliations inflicted on Muslims from outside—humiliations inflicted by the Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and secularist worlds—are significant to Muslims. Even George W. Bush learned to avoid the use of the term *crusade* in describing his response to al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

To understand the Islamic world, we have to look at the past and continuing injustices committed against Muslim populations. I single out particularly the oppression of Palestinians since at least 1948, the forcible inclusion of largely Muslim Kashmir in India since 1947, the suppression of Muslim minorities in parts of the Russian Federation and the Balkans, the hounding of Rohingya Muslims in majority-Buddhist Myanmar, the persecution of Muslims and other religious minorities in India whenever—as is true today—the descendants of the Hindu bigots who murdered Gandhi take control of government. Nor can we ignore the many acts of Islamophobia that have been cropping up in Europe and the United States, events suggestive of the ugly events of *Kristallnacht* in Germany seven decades ago.

If Christians cannot make up for the Crusades or the colonial era, at least we can look at contemporary situations of injustice. There is no doubt that Muslims likewise

must reevaluate their conquering past and learn to live in a pluralistic world. The Muslim persecution in the Middle East of Christians, Yazidis, Baha'is, and other religious minorities must stop.

As important as it is to remember this history, it's also important to remember the example of the Yoruba people. I cannot forget my experience with Yoruba Muslims and with how Muslims and Christians lived together as one people. Although there are manifold problems in other parts of Nigeria between Muslims and Christians, especially in areas ravaged by Boko Haram, Muslims of the Middle East and South Asia could still learn a lot about living a good Muslim life from the Muslim Yoruba.

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