



A RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION
IN CONTEMPORARY SYRIA

THE FATIH ISLAMIC INSTITUTE
AND ITS RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS

*Edited and with an Introduction
by Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi'
and David J. Goa*

Introduction

Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' and David J. Goa

This is an introductory book on a major theological institution in contemporary Syria: the Fatih Islamic Institute. Established in 1956 in Damascus by the late Shaykh Salih Farfour, the Fatih Islamic Institute has developed greatly since its humble beginning. Shaykh Salih Farfour's initial objective was to spread Islamic education by using modern means of teaching and empowering the students of the Institute to think about contemporary Islamic issues from a theological perspective. For that purpose, he opened the doors of the Institute to as many students as possible from across the Muslim world. He paid special attention to both Palestinian and Turkish students. In the first case, Shaykh Farfour sympathised with the Palestinians in their own tragedy; in the second he sympathized with Turkish students because of the radical secularization and westernization of Turkish society.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Syria was subject to enormous political and economic changes, as any country would be as it emerged from colonialism. Syria was able to achieve its independence from French occupation right after the end of World War II, in 1946. The post-colonial period witnessed a number of military coups, and the Ba'th Party, originally established in Syria in the early 1940s, has been in power in the country since 1963. Syria is governed by a young and Western-educated president, Bashar al-Asad, who inherited the presidency from his late father, Hafiz al-Asad, who ruled from 1970 until his death in the year 2000.

The Ba'th Party ruled in both Syria and Iraq; it ruled in Iraq from 1961 until the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime by American forces in March of 2003. From the very beginning, the Ba'th Party defined itself as a secular Arab socialist and nationalist party with the goal of liberating the Arab world from colonialism, freeing the economy from dependence on outside powers, and unifying the Arab world under the banner of nationalism and socialism.

In spite of its secular orientation, and the fact that the Ba'th Party was founded by secularized Arab intellectuals, many of whom studied in the West, the Ba'th Party has held a reverential position on Islam as a religion. The Ba'th Party never followed in the footsteps of Kemal Ataturk in neighbouring Turkey, who limited the role of religion in society. The Ba'th Party has always seen itself as a defender of both Arabism and Islamic tradition, since the Prophet Muhammad was seen by the founders of the Party as the greatest Arab hero.

It is within this context of 'reconciliation' between Islam and Arab nationalism that the Fatih Islamic Institute was launched in the 1950s. We do not have a precise idea about the number of Islamic institutions in Syria at the time, however, we are comfortable in asserting that the Fatih Islamic Institute has been one of the leading Islamic theological institutions in contemporary Syria. Currently, over 5,000 students are enrolled in its various programs; its curriculum reflects a wide range of topics covering such classical Islamic sciences as Qur'anic exegesis, hadith studies, Sufism, history, and orientalism. Since 1956, the Fatih Islamic Institute has graduated thousands of students from different parts of the Muslim world, both women and men. Some of these students have become imams, teachers, and professors in Syria, as well as abroad.

As an example, we should briefly describe the training of the Sunni religious leadership in Lebanon. As is well-known, the Shi'a religious leadership of Lebanon had usually received its religious education in either Iran or Iraq. For example, the late Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah,

who passed away in July 2010, had been educated at Najaf, Iraq, and after his return to Lebanon in the 1950s, he began to build educational centres for Shi'a leaders. Shi'a religious leaders would never go to al-Azhar University in Cairo to study Islamic theology and thought, and vice versa. However, a small number of Sunni 'ulama' in Lebanon received their traditional education at al-Azhar University. Many of them received their education at the Fatih Islamic Institute because of the proximity of Damascus and because the Fatih Islamic Institute has always prided itself on offering the same kind of Islamic education as al-Azhar.

What this means is that a large number of Sunni scholars in contemporary Lebanon owe a great deal of their education to Syria; it would be interesting to know whether they believe that Syria and Lebanon should be united. Another interesting fact is that most of the Lebanese graduates of the Fatih Islamic Institute have come from the countryside, which means that many mosques and theological institutions have emerged in the Lebanese countryside in the past five decades or so.

Because of the secularization of the post-colonial Arab world, some tend to think that religious intelligentsia and scholars have become an extinct breed. They point to their traditional education and say it is not on a par with that of graduates from Western institutions or that the 'ulama' in the contemporary Arab world are not as visible as the secular intelligentsia. It is our argument that the 'ulama' have been part and parcel of the public sphere in the contemporary Arab world and that their social and political role has been somewhat enhanced by the rise and fall of 'Political Islam' in many an Arab country.

The preceding, though, begs the question of the relationship between religion and state in the Arab world and the role of the 'ulama' in this relationship. There is no doubt that since the Muslim conquest of Greater Syria or Bilad al-Sham (which is defined today as Syria, Transjordan, Lebanon, and Palestine) in 638 AD, the 'ulama' have played a major role in the gradual Islamization of the country and the spread of the Arabic language. Because of the preponderance of the Christian factor in Bilad al-Sham, the issue of Muslim-Christian relations has been an interesting one. As Hussam al-Din Farfour shows in his very interesting article here on Christian-Muslim relations in contemporary Syria, the 'ulama' have always been in dialogue with the different brands of Christianity in the country; the fact that Christianity has survived in Greater Syria is a testimony to a healthy relationship between Muslims and Christians.

It is true that classical Islamic intellectual history records a number of religious polemics between Muslim and Christian leaders, especially as it relates to the meaning of God and the place of the sacred text in both religions. However, these polemics did not substantially change the positive course of Christian-Muslim relations in the country at all. Here one must bear in mind, for example, the religious position of Christianity in the present-day Gulf states as compared to that of Syria. In our view, Syria is far more advanced in this relationship than many other Arab and Muslim countries, due mainly to the long existence of Christians and Muslims in Bilad al-Sham. What that means is that Christianity in Bilad al-Sham has never been an accidental religion but has been at the heart of the Syrian people and historically precedes Islam in this region.

Because of this major historical fact, the current leaders of the Fatih Islamic Institute, Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm, Mufti of Damascus, and Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour, Vice President of the Institute, pay great attention to the issue of Christian-Muslim dialogue and relations. It is well-known that some of the most significant founders of the Ba'th Party in the 1940s, such as Michel Aflaq, were Syrian Christians, who paid their utmost respect to Islam.

The Fatih Islamic Institute has been, to our knowledge, the only Islamic institution in recent years in Syria to take the issue of Christian-Muslim relations seriously. It has always invited Christian leaders to visit and to participate in the various conferences held by the Fatih Islamic Institute in the past decade. (Please see the two articles by Kholoud al-Nounou and Souhaila Ramadan in this book.)

In addition to taking seriously the issue of Christian-Muslim relations at the local level, the Fatih Islamic Institute has engaged with a number of institutions internationally, most notably in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, the United States, and Canada. This approach has naturally raised a number of questions about the globalization of Islamic education, the relationship between the Muslim world and the West, and the position of the religious intelligentsia in Syria on urgent religious, political, social, and economic matters.

Undoubtedly, one of the major questions on the minds of almost every Syrian is the Arab-Israeli conflict and its impact on Syria, especially after Israel occupied the Golan Heights in 1967. Syria is historically part of Bilad al-Sham, which has included four interconnected countries: Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Palestine. The 1917 Sykes-Picot agreement put an end to the historical unity of Bilad al-Sham and placed both Syria and Lebanon under the virtual hegemony of France, whereas it placed Palestine and Transjordan under the virtual hegemony of Great Britain. Therefore, it is impossible to understand the origins of the Arab-Israeli conflict, or the origins of the rise of the modern Hashimite Kingdom of Jordan, without coming to grips with the Sykes-Picot agreement between two colonial powers that gave themselves the authority to decide the fate of millions of people for many years afterwards. There is no doubt that the Arab world is still suffering the consequences of such colonial agreements.

As can be seen, such issues as the West, Zionism, Israel, and the Palestine Question weigh heavily on the minds of many Syrians. Since 1948, Syria has shown a positive record vis-à-vis the Palestinian refugees and other Arab and Kurdish refugees who have come primarily from Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey. We also must mention that during World War I, Syria and Iran were two of the few countries in the world to receive hundreds of thousands of Armenian refugees, who were escaping the Ottoman genocide of the Armenian people. For example, the Syrian city Aleppo has perhaps the largest Armenian community in diaspora ever in one city. It is estimated that there were around 2 million Iraqi refugees in Syria following the 2003 American occupation of Iraq. During the 2006 Israeli attack on Lebanon, at least 800,000 Lebanese people sought temporary refuge in Syria. In the 1930s and 1940s, hundreds of thousands of Kurdish refugees emigrated from Turkey to Syria because of the discrimination carried out against them by the Kemalist authorities. The approximately 700,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria have been integrated totally into the Syrian economy since 1948.

Consequently Syrian society, with its multi-religious and multi-ethnic component, is quite complex. In spite of the interesting history of Syria, its unusual record of Christian-Muslim coexistence over more than fourteen centuries, and its current ethnic and religious composition, Syria's image in the Western world has been, on the whole, negative. There are various reasons that account for this sad fact, one of which, no doubt, has been the Arab-Israeli conflict and the general Western attitudes vis-à-vis Arabs and Israelis. However, we believe that Syria has not done enough to engage the world intellectually and religiously. What that means is that few people in the West, for example, know that almost 10 percent of the population in Syria is Christian; that Christianity has been part of the religious, social, and cultural make-up of the country; and that Syria has the oldest Christian community in the world: the Syriac Church.

The leaders of the Fatih Islamic Institute have understood this fact and acted upon it by engaging the global Christian community, especially from the United States and Canada. However, in our opinion, this is far from sufficient. As a country, Syria should encourage interfaith religious and cultural delegations to travel to the West and the rest of the world in order to highlight this important religious and historical fact of coexistence in Syrian society. We must also stress the fact that the Jewish community has had a long history in Syria. However, due to the Arab-Israeli conflict, most Syrian Jews have left the country since 1948.

The term ‘West’ means a number of countries and historical situations. In the first half of the 19th century, when the Ottoman political elites launched their ambitious Tanzimat project, they sought to modernize all the Ottoman provinces, including Anatolia, Eastern Europe, and Greater Syria. To the Ottoman Syrians, Tanzimat was a form of progressive organization of the various structures of state and society, including the military, education, and the bureaucracy. Tanzimat sought to borrow Western ideas and techniques in order to modernize the state. To many Ottoman Syrians, then, the West meant progress and prosperity. It is true that the upper echelon of the Ottoman religious intelligentsia rejected Tanzimat at the beginning, however, by the end of the 19th century, the majority of the Muslim ‘ulama’ in Ottoman Syria accepted it. To them, the modernization and preservation of the Ottoman Empire did not contradict the essence of Islam.

However, since the Sykes-Picot agreement, the West has meant colonization and dependence. It is interesting to briefly consider the position of the Syrian intelligentsia on the United States today. Syria’s relationship to the United States has been difficult and has been primarily determined by the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Syrian military and political elites were very nervous about the possibility of an American invasion of their country after the American occupation of Iraq in 2003. Syria was accused by America of supporting al-Qa‘ida’s people by sending them to Iraq across the Iraqi-Syrian porous borders. In addition, Syria has been accused by America of supporting Hizbullah in Lebanon, as well as different Palestinian organizations that are opposed to the Oslo Accords, such as the Hamas and Jihad organizations, and of nurturing Iranian influence in the area. We mention all of that since the ‘West’ looms very large in the writing and thinking of a great number of contemporary Syrians. This is the most significant fact, besides the Palestinian Question and Zionism.

This book is a humble contribution to the ongoing Syrian debates on many of the above issues, especially as expressed by three major ‘ulama’ who have been associated with the Fatih Islamic Institute: Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm, who acts as the President of the Fatih Islamic Institute and the Mufti of Damascus; Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour, Vice-President of the Institute; and Shaykh Muhammad Sa’id Ramadan al-Bouti, perhaps the most important Muslim theologian in contemporary Syria and a professor at the Institute. In the Arab and Muslim worlds, many ‘ulama’, who graduated primarily from al-Azhar University in Cairo, have been well-known. The most famous has been the Qatar-based Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who has written over 80 books on different aspects of Islamic theology and thought. Although al-Bouti has not attracted the same international fame as al-Qaradawi, there is no doubt that al-Bouti is a very significant Muslim thinker in contemporary Syria. He has written on a number of topics such as jihad, the biography of the Prophet, and Islam in Turkey.

We have included in this book a series of articles written by these three eminent scholars: al-Bizm, Farfour, and al-Bouti. These articles reflect the multifaceted occupation of these religious scholars, who have written on all aspects of Islamic life and thought. These scholars uphold the Qur’anic principle of dialogue and wisdom, in addition to being concerned about the

contemporary Muslim world and the plight of modern man in general. It will be clear from the articles of these Syrian scholars that although they are open to dealing with modernity and westernization, they are not ready to get rid of Islam or the Islamic tradition, methodology (which is based on the Qur'an and Sunna), and worldview. On the one hand, they advocate engaging modernity and westernization; on the other, they are proud of their Islamic tradition that can be accurately expressed in the theological lingua franca of Islam, Arabic.

By and large, these scholars belong to the long tradition of a trans-Islamic, Arabic-writing clerisy, and they are fully aware of the changing conditions of the Muslim world, due to the rise of Arab nationalism in the region a century or so ago. Nationalist intellectuals in Syria, as well as the rest of the Arab world, are, more or less, bilingual intellectuals who, in spite of their respect for Islam, present a different project of renaissance than that of the 'ulama' or the Islamists in the contemporary Arab and Muslim worlds.

We have previously mentioned that al-Bizm, Farfour, and al-Bouti at the Fatih Islamic Institute are all indebted for their education to al-Azhar University in Cairo. All three of them received their Ph.D. degrees from al-Azhar. Therefore, it is appropriate to raise a question about the relationship between these 'ulama' and the Gulf states, especially Islamic institutions in Saudi Arabia, the pre-eminent Islamic country in the world because of Mecca and Medina. The answer is quite clear from al-Bouti's perspective. (Please see his article in this volume on Salafiyyah.) It is clear that al-Bouti has a problem with the idea that the Saudi 'ulama' consider Salafiyyah to be synonymous with Wahhabiyyah. To him, Salafiyyah is not a legal school but a way of life that every Muslim, regardless of his or her legal school of thought, decides to emulate in the contemporary period. We would assume that both Abdul Fattah al-Bizm and Hussam al-Din Farfour share the same general position about that.

However, we must admit that there are some significant differences between Saudi Arabia and Syria. Saudi Arabia claims to apply shari'a. Although the Syrian constitution mentions that the religion of the state is Islam, and only a Muslim person can become the president of the country, Syria does not claim to apply shari'a like Saudi Arabia. We may raise a number of significant questions about the meaning of shari'a in the 20th and 21st centuries. What is shari'a? How do you implement shari'a? What is the relationship between shari'a and civil society? If we are to examine the debate on shari'a in the 19th century, we would soon discover that all these major Muslim reformers never spoke about the necessity of implementing shari'a. They spoke about the reform of Islamic practices. Discussion on the implementation of shari'a in Islamist revivalist literature arose only after the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate, and only in a political sense. No one in Saudi Arabia speaks about the implementation of shari'a, since first, shari'a has been there, and second, shari'a is not the privilege of the state only, but of society as well.

Syrian 'ulama' speak about the necessity of reform since, according to Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour, contemporary Islamic thought suffers from a severe crisis and even stagnation. However, the 'ulama' of Syria do not raise the issue of applying shari'a in Syrian society. In the case of Saudi Arabia, and in spite of the increased power of the 'ulama' in the modern Saudi state, one notices the beginning of a major crisis in Saudi Islam from the 1970s on. This crisis came out in the open during the second Gulf War, after the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990, when some leading Saudi 'ulama', especially from the Hijaz area, opposed the Saudi invitation to foreign troops to enter the country. There was a crisis over the role of orthodox Islam in the context of radical social, economic, and political changes. The discourse of orthodox Islam

aspires to be authoritative. Also, the *modus vivendi* reached between the ‘ulama’ and the state was showing signs of fraying in the 1970s and 1980s.

We hope that the various articles contained herein will give the reader a true glimpse of the religious situation in contemporary Syria. This book does not aspire to be exhaustive in nature. We believe that research into Christian-Muslim relations in Syria, religiosity in Syrian society, etc. is still in its infancy. We encourage young scholars to delve into these important fields and to apply the most advanced methods of the social sciences and theology in their fields of inquiry.

There is a long list of people that we must thank. We would like to thank all the contributors to this volume for their valuable contribution. We have benefited greatly from their articles and insights. We also would like to thank the three eminent scholars, Shaykhs al-Bouti, al-Bizm, and Farfour, for their generosity and openness to us while visiting Syria several times in the past five years. Through them we were able to discover the tolerant and open face of Syria and the Syrian people, and understand the complex national, regional, and international conditions surrounding this beautiful country.

Religious Institutions in Contemporary Syria: The Fatih Islamic Institute and its Religious Scholars

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Chapter 1

Biography of Muhammad Salih Farfour, Founder of the Fatih Islamic Institute (1901-1986)

Muhammad Salih Farfour's lineage goes back to Imam al Hasan ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet of Islam. Shaykh Farfour was born in al-Mahalla al-Jwaniyyah in Damascus in 1901. His father sent him to a traditional Islamic *madrassah* or *kuttab* in the old part of Damascus to study the Qur'an and the Arabic language. One of his earliest teachers was Shaykh Anis Talwi who enabled the young Farfour to memorize a great part of the Qur'an at the age of seven. In addition to studying under Shaykh Talwi, Farfour studied the science of Qur'anic recitation under the supervision of Shaykh Muhammad Salim al-Halawani.

After finishing the *kuttab*, Farfour was admitted to al-Kamiliyya school in Bzouriyya (Damascus) where he finished his high school with excellent marks. A short while after graduation, his father passed away leaving behind a large family that the young Farfour was obliged to take care of. Salih had three sisters and one brother and his mother..

He had to work in order to make a living for his big family. He opened a shop in al-Qubqabiyyah market next to Umayyad mosque, where he crafted chairs and small cabinets. He did other kinds of jobs too. For example, he would buy old estates and renew them, divide them and sell them as small residencies. He traded in lands, states, and wood.

His heavy duties had never prevented him from searching knowledge and getting education. He started purchasing books as much as he could offer and reading them in his spare time and memorizing poetry and prose. He had the talent of poetry that he began to nourish and empower by reciting the best of the old poems.

He used to frequently visit the *Arabic Scientific Union* listening to and sharing in its members' lectures and discussions. He also met Shaykh Hashim al-Khatib and got benefit of his public and private lessons. He used to take over the teaching position at his teacher's place whenever the teacher was absent in al-Qblabjiyya school. Eventually, his Shaykh introduced him to Shaykh Badr al-Din al-Hasani to whom he attached himself becoming one of the Shaykh's best students.

Shaykh Badr al-Din encouraged him greatly. Whenever the Shaykh would pass by his shop in al-Qubqabiyah he would say: "O son! wouldn't you read the lesson?" then he would take him to the school of hadith *dar al hadith*. He learned from the Shaykh's private lessons a sum of Islamic studies and other studies as well. For example, he learned Qur'an commentaries, hadith, jurisprudence, Islamic creed, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, principles of jurisprudence, inheritance law and other things. In addition, he used to attend the Shaykh's public lessons.

He sought Shaykh Salih al-Humsi from whom he learned inheritance law and legal system of the Hanafi school of thought through studying *Hashiat ibn 'Abdin* which he read and completed all of it by his own. After he finished it Shaykh Salih al-Humsi said: "It is sufficient for Salih [as a teacher] to have Salih [as a student]." Shaykh Salih al-Humsi would offer his lesson to Salih whether there were other students or not. Salih got so much benefit of Shaykh Salih al-Humsi, his knowledge, character, morals and his asceticism. He was deeply touched by the sheikh and he bonded himself to him. For him the sheikh was the true "jurisprudent of the soul." He used to serve the sheikh by purchasing stuff for him and doing other things as well.

In addition, he sought Shaykh Muhammad As-Sa'ati, the religious leader of the Circassian community in Damascus, from whom he learned astronomy and math. He would walk to his mosque weekly, which was outside of Damascus, spend the

night reading and learning with the Shaykh and then he would walk back to Damascus the next day.

He also learned from Shaykhs Amin Swid and 'Ata'Allah al-Kasm for whom he attended lectures on jurisprudence, particularly those which were taught from *Hashiyat ibn 'Abdin*. He learned also from Mr. Muhammad ibn Ja'far al-Kittani as he attended his public classes and from whom he got an *ijaza* (certificate). He was credited also by Shaykh Abdul Qadir al-Qassab al-Dir'atani.

Once he read a paper on inheritance to the end in front of Shaykh As-Sa'ati in one session which lasted for one night and one day. An incident that delighted the sheikh and made him describe Salih of having so much adoration for knowledge. He said: "He is a thief of knowledge who wants to take all of it in one night."

He traveled to many Arab countries wherein he studied under the supervision of scholars of these countries such as Muhammad Abdul Baqi al-Hindi al-Ayyoubi al-Ansari d. 1364 in Medina, Shaykh Abdul Qadir al-Shalabi al-Tarabulsi (d. 1369), Shaykh Muhammad Ali al-Maliki, Shaykh Omar Hamdan al-Mahrиси and others.

He visited Egypt and al-Azhar university several times where he met the esteemed scholars of al-Azhar. He used to serve the students in al-Azhar facilitating their paper work there and supervise their exams by himself. He also traveled several times to Palestine and visited al –Aqsa mosque.

He lived in seclusion for ten years in his house after the passing away of Shaykh Salih al-Humsi. He would never get out except for congregational prayers and Friday prayer. During that time he devoted himself to reading massive works and to searching for knowledge. His devotion for reading was undisturbed by a wife nor a son because he was not married by then. He used to fast, pray at night and eat only

what was necessary for his survival. He mastered Turkish and acquired good level at French.

He was assigned to teach Arabic language and Islamic studies in Beirut in the Shari'ah college of Beirut which was under the supervision of the Mufti of Lebanon, Shaykh Tawfiq Khalid. He became a professor of theology in the College, in addition to being the general supervisor for students' affairs, so he was appointed as a supervisor at night to guide, educate, help and take care of their matters. They would refer to him in their disagreement. He taught them swimming, playing with sword, and archery. He spread a spirit of chivalry amongst them and encouraged them to wear turbans and to grow their beards.

He did not stay for a long time in Beirut. He went back to Damascus after a while on the instructions given to him by Shaykh Badr ad-Din. He started giving lessons in Fathi mosque in al-Qimariyya and in Umayyad mosque between sunset prayer and night prayer and after night prayer. These lessons formed the core from which the Fatih Association, which was founded to teach Islamic studies. This Association gathered the students of these lessons in an institution under its supervision.

He was one of the founding members of the Association of Scholars, which was then a member in the scholars' league. In addition, he was delegated as a representative for Syria in the conference on Islamic research that took place in Cairo in 1392 A.H.

He occupied the position of Imam in the mosque of Manakhliyya (Sinan Agha) in which he worked as an Imam until his death. Sometimes he would let the leadership to some of his students or sons. In addition to that, he was giving the Friday ceremony until he moved to al Aqsab mosque (as-Sadat). This was besides

his Islamic teaching position in the mosques of Damascus that he had occupied since 1364.

After returning from Beirut, Shaykh Farfour worked on establishing an association which was devoted for spreading knowledge and serving its students. This was called the Fatih Islamic Association, which was established in 1376 AH, 1956 AC. It was located in Fathi mosque in al-Qaymariyya.

A group of young students who had dedicated themselves for seeking knowledge gathered around Shaykh Farfour. Those students established the core of the Association. Four of them quit their jobs and dedicated their times to support it. They were Shaykhs Abdur-Razzaq al-Halabi, Adib al-Kallas, Shu'aib al-Arna'ut and Abdul-Qadir al-Arna'ut. Shaykh Farfour supervised all of them in running the affairs of the Association.

The Association started its lessons in Fathi's mosque as simple study circles with no arranged forms. These study circles grew up to form a class which was the first class been taught by the aforementioned scholars. These students, as little number they were (around twenty), came from different nationalities. They were from Lebanon, Turkey, Africa, in addition to Syrian students. Classes began to grow and every year there was a higher level class. Gradually, the classes were shaped as six.

Six months later, the Association purchased a house in al-Qaimariyya in al-Shutti neighborhood by the donations that had been offered in which the sheikh contributed generously. It had been renewed before the students were moved there. There, it became a real school with discipline and clear educational syllabus.

General Information about al-Fatih Islamic Association: Goals and System:

We may point out to the following objectives of the Fatih Islamic Association after its foundation in 1956:

- 1) The basic goal of the Association is to produce faithful scholars who work on spreading the word of God by wisdom and good advise with sincerity and honesty not aiming at any worldly rewards;
- 2) Calling to God and spreading the knowledge of Shari'ah and Arabic language following the Qur'an, the Sunnah and the opinions of the distinguished Imams, the leaders of the known Islamic schools of thought;
- 3) Teaching Islamic Jurisprudence according to the Hanafi School of thought;
- 4) Supporting the students financially in order to achieve their learning objectives;
- 5) Enrolling the students in a six-year program focusing on all aspects of Islamic theology;
- 6) Preparing the students to do graduate studies in Islamic Studies.

There is no doubt that the generosity of the people and merchants of Damascus made the Fatih Islamic Association possible. Because of the growing demands on the Association, it was moved to occupy the ground floor under Bilal mosque in the year 1984\1985. Nowadays, it has more than five hundred students from around thirty different nationalities. It is supervised by Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm, Mufti of Damascus, and Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour, son of the late Shaykh Salih Farfour.

Chapter 2

Religious Education at the Fatih Islamic Institute

Nowadays the doors of the mosques are usually closed between prayers except for those which teach the Qur'an and other basic Islamic sciences. Most of them have no special educational agendas. However, a few mosques, al-Azhar in Cairo among them, have maintained their educational activities and programs throughout centuries. In Damascus, Syria, al-Azhar has students who attend classes at an Islamic Institute which has been growing for fifty years and which has academic links with al-Azhar. It is called the Fatih Islamic Institute. Its history tells you about transition from the traditional *halaqa*, study circles, held at mosques to a well-organized education institution with stable curriculum and grading scales.

The Fatih Institute is a young institution in Syria which has its origins in mosque lectures. It started more than fifty years ago as a small Islamic school, whose first graduates numbered fifteen. Eventually, and due to the gradual growth both of the number of students and teachers, it now occupies its own premises in the basements of three large mosques in Damascus, and will, hopefully, grow into a distinguished Islamic University.

It embodies, beyond all doubt, the thought and dreams of its founder, Shaykh Salih Farfour. Given that he had mastered different branches of knowledge besides Islamic sciences, the institution he had started is now prepared to follow in his footsteps and teach its students languages, banking and other non-religious sciences.

This chapter scrutinizes and relies on the documents available at the Institute, generously supplied by Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour, which, although not numerous, are well-worth looking into. Other information has been drawn from the interviews I had, the lectures and conferences I attended both in Syria and the United States, where some members of the Faculty at the Fatih gave talks or were present.

The research follows a chronological order . that is it begins at the beginning and moves along the different stages the Institute has gone through. In addition to the history, the reader will find in this chapter information on some aspects of the doctrine and theological belief, and will follow the development, especially as regards the women's department, that has led the Institute to send male and female students abroad to study interfaith dialogue and get involved in interfaith activities. Undoubtedly, it has been a brave step and a remarkable undertaking of the Institute Board as well as of the students' families, and, especially, female students themselves. It should be borne in mind that they were sent to the USA at a point when Syrian-USA relations were at a low ebb indeed, so much so that nobody felt inclined to predict what the future might bring. Not only diplomatic barriers had to be overcome, but also social and cultural. They also had to face a great deal of criticism, frequently from their closest relatives and best friends since for many Muslims sending women with no guardian to *Dar al-Kufr*, the abode of disbelief, is equivalent to major error. One might wonder about the legal position adopted by the authorities of the Institute and the scholars who supported the step, as opinions were by no means unanimous. Some scholars clearly opposed the decision. Given the success of the step which was to a certain degree controversial and considering the emerging branches of studies, the future of the Institute seems to be promising, although there are difficulties which will have to be overcome. Some of them are internal and some

others external. The final section of the present work is a reflection on the present day situation and a prediction for the future as regards the Institute's goals and guidelines.

The Fatih Islamic Institute:

Its founder, Shaykh Salih Farfour, was deeply involved in educating and teaching in several mosques in Damascus. Although he had always deeply felt the necessity of supporting students, especially those who came to Damascus from far away to seek knowledge of Islam, it was not the first reason for starting an institution which would help them in an organized way. Actually, its origins go back to the late thirties. In 1939 Shaykh Salih Farfour visited Egypt and was profoundly impressed by the extremely low standard of living of Egyptian scholars. His efforts to improve it brought to life spontaneously and almost immediately a small organization which aimed to offer those scholars effective assistance and improvement. A few years later their situation improved to such an extent that they were in a position to notify Shaykh Salih that the help was no longer necessary, and thus the funds were directed to help and support students.¹ In the year 1956 the original organization got consolidated and named the Fatih Islamic Organization.

Four years later the number of students increased considerably and the need for proper premises and clear curricula became evident. In 1960 the Fatih Institute emerged from the Fatih Organization.² Although separated by the four-year period of time, the transition

¹ Khadrawi, "al-'Ahdan Al-Fathi wal-Fatih min Hayat al-'Allamah al-Shiekh Muhammad Salih al-Forfour", 59.

² Khadrawi, 48.

was smooth and practically invisible. 1960 was also the year of the first graduation³, after a five-year course of studies, which means that the first graduates began in 1956 at the latest. The goals of the Institute were not only educational. Serving Allah and the Muslim community was, and is, one of the most important priorities.

Goals and Objectives:

Although the main goal has always been crystal clear, it, nonetheless, has always been written down, discussed and studied in order to make focusing on it and finding the best ways of achieving it easy. The goals of the Institute as mentioned below come from two sources. The first one is a document signed by Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm, Mufti of Damascus and the Principal of the Fatih Islamic Institute and by Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour, Vice-President of the Fatih Islamic Society and Chairman of Graduate Section at the Fatih Institute. The second source is the Institute's website.

- 1) To raise the standard of the Muslim community by spreading true Islamic knowledge and culture in order to help preserve Muslim identity and heritage;
- 2) To bring up good and upright generations, faithful to Allah, to their religion and their nation, so that they invite to Allah in a wise and kindly call;
- 3) To invite mankind to Allah using clear evidence as the base; to adopt moderate way in da'wah and avoid excessiveness and extremism;

³ Muhammad Muti' al-Hafiz, and Nizar Abaza, Tarikh 'Ulama' Dimashq (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1986), Vol. 3, p.515.

- 4) To instill sound faith, profound knowledge, righteousness and exemplary conduct in the minds of the youth so that they can spread across the world Islam of tolerance, brotherhood, mercy and justice;
- 5) To harmonize Muslim minds and hearts to help them understand shari'ah and truth so that the coexistence with modern ways of life is smooth;
- 6) To maintain balance between religion and science, Islam and Arab culture, and originality of the past with the modernity of the present day;
- 7) To work on the development of Islamic sciences in a constructive manner which would ensure the maintenance of the pristine foundations of Islam;
- 8) To spread sound religious awareness as well as correct education;
- 9) To respect the others and to cooperate with them on the basis of preserving one's identity;
- 10) To seek uniqueness while encouraging critical way of thinking in order to enrich human knowledge;
- 11) To spread moderate approach and to use moderate ways in da'wah and to avoid extremism;
- 12) To rehabilitate specialization in humanities and Islamic studies as well as the Arabic language studies through updated teaching programmes available all year round.

For the sake of simplification the above goals can be arranged into three categories:

- 1) Those referring to students and the Muslim community, such as 1, 2, 5, 7 and 13;
- 2) Those referring to community at large and the world in general, such as 3, 4 and 10;
- 3) Those referring to methodologies and the image of the Institute, such as 8, 11, 12 and 13.

In order to achieve its goals, the Fatih Institute established a long-term study programme, starting after elementary school and continues up to the Master degree. Ten years later, in 1970, the Fatih Institute associated itself with the historic and historical University of al-Azhar, Cairo, Egypt, on the initiative of its founder, Shaykh Salih Farfour. This cooperation was of vital importance for the students of the al-Fatih Institute, given the fact that it had never been recognized or accredited the Syrian authorities since its establishment in 1960. At present, as before, the fourth-year students travel twice to Egypt in order to take their exams there. Actually, al-Azhar certificate is not recognized in Syria either, and graduates from the Fatih and al-Azhar have a hard time finding jobs. Nevertheless, this fact has never diminished the number of students who enroll every year in order to pursue their Islamic education..

The Founder – Shaykh Salih Farfour (1318-1407/1901-1986)

His full name is Muhammad Salih bin ‘Abdellah bin Muhamad Salih al-Farfour al-Hasani al-Dimashqi [henceforward referred to as Shaykh Salih Farfour]. He was born in the Damascene district of Al-'Emara al-Ywwanyya. Since early childhood he sought knowledge from the well-known scholars in Sham. Shaykhs Anis Talwi and then Muhammad Salim al-

Halawani taught him the Qur'an and Arabic⁴, and by the age of seven he was well versed in both. He continued with the Qur'an, Arabic sciences and Fiqh at Al-Kamilyyah School.⁵

Just before his graduation from this school his father, Muhammad Salih, passed away, leaving him in charge of his mother, his six sisters and one brother. It was necessary to look for employment. He was remarkably successful as a carpenter. His workshop was in the market of al-Qabaqayyah, next to al-Masjid al-Umawi. In addition to carpentry, he was a real estate agent – he would buy old houses, reconstruct them, then sell them. He also traded in lands and wood⁶. However, earning a living did not prevent him from seeking knowledge. He completed his studies with the most respected scholars in Sham and he traveled to meet scholars from other countries.

Some of the scholars under whom he studied were:

- Shaykh Hashim al-Khateeb: Salih attended his public lectures and teaching circles and benefited extraordinarily from them. He used to substitute for Hashim at the school of Qablabjyyah whenever necessary. It was Shaykh Hashim who introduced him to Shaykh Badr al-Deen al-Hasany, whom he accompanies assiduously.
- Shaykh Badr al-Deen al-Hasany: Salih became one of the best students of this Shaykh. He studied with him religious and secular subject matters, such as Tafseer (Commentaries on the Qur'an); Ahadith (Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, may

⁴ Ibid., 507.

⁵ Al-Mawsou'ah al-Arabyyah 417.

⁶ Al-Hafiz and Abaza, 507.

Allah bless him and grant him peace); Fiqh (Islamic Legislation); Tawheed (Islamic Creed), Philosophy, Astronomy, Mathematics and others.

It is worth quoting here a conversation between the Shaykh and Salih, reported by Salih himself in his book "Al-Shaykh Badr al-Deen as I Have Known Him":

"I was teaching Geography in Al-Kamilyyah school in Damascus. I came to the Shaykh's private teaching circle, and had the following conversation with him:

I: Master, they say 'Rain is the water which has been raised from the earth, which goes up to the sky as vapour, and then this vapour drops join together forming clouds, and then from these clouds rain falls again on the earth.

Shaykh: So what?

I: Allah the Almighty says in the Holy Qur'an: 'And We send down pure water from the sky.'⁷

He went to the northern wing of the room and brought an old book covered in dust. He cleaned it with a piece of cloth and opened it, turned a few pages, put his finger near the bottom of one page and asked me to read. I read that Ibn Sina was sitting on the beach when he saw a waft of vapour going up to the sky, then a cold wind came, and then it rained and snowed. Ibn Sina wrote that rain and snow come from the earth as vapour which condenses and comes back to earth as rain or snow. The Shaykh paused waiting for my reaction.

I: I do not believe in philosophers' ideas.

⁷ Qur'an 25:48.

Shaykh: Why?

I: Allah says 'We send down' and they say 'They rose up'.

The Shaykh liked what I said. He stood up and brought another book, Al-Bujayrami, and opened it at the chapter about water which is acceptable for washing before *salah* and read:

'All water that comes down from the sky or is raised up from the earth...'

and he said:

'Ahl al-Sunnah disputed with the Mu'tazelites about this. The Mu'tazelites would say that it goes up from the earth to the sky and becomes rain. Ahl al-Sunnah would say that this is accepted.

I: Whatever Ahl al-Sunnah said, the Qur'ay says 'and We send down from the sky'. The Qur'an is absolute truth, and their opinion is doubtful.

He looked at me and said:

'Allah says: 'We send down' not 'We raised'. This Qur'an is addressing Arabs (meaning Bedouins who cannot understand subtle meanings).

Then, I was convinced and my trust in the Shaykh grew deeper."⁸

⁸ Umar Al-Nashouqati, Al-'allama al-Murabbi al-Kabir al-Shiekh Muhammad Salih al-Farfuri, Hayatuhu al-'Imiyyah wa Nahdhatuhu wa Atharuh, (Damascus: Dar al-Farfur, 2000), 48,49.

- Shaykh Salih al-Humsi from whom he took the knowledge of *usul* (the origins and rules of Islamic legislation), of inheritance and fiqh according to the Hanafi school of thought). He completed reading the book of ...title... on his own. The Shaykh would give the lecture even if Salih was the only one present. Salih established intimate relationship with the Shaykh, whom he would call 'the experiment of the soul'.
- Shaykh Muhammad al-Sa'ati: A scholar who lived in the village of Marj al-Sultan, 15 kilometers east of Damascus, and was of the Adigaian origin. Al-Sa'ati taught Salih astronomy and timing. Salih used to Sa'ati's place on foot, spend the night there studying, and then would walk back to Damascus. He used to do it once a week.
 - Shaykh Ameen Sweed.
 - Shaykh 'Atta-Allah al-Kasm.
 - Muhammad bin Ja'far al-Kittani.
 - Shaykh 'abdul Qader a-Qassab al-Deer'atanin.

Some of the scholars outside Syria who taught him were:

- Shaykh Muhammad 'Abdul Baqi al-Hindi al-Ayyubi al-Ansari (d. 1364 H in Madina).
- Shaykh 'Abdul Qader al-Shalabi al-Tarabulsi (d.1469 h in Madina).
- Shaykh Muhammad 'Ali al-Maliki.
- Shaykh 'Omar Hamdan al-Mahrous.

After the death of Shaykh Badr al-Deen and Shaykh Salih al-Humsi, Salih isolated himself from the community, except for prayers and Fridays for about 10 years. During this 10-year retreat, he studied many relevant books as well as several languages. He became

fluent in Turkish and good in French, and good in French. He was appointed to Beirut as a teacher of Arabic and Islamic sciences at the Islamic College there, under the supervision of the Mufti of Lebanon, Shaykh Tawfiq Khalid. In addition to teaching, he held the post of general supervisor of students' affairs. He was also their advisor and tutor, and taught them swimming, shooting and other skills. His relationship with them was extraordinarily harmonious.

On his return to Damascus he taught at Jami' Fathi in al-Qaymaryyah neighbourhood and at Masjed al-Umawi between Magrib salah and Isha salah, and after Isha. These lectures and circles of knowledge were the seed from which Al-Fatih Islamic Community sprang and grew into Al-Fatih Islamic Institute. Apart from his teaching activities, he was also the Imam of Jami al-Mankhlayyah, known as Sinan Agha. He would also deliver the Friday *jutba*, or else ask one of his sons to do it. Later on he moved to teach at Masjed al-Aqsab, known as As-Sadat. He was appointed as the representative of Syria at the Conference of Islamic Research in Cairo, Egypt, in 1392 H.

Shaykh Salih Farfour as a Teacher

After ten years of retreat, studying in solitude and reading, Shaykh Salih Farfour reappeared in public and started teaching at Jami' Fathi. His method of teaching, although it followed traditional way of reading and explaining relevant texts, was clearly distinct in terms of activities, interest in the young generation and the follow-up work with the students.

His aim went beyond mere preaching and reminding people of their Lord. His hope was to establish a generation of educated believers steeped in knowledge. That was the reason why he followed strict syllabus in his teaching, without desks or classrooms. Not even

students themselves were familiar with the entire plan of studies. They would come to the mosque to study a book recommended by Shaykh Salih. After having finished it, he would recommend another book, and so on and so forth. The relevant books read dealt with thirteen subjects. Each of them was studied from more than one source. They were:

- *Fiqh*
- *Tasawwuf*
- *Tajweed*
- *Mustalah al-hadeeth*
- Literature (*Adab*)
- *'Aroudh*
- *Nahw*.
- *Tawhid*
- *Tafseer*
- *Hadeeth*
- Philosophy (*mantiq*)
- *Balaghah*
- Qur'an sciences (*'Uloum al Qur'an*)

For each subject the Shaykh would choose the easiest book to start with, then he would gradually move to the deepest and hardest. Although all his students worked to earn their living or help their families, the Shaykh would meet them twice a day. The first time was after the *salah fajr*, the prayer before the sunrise. At this early hour he would be teaching fiqh in Jami' Fathi. The second time was after the *salah isah*, the night prayer, the Omayyad Mosque, where he taught according to a planned syllabus until the mosque was closed. After that he would go with his students to Jami' Fathi, or some other mosque, and spend a good part of the night teaching. All that in addition to the open lectures he used to give between *maghrib* and *isha'* at the Omayyad Mosque.

The Shaykh not only wanted to teach his students but also to educate them. He was fond of sports and instilled his enthusiasm in his students during the occasional trips he organized for them once in a while. They would go somewhere on foot, revise or discuss one of the books they were studying, or compose poetry, and on arriving at their destination they would give the call for *salah* and pray together. They would then have a rest, eat, swim or exercise with sticks. The Sheiks would in this way ensure that the theoretical knowledge his students had acquired was applied in their life style.

In order to achieve these goals, Shaykh Salih Farfour urged his students to study two sufi books so that they would purify their hearts and be equal to the weight of the task of transmitting the message they had. The books he used to teach Islamic behaviour, love of Allah and living for Him were:

- Al-Risalah al-Qushayryyah, which was written by ‘Abd al-Kareem al-Qushairi died in Nisabour in 465 H. and
- Ihya’ ‘ulum al-deen written by Imam al-Ghazali ⁹

It is advisable to give a brief description of one of them, Al-Ghazali's “Ihia’ ‘ulum al-deen” or “The Revival of Religious Sciences.” on account of its importance in the teaching syllabus of Al-Fath Institute.

Al-Ghazali (d. 505 H) was born in Tous. His father arranged for a certain sufi to take care of him and his brother Ahmad after his death. The man carried out the task until the

⁹ ‘Ashour khadrawi, 20-42.

money he had been given lasted, when, however, it ran out, and in view of the fact that he was a poor man, he advised them to register in a school where they would get bed and board. The two brothers followed his advice. When talking about their enrolment later on Al-Ghazali says: "We wanted it not for the sake of Allah, but Allah wanted it to be for His sake."¹⁰ In this way the door to knowledge was opened for them.

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali used to travel for knowledge and he has transmitted a story which was a turning point in the course of his travel. On his way back from Jurjan to Tous after having studied with Abu Nasr al-Isma'il and after having written down everything he had learnt, he was assaulted by a group of highway men. He was deprived of everything he carried, his notes included.

He was ready to part with everything, except those notes, therefore he asked their chief if he could get back their notebooks. The chief commented in return: "What kind of knowledge is it that you have that goes when your materials go?" Al-Ghazali then spent three years on revising and digesting the notes he had made so that never more it mattered whether his notes were with him or not.¹¹

Another turning point in his life was when he was at the peak of his fame in Nisabour, where he was teaching in a Nizamayyah school, and on account of his going for *hayy* his brother substituted for him. From Makah he went to Damascus and sat in the Umayyad Mosque, al-Masjed al-Umawi, wearing old rough clothes. Hence he wrote his book "Al-

¹⁰Muhammad al-Ghazali, Ihya' Uloum al-Deen, (...), ٣, ج.

¹¹ Ibid. ٤.

Ihya'". He went back to Nisabour and continued his teaching in a-Nizamayyah before going back to Tous to establish a school for jurisprudence there.

In the introduction to his book "Al-Ihya'," al-Ghazali points out the aim of his book and the reason behind writing it. He distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge and eventually between two kinds of scholars. Both kinds are in the category of religious knowledge but with different aims. The first one he explains, as the permanent majority that most scholars, intentionally or unintentionally, are seeking, teaching and spreading, is the knowledge of the jurisprudence and the law. They concentrate on the legislation and ignore the inner implications that they are basically supposed to apply. Most scholars of his time were concerned about teaching legislation, giving *fatwa*, discussing specific cases in fiqh, jurisprudence and giving legal judgments in their court cases.

The second type belonged to the path of the *al-salaf al-salih*, the righteous ancestors.

It is the path that Allah calls in the Qur'an fiqh (understanding), hikmah (wisdom), 'ilm (knowledge), dhya (brightness), nour (light), hidayah (guidance), and rushd (prudence). This type of knowledge, according to Al-Ghazali was forgotten. Dr Bankey Behari, the translator of Ihya' into English states:

"One reason he adduces for writing the work was the deplorable state in which both the literate and the illiterate were plunged. The guides and preceptors of religion, the custodians of scripture were mad after accumulating wealth and power. This evil trait had overtaken them so much that they had, by their deeds, blocked the path to salvation and life Hereafter. People reveled in flowery speeches and wild meaningless

discussions that turned their attention from the knowledge that would help them in the Hereafter."¹²

For that reason al-Ghazali starts his book with the Book of Knowledge, discussing the two types of knowledge and pointing out the importance of purifying intention. For him –"A little faith is superior to much practice."¹³

Such was the root and the ground from which the Fatih Organization and the Fatih Institute emerged from. The development at this stage depended mainly on the great efforts that Shaykh Salih Farfour had made to safeguard the survival and ensure the continuity of the teaching and learning process that he had started. His personal efforts were reinforced by those of some of his best students, whom he asked for help, assistance and support. Eventually, the number of students increased considerably and the syllabus was perfected.

Later on it became clear that still more intensive help was necessary and the Shaykh asked four of his students for entire dedication to students' affairs and the teaching process.

It became evident with the continuous increase in the number of students that the purchase of new premises was absolutely necessary. Proper funding and a permission from the government were needed and the shortest way to get both of them was to establish a non-profit organization which was a new step in the history of the institution.

¹² Bankey Behari,

¹³ Muhammad Al-Ghazali, The Revival, (...), 12.

Legal Birth of the Institute

In 1956, the Organization of the Fatih was established and received official authorization, following which the Fatih Islamic Institution was founded to accommodate the increasing number of students in an organized educational establishment. All were actively engaged in reaching out beyond the walls of the classrooms. Examples of this activity can be found in the available documents about the Fatih Islamic Organization.

An official document dated 1960, entitled "Statement of the Treasury and the Achievements of the the Fatih Islamic Organization between 1958 and 1960" contains a list of activities carried out by that organization and the institution in the period mentioned. They included:

- 1- Public Halaqat (study circles) in the mosques
 - Umayyad Mosque: Four study circles used to be held after *Salaat al-Maghrib* (sunset prayer) to teach *tafsir* (Qur'an interpretations), *hadith* (the tradition of the prophet Muhammad), *fiqh* (Jurisprudence) and Arabic language.
 - Sinan Agha Mosque: Three study circles used to be held there after *Salat al-Asr* (afternoon prayer) to teach *fiqh*, *hadith* and *tafsir*. Some of the local residents of al-Manakhliyyah- where Sinan Agha mosque stands- after having completed their studies became scholars and taught there later on.
 - Fathi Mosque: Islamic studies and Arabic were taught in it after *Salat al-Isha'* (night prayer).
 - Al Najjareen mosque: After Isha' prayer, Qur'an, *tajweed* (recitation art of the Qur'an) and *fiqh* were there.

- Al-Bareedi Mosque: After Asr prayer, fiqh, nahw (Arabic grammar) and tafsir were taught there.
 - Yaghoushyyah mosque: fiqh, hadith and tafsir were taught there.
- 2- Public Halaqat in the houses and market places. A significant number of shopkeepers, businessmen and merchants who were busy during the day asked Shaykh Salih to hold study circles for them in their houses so they could learn Islamic knowledge. The Shaykh, along with some of his students, agreed to teach in the houses of these people after *salat al- 'Isha'* (night prayer). Eventually, the shopkeepers, and the traders became students and knowledge seekers after a long period of alienation from Islamic studies.

Halaqat in the prisons and refugee camps The Institute would send preachers and scholars to prisons, Al-Mezza Mosque for example, and to refugee camps, Jaramana for example, to teach people and relieve their pain and suffering.

4. Sending Imams and preachers to rural areas

Dramatic decline in the care which is supposed to be given to mosques was taking place in rural areas and villages. Some mosques did not even hold Jumu'a meetings due to lack of knowledge and racking poverty.¹⁴

The Institute received numerous appeals from those areas for Imams and scholars, of which were dealt with and their needs were covered satisfactorily. Some of those villages were

¹⁴ Declaration of treasury and achievements of al-Fatih community during the period between 1958 and 1960.

'Abbadab, Kafar Batna, Blay, 'Afrin, Al-Zhawahrah, Adisa and several others on the Syrian-Lebanese border and in Lebanon¹⁵.

5. Sending Imams and preachers to Bedouin settlements

"If the rural areas were in need of Imams and scholars, the Bedouins were in the utmost need of such help."¹⁶ Three years before "The Declaration of the Treasury and the Achievements of the Fath Organization" was written the Institute had sent scholars to Bedouin settlements in order to teach them. Later on more pleas were received by the Institute from other Bedouin tribes and the intention to send other scholars to them was discussed in the statement.

6. Establishing and reconstructing mosques

The Institute sent a number of teachers and outstanding students to help reconstruct and reopen mosques in Lebanon which had been entirely neglected as places of worship or used as animal pens for over fifteen years.¹⁷ These efforts were successful, because of the generous contribution of the first faculty members and dedicated students.

The First Faculty

Shaykh Adib al-Kallas and Shou'aib al-Arna'out were the first two students who completely committed their lives to the development of the teaching and learning process in the institute. They were followed by Shaykh 'Abdr-Razzaq al-Halabi. They all quit their previous jobs

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8-13.

and offered their lives willingly to serve the institute.¹⁸ They were the seed of the faculty body that worked hard in order to see the first result of their work in 1960.

First Graduates:

First graduation party was held in 1960 with a total of 13 graduates from four different countries.¹⁹ The names are as following:

- Ahmad Nounati from Syria
- Uthman Qanat Sez from Turkey
- Aber-Rahim Tammam from Abyssinia
- Ahmad Omma from Lebanon
- Esmat Asoz from Turkey
- Ibrahim Ashjan from Turkey
- Ahmad Qerqmaz from Turkey
- Faisal al-Droubi from Syria
- Fadel Jan from Turkey
- Musa Jaberty from Abyssinia
- Ismail al-Majthoub from Syria
- Ahmad Touletkin from Turkey
- Tahseen Bileer from Turkey

The total number of students in different grades was 70 at the time.²⁰

¹⁸ 'Ashour Khadrawi, "al'Ahdan Fathi wa al-Fatih" 1988. 59.

¹⁹ Ibid., 61.

²⁰ Ibid., 62.

Women's Department

Although Shaykh Salih Farfour was fully dedicated to the task of ensuring first –survival, and then success of the newborn institution, the necessity of establishing women's department had always been one of his utmost concerns. He had both sons and daughters, and made no difference between them as far as education went. Fatimah and Lutfiyyah, his daughters, along with several other women were strongly encouraged by the Shaykh himself to take the chance of an integrated line of studies. Eventually, in the same year of the first male graduation, the female department initiated its course, following the same curriculum as men.

Originally it was a five-year curriculum for both departments, later on increased to seven, finally reduced to six in order to resemble the course of studies at public schools. In both sections mornings would be dedicated to classes as such, while afternoons were devoted to optional research and meetings with scholars. The period of pilgrimage was vacation so that those students who wished to perform it could do so, or else they would go home and visit their families. Friday was a holiday.

General look at the main study subjects:

Although a specific curriculum was always followed, students aspired to as broad education as possible and took every opportunity of getting it. Consequently, the official timetable was not the only one. Study circles continued at mosques and private houses. For example, Shaykh Salih would read from “the Revival” for al-Ghazali after *Salat al-Fajr* (dawn prayer)

for students interested in this book.²¹ However, there was a specific curriculum to be followed in the school.

The curriculum followed that of the University al-Azhar. However, for different reasons some changes were introduced to some of the syllabi. For example, although the stress was laid on the memorization of the Holy Qur'an, that was reduced to about twelve parts of it (*ajza'*). "Al-Sanousyiah" and "Sharh Al-Amali", both of them books on *Tawheed*, were replaced by a work by Shaykh Salih called "al-Risalah an-Nafi'a wal-Hojjah al-Qati'ah." The book of "Kitab Sharh Jawhar al-Tawhid" for al-Bajouri was replaced by "Sharh al-Sawi" because the latter was available at bookshops, while the former was not. The book of "Tadrib al-Rawi" for al-Imam as-Sayouti was replaced by "Sharh al-Bayqounnyah" and "Muqaddemat Ibn as-Salah."²²

Broadly speaking, the subject matters can be sorted out into seven categories as follows:

- *Tafseer*, the Qur'an exegesis, was taught at the same time as memorization was going on, which implied that students learnt the meanings of everything they had memorized. The depth of the required *tafseer* was gradually improved. For the first graders, it was to explain the meanings of some words and to give the general meanings of the verses. Brief *tafseer* was taught to the second graders, while the third and fourth graders studied the Arabic grammar from the verses, the Arabic language arts –such as *balaghah* (eloquence), and some doctrinal opinions. For the fifth and sixth graders, the curriculum went on to discussing in depth how

²¹ Ashour Khadrawi, 69-75.

²² Ashour Khadrawi 74.

laws were derived from the verses and the variety of opinions about a specific subject would be explained.

- *Ahadith*, or the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, were taught in four levels. Beginners were taught the forty *ahadith* collection by Al-Nawawi, with the explanation by Shaykh Salih. The second step was to teach the practical application of the *ahadith* in solving certain social problems. For this aim, “al-nasa’iyyat” by Shaykh Salih was taught. The third step was to study "Riyadh al-Salihin" by Al-Nawawi, and this aimed to urge the students to follow in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. The fourth step was about the laws or legislation rules derived from the *ahadith*. "Bolough al-Maram min Adellat al-Ahkam” by Al-San'ani were the required books for this stage. Some other sciences connected with *ahadith* were taught as well. *Mustalah al-Hadith*, the science of researching the authenticity of *ahadith* and its methods -such as studying the chain of narrators or the text of the *hadith*; *Rijal al-Hadith*, The Biographies of the Transmitters; and the *Sira*, The Biography of the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, are some examples of the sciences connected with *ahadith*.
- *'Aqidah*, Islamic theology, was and is still taught as a combination of *kalam*, philosophy, and *tasawuf*, Islamic mysticism. Both Both Ash’ari and Matouridi theological schools were taught in addition to some major books about Islamic

ethics and mysticism like “al-hikam al-‘Ataiyyah,” “al-Risalah al-Qushairyyah” and “Ihya’ Uloum al-Deen.”

- As far as *shari'ah*, Islamic Law, is concerned, both its parts were taught: *al-'ibadat*, the law of worship or the law of the ritual; and *al-mu-amalat*, the law of social transactions.²³ This was done according to the Hanafi school of thought for the beginners and later on as a comparative study, together with *fiqh al 'ibadat*, *fiqh al mu'amalat*, and *usoul al fiqh* –the rules of deriving legal rulings from the texts, as well as the law of inheritance. The books chosen for *fiqh* included “Nour al-Eidhah,” “Maraqi al-Falah”al-Ikhtyar le Ta’lil al-Mukhtar” and “Kitab al-Hidayah.” The books chosen for *Usoul* were “Sharh al-Manar” and “al-Tawdih ‘ala al-Tanqih.” For inheritance “al-Rahbiyyah” according to the Shafi’I school of thought and “Sharh al-Sirajyyah” according to the Hanafi school of thought"Al-Ahwal al-Sahkhsyyah", a book on the laws regarding personal matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, dowry, etc., was used for teaching practical applications of the Islamic Law.
- Arabic sciences and the art of eloquence have a significant importance because of their intimate relationship with all Islamic sciences, be it the Qur'an, *ahadith*, *tafseer*, *fiqh* or *'aqidah*. The strategy followed was to introduce students to all grammatical

²³ The translation is borrowed from Paul R. Powers from the electronic version of his book “intent in Islamic Law”

http://books.google.com/books?id=uB0tNdJZYnEC&pg=PA97&lpg=PA97&dq=fiqh+al+mu'amalat&source=web&ots=eJbZosGV-b&sig=5S488XOoS7UnBQ_afArziCHFMrE&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=4&ct=result
accessed on Sunday 8-10-2008.

rules from the first year and to repeat them each year with the gradual increase in depth and scope.

- Sciences not connected with religious studies also formed part of the curriculum. Mathematics and English were two priorities due to the importance of the former in some legal cases, such as distribution of inheritance for example; the latter being the language of science in the modern world.²⁴

The Present Day

In September 1984 the Institute moved to Masjed Bilal, named after the Companion Bilal al-Ansari, may Allah be pleased with him, which has been its premises since then. Shaykh Salih appointed Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm, Mufti of Damascus, director of the Fath Institution. However, he would supervise and provide advice whenever necessary. At this stage the Institute became yet more organized and more specialized. Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm played a significant role in this development, especially as regards discipline, punctuality in particular, both for students and teachers. Being late required having a good excuse.

Students were encouraged to take particular care of their standard of dress, and were expected to follow a code which corresponded with the requirements of their religion and dignity, bearing in mind that they were, to a large extent, models for the rest.

The Institute has been structured into two sections for both, men's and women's, departments

- The first one is preliminary and is followed by the university level section. The preliminary section starts after the elementary school and is followed by the Islamic high school. The subject matters at this stage include Islamic sciences, the

²⁴ 'Ashour Al-Khadrawi., 93.

Arabic language sciences, sciences that are not connected to religion, foreign languages and cultures. They are taught by righteous, well educated professors.

- The university level is formed by the Department of Specializations, followed by the Master Preparatory Stage. The Department of Specializations accepts graduates from Islamic High Schools which follow the programme of the Syrian Ministry of Endowments, graduates from public high schools as well as those from foreign high schools. It is a three-year study course, followed by the fourth, in which students sit twice for their exams in Cairo, Egypt, in order to obtain the official certificate of the University al-Azhar, according to the 1966 agreement between the two institutions –al-Fatih Islamic Institute in Damascus, Syria and the University of al-Azhar in Cairo, Egypt. Students who cannot travel to Egypt but wish to complete their fourth year, can do so in Syria and receive their certificate from the the Fatih Institute.

Students who cannot travel to Egypt but wish to complete their fourth year, can do so in Syria and receive their certificate from the the Fatih Institute.

After having completed the four-year course study students are qualified to apply for the two-year Master Preparatory Programme, which prepares them to pursue their Master at the University al-Azhar in Cairo. This programme requires them to present a research paper, for which they have two advisors –one from the University al-Azhar and the other from the Fatih Institute.

Several entirely new sections, opened a few years ago, are now offered for students who wish to carry out a post-graduate course, either foreign language one or the one on Islamic finance and economy. They aim to give a more international orientation to their

students, not only in theory but also in practice.²⁵ Actual steps have been taken in this regard.

The Fatih Institute has sent some students abroad in an initiative step. The Fatih Institute was the first one to send a group of students, both male and female, to western countries in order to carry on with their theological studies and to contrast their experience with that in other parts of the world. In this respect I am in a position to speak from experience, being one of the group of seven female students who since January 2007 studied in the United States of America for their Master of Arts. Some of us chose Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations. Others chose Biblical Studies. The experience has been valued as positive and encouraging as regards future similar projects.

As regards new premises, the Institute is now engaged in the building project of a new campus on a large site on the outskirts of Damascus. Financial support is badly needed at the moment. In addition, getting on with all the paper work, which may take years actually, is another imperative. All these are the necessary steps to transform the Institute into a recognized university.

²⁵ Dr. Maher Abul-Dahab January 2008.

Sufism at the Fatih Islamic Institute

Reem Ezolley

What is the Fatih Islamic Institute's methodology for Sufism? Does it have a specific methodology that distinguishes it from various other opinions and orientations? Which texts shape the Institute's methods? Who originated this methodology and how has it spread among the students? What future prospects does Sufism have at the Institute?

Recently, Sufism has become an attractive topic to many people. The Fatih Islamic Institute has a long and firmly established tradition in Sufism and has much to offer to people eager to follow its path. We will discuss here two approaches, the first being Shaykh Muhammad Salih Farfour's method of building Sufism at the Institute, carried on today through his children who follow his methodology of teaching spirituality. Then we will go somewhat deeper to discuss some issues of Sufism with Shaykh Adnan al-Saqah, one of the Institute's prominent scholars.

Sufism is an essential element in every aspect of a Muslim's life and, as such, it has the same role in Fatih Islamic Institute courses. Shaykh Salih Farfour established the Institute on the foundation of the traditional books of Islamic science and Sufism. The path of acquiring this knowledge, as explained in the famous text, *al-Risalah al-Qushairyyah*, is through serving the righteous and keeping the company of virtuous people. However, Shaykh Salih Farfour added to this methodology the extensive use of lectures. Instead of supporting the chanting circles of invocation, he chose to give a class every week on books of Sufism, no matter what his personal circumstances were. He would never neglect these lectures, even when he was fatally ill. His main concern was always his students and not his own pain. His concern was to ensure that all the students who visited him entered the lecture room in his home, even though he was in dire need of medical attention. He chose the Sufi books that he taught very carefully, because he didn't want the exaggerations of some Sufi masters to corrupt his students' thinking. Some of those

statements could have been considered heretical, but after having properly understood them and their conditions, their hidden meanings became clear. His habit was to discuss such statements, comment on them, and explain them to his students whenever they appeared in his lectures.

He would apply the method of the Shadhiliyyah Brotherhood with some of his students by giving them a special *dhikr* or invocation of the divine. Then he would check up on how they were doing and what they had achieved. He used Islamic jurisprudence as a means to achieve the Sufi way. His life-long efforts opened a clear and smooth path of understanding and applying Sufism, which is supposed to influence and shape the students' entire lives.

Sufis are expected to have a deep and clear feeling for the real meaning of the Islamic religion. They embody the living example of the Prophet and the Qur'anic ethics to show the way to practising Muslims. They represent the higher standard in dealing with people and show high moral virtues, whatever the situation. A Sufi is characterized by extraordinary magnanimity, which makes him more than simply open-minded. He deals with others upon solid principles and established values, and doesn't respond to others according to their actions.

It is said, "The honest Sufi is like fertile land. You may throw bad things on it, yet it only produces good."¹ He has the power to rectify every bad action or reaction by his high moral attitude. The word Sufism itself was first used in Islamic history as a description of a Muslim who wore wool clothing. This humble dress was the external reflection of piety and asceticism.² This word has gone through many stages of development regarding the term itself and its mean-

1 Imam Malik said: "He who practises Sufism without following the Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), slips into atheism; and he who practises *fiqh* without grasping Sufism, goes astray from the right course, yet whoever combines both of them, attains the truth."

2 Hassan Muhammad Abd al-Latif al-Shafi'i, *Chapters in Sufism* (Cairo: Dar al-Bassda'r, 2008); the first fifty pages are a critical study of various possible ways to relate the term Sufism to its roots.

ing. Now the term Sufism is more related to personal characteristics and ethics than to the clothes we see. Ibn Ajibah said that "Sufism is the knowledge that educates and allows people to be aware of the presence of the King of all kings, through cleansing their inner selves of all vices and embellishing them with high virtues. The beginning of the Sufi way is knowledge, its middle is work, and the end will be divine gifts."³

From my experience I can say that the majority of scholars at the Fatih Institute are experts in this field, and in the course of their teaching they may spontaneously include some spiritual wisdom or advice. In addition, Sufi virtues and righteous detailed biographies are included in their courses, thus contributing in a major way to the building of a strong spiritual foundation for students. *Al-Risalah al-Qushairryyah fi 'ilm al-taşawwuf*, *Tabaqat Awliya'*, and *al-hikam al-'Ata'iyyah* are the three main traditional books of Sufism taught at the Institute. The main role of these books is to give the students a clear vision of the Sufi world, the lives of Sufi saints, and their way of dealing with times of hardship and ease. Often the students are encouraged to imitate their steps and apply their methods.

The prominence of every science is related to the material it deals with. Therefore theology, which is concerned with Allah's attributes, His names, and other forms of knowledge that are connected to Allah, has the highest status among all the other sciences. Ahmad Zaruq said: "The Sufism-religion relationship is the same as the soul-body relationship."

DEFINING THE TERM SUFISM

One of the Muslim scholar's main roles is as an adherent of academic honesty. Thus, they work according to Islamic legal theory to find Islamic laws from the primary Islamic sources for every new case that appears in life. Therefore, they are determined to follow the correct methodology. This is true with the scholars of Sufism. According to a small review of the definition of Sufism in various Sufi resources, many definitions would be readily clear. For instance,

3 Ibn Ajibah, *M'arij al-Taşawwuf Elaa Haqa' al-Tassauf*.

one book on Sufism mentioned more than a thousand of its definitions. However, they all contain one essential meaning, namely "dealing with others with a pure heart and according to Islamic laws, as well as a high standard of manners in dealing with the Creator and all his creation". This is achieved by purifying the self, obtaining virtues, and removing vices. This is derived from the prophetic narration. "Those whose faith is complete are those with excellent character and they are excellent to their families."

If we review the books that focus on the definition of mysticism and the origin of Sufism, we find that there is a wide range of definitions for the term. Therefore, each scholar would define the term based on the station he reached; his own knowledge, experience, and tastes would shape the definition he chose.

In terms of the origin of the word Sufism, some scholars make reference to a pre-Islamic origin, even though the term formally emerged in the late second century AH. As Ibn al-Jawzi (d. AH 597) said: "This name appeared two hundred years ago." I tend to think of Sufis as a group of Muslims characterized by certain names such as "ascetic" or "hermit reciters". The name "Sufi" prevailed and soon replaced all the other titles around the start of the third century AH. Imam al-Qushairi said: "These blessings, people were known by this name before the beginning of the second century AH."

The place where this term emerged was Basra. Ibn Taymiyyah (d. AH 728) said: "Sufism first appeared in Basra, where some friends of Abdul Wahid bin Zayd built the first small house of Sufism. They were called by the term Sufi, which means someone who wore wool. They didn't decide on this term themselves nor did they place any special significance in wool. It just reflected their outward state."

Hassan Muhammad Abd al-Latif al-Shafi'i searched extensively for the origin of the word Sufism. There is a great debate concerning the exact linguistic meaning of the term. Some say it doesn't have an Arabic origin, while others say that its origin is clearly Arabic and is derived from Arabic words meaning purity, wool, elite, a legume, and "the first row". However, most authorities believe that it comes from the practice of wearing wool. As Hasan al-Basri and al-Sarraj stated, "Sufism is the description of its people's usual dress; especially

that which has been the habit of prophets and saints.”⁴ A similar analogy is used with the description of the companions of Jesus, as it is mentioned in the Qur’an that “when I [Allah] put in the hearts of al-Hawariien [the disciples (of Jesus)] to believe in Me and My Messenger, they said: ‘We believe. And bear witness that we are Muslims’” (Qur’an 5:III). The Arabic term *Hawariien* refers to the colour of their dress.

Kettani said: “Sufism is good character, and whoever has a higher moral character has a higher station in Sufism.”⁵ The definition that I personally prefer is: “It is the source of all the Islamic sciences and the seat of all praiseworthy stations.”

SELECTIONS FROM MY INTERVIEW WITH SHAYKH
ABDUL FATTAH AL-BIZM, MUFTI OF DAMASCUS

I asked: How did you start your journey of knowledge and how did you achieve your present status?

May Allah have mercy on you! What status do I have? I am only a seeker of knowledge. I was raised in an Islam-conscious family. My father was one of the Muslim scholars of Syria and one of its traders. He planted into my heart—through his practice—the study of the religious sciences, to carry the banner of calling to Almighty Allah, and to realize the important task of worship that Allah asks us to realize. I was raised in an old school called *Aminiyyah* where many generations had graduated. The school was located in the old city. Its director was Shaykh Jalil al-Khatib, one of the most famous scholars at this time for raising students, strictness, and manliness. I completed the elementary and secondary education, and then I decided to study medicine in Egypt. However, because of my father’s advice, I studied Arabic language at Damascus University. Shaykh Salih Farfour accepted me as a teacher in the Fatih Institute. I taught mathematics that year, English the next year, then Arabic literature when I finished my university studies. All of that came along with religious studies, at mosques as well as in some teachers’ homes.

4 Al-Siraj, *al-Lummau* 47.

5 Mohamed Ibn Abdelkabir al-Kettani (1873–1909), Moroccan jurist and mystic.

I asked, "What is Sufism for you and what is its impact on your life?"

True Sufism is the status of excellence, "*Ihsan*", which is mentioned in the prophetic hadith: "to worship Allah as if you saw Him, for if you cannot see him, he definitely sees you".⁶ It also entails applying personal striving, "*Mujahada*", according to the Qur'anic saying: "Those who strive [in their life] for our sake, we will guide them to our ways. And Allah is with those who do goodness." If the student progresses in the Islamic sciences from mere knowledge to application, he has already adopted Sufi practices. The commentary of *Ibn 'Ata'illah al-Iskandari's Wisdom* and *al-Risalah al-Qushairyyah*—which I read repeatedly—had a significant impact on my daily behaviour. The first step in this perspective is to read and reflect on the biography of the Prophet Muhammad and then the biographies of his noble companions, the righteous followers, who reaped the natural fruit of sound doctrine and true worship through their behaviour, because these sciences are without benefit if they have no true reality, no matter how much they are repeated. The practitioners of Sufism benefit by learning how to be faithful, to reach stages of fear, hope, and trust in Allah, and to balance between dependence on Allah and taking the necessary worldly means. The primary sources of this knowledge are the righteous Sufi scholars. "This matter is religious, so see whom you are taking your religion from."⁷ The next step is to apply this knowledge sincerely according to these sciences. "With sincerity in religion, a little work will suffice you [on the Day of Judgement]."

INTERVIEW WITH SHAYKH HUSSAM AL-DIN FARFOUR

I asked: What is Sufism in the life of Shaykh Hussam al-Din?

I think I am a Sufi by nature with no attempt at obtaining it. I don't feel happy or satisfied in my life without Sufism. I've spent all of my life among the people of Allah, those who are gifted scholars and righteous people in the Middle East and other regions. I've always kept searching for those people, in Egypt and many countries,

6 Narrated by Muslim from 'Umar.

7 It is a saying from al-Qushairi's treatise on Sufi scholars.

to learn from them. Furthermore, my long companionship with my father has a huge impact on me that I couldn't forget.

What is the relation between Islam and Sufism? What is the position of Sufism in the al-Fatih Institute curricula? How far is Sufism applied by al-Fatih institute students?

Sufism means purifying and disciplining that is one of the basics of Islam. As a result, Islam without Sufism is not completely true. Sufism is a fundamental subject of al-Fatih institute academic curriculum in all its levels. I am proud of all Sufi and ethical teachers in the Institute. The students as usual are in different stages of applying Sufism's rules. It is hard to judge all of them but the Institute's alumni acquire a Sufism glimpse. I hope that all students reach the top or almost in Sufism. If the heart does not turn towards the Divine Presence one's religion will be weak and unstable.

A new impression for me was Dr Hussam's ideas of understanding Sufism with the sights of human self. These sights of Sufism consist of three aspects: reforming the heart, purifying the self, and raising the soul. The third aspect is the result of the first two previous aspects. Raising the soul means to direct the soul to improve its relations with Allah the Almighty and with human beings as well, which is accomplished through worship and good deeds. One of its rewards is the feeling of tranquillity of Allah.

Who are the best models for humanity?

Sufis are the noble people in every generation. They are the righteous worshippers of Allah. They perform real worship, which pushes them away from tyranny, evil, and hegemony. Moreover, the righteous character directs righteous worshippers away from destroying the earth. As it is mentioned in the Qur'an: "before this, We wrote in the Psalms, after the Message (given to Moses): My servants the righteous shall inherit the earth" (Qur'an 21:105).

They (the Sufis) are called the people of Allah and recognized for having two signs. First, if anyone sees them, he mentions Allah, because their souls are pellucid. The second, they make people love Allah more (through their characters).

The absolutely perfect models in Sufism and other knowledge are the Prophets. Our prophet Muhammad—may Allah bless him, grant him peace—is the perfect model and the most righteous example. In addition, Muhammad is given a special quality by Allah that no other prophet has, it is the state of being the beloved of Allah. This is what I know (and Allah knows best!).

What is the role of Sufism in human life?

Sufism depends on purifying the self and betterment of the heart. As the Prophet Muhammad—may Allah bless him, grant him peace—said, “Surely there is a portion of a person; if it is good the whole person is good, if it is bad the whole person is bad; and that is the heart” (hadith, agreed upon). From this point Sufism and the problem of most Muslims start. If the heart becomes better its relation with people and Allah reforms amazingly. This heart will enable man to fulfil his role as the successor of Allah on earth. Sufism is the dynamo, which keeps the mind and the body active.

What state in Sufism influenced your heart more than others?

All states are near to my heart! The heart has to pass through all phases of Sufism to achieve a state of balance. However, I find myself drawn most strongly towards the stations of love towards Allah Almighty and tranquillity, although other stages as worship are already in my heart. I find myself more in the footsteps of Rabi'ah. When someone asked her, “What do you say about Paradise?” she said “The neighbour is more important than the house!” and then she recited: “the wife of Fir'aun (Pharaoh), when she said: ‘My Lord! Build for Me a home with You in Paradise, and save Me from Fir'aun (Pharaoh) and his work’ (Qur'an 66:II), she chose the highest company.”

Do you prefer any particular Sufi writer?

I generally love to read the works of all Sufi scholars, who devote their lives for the cause of Allah. Particularly, I love al-Ghazali's books because they combine the aspects of the heart and the mind. And all righteous ancestors like the people who are mentioned in *The Treatise of Al-Qushairi*. In general what I read has to be in accordance with the Islamic legislation, the Qur'an, and the Sunnah.

What does Islamic Sufism offer to spiritually inclined people of other religions?

Generally, the sphere of spirituality has been adulterated with superstitions and interference of devilish forces. Clearing spirituality from these influences is only possible through the application of the teachings of Islam. Islamic law offers the clarification to every aspect of Sufism, with the Qur'anic and Prophetic rules. All humanity can benefit from spirituality with a clear image and a clear way. No methodology can play the role of Sufism in building the character of the righteous person as [does] the Islamic Sufism. At the same time, it is the nearest way to build the goodness in humanity.

INTERVIEW WITH LUTFIYYA FARFOUR

Lutfiyya Farfour is a member of one of the most important religious and educated families in Damascus. She had a strong, wise, and compassionate father, Shaykh Salih Farfour, whose kind heart offered help to anyone without the slightest hesitation. Her father's love was deeply rooted in her heart and shaped her character.

Her introduction to scholarship began when she was only six or seven years old. She used to hear her brothers' intense discussions, which kindled in her heart an overwhelming desire to join them. However, her father directed her to learn sewing from Umm Nawal al-Shallah, the daughter of Shaykh Salih al-Humsi.⁸ Nine months later, she had become an expert in sewing all kinds of clothes. At that time there were no ready-made clothes for scholars or imams, so she helped a lot by sewing clothes for her father and brothers, and she was, indeed, a great help to her father's household.

Her father was her teacher. He read to her from the various texts and then explained what he had read; his knowledge was indeed profound. Once, he explained one Qur'anic verse from nine different perspectives, one of them being medical. Several of his students were doctors, and thus every one of them was taking notes.

Lutfiyya Farfour used to stay up with her father every night, pray with him, and then discuss a story of the great Sufi masters. She

8 Shaykh Salih al-Humsi was one of Shaykh Salih Farfour's teachers.

enjoyed her father's profound explanations with perfectly chosen words. All that enriched her, impregnated her heart, and made her experience the ever-increasing wish to have lived in their time. Also, it gave her energy to be able to wake up every morning and go to open the Institute before the janitor would come to work.⁹

She read with her father many Sufi books, such as *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* by al-Ghazali, and books by Ibn Arabi, in addition to the classical works of Arabic literature. She memorized many Arabic poems directly from her father's lips. As soon as he realized her deep interest in Arabic poetry and language, he advised her to specialize in the Arabic language at al-Azhar University. He implanted in his students and children wisdom, love, and fear of Allah. He also directed them to be upright in all aspects of their life and to be honest with themselves and Allah.

Shaykh Salih Farfour said that Muslim women leaders were numerous in our Islamic history. Now, in our age, we need women leaders whose knowledge would benefit them in this life and in the Hereafter. He was worried about the new generation who would abandon the guidance and protection of their families. Therefore, he decided to open a special department for women students at the Institute. He asked his two daughters, Lutfiyya and her elder sister, to help him fulfil his dream; thus the Institute for Women became a reality. Initially, her sister was a teacher and Lutfiyya was a student. She then became a teacher at the Fatih Islamic Institute Women's Department. Lutfiyya Farfour was one of the first members of the women teachers' team, specializing in Sufism. Her classes on ethics were spiritual journeys with al-Qushairi's heroes and their life stories. She commented on her work as a teacher of Sufism at the Institute by saying that "Teaching *al-Risalah al-Qushairyyah* in our Institute had a positive and beneficial influence on the students' lives. Sufism finds a special way into the students' hearts even though they come from different cultures. They find in this course spiritual meanings, which for some of them are innovative, but gradually,

9 She called the janitor, the employee who looked after basic needs at the Institute, "helper".

with Allah's help, become clear to them. They themselves are surprised to find how easy and clear it becomes to them, so much so that they all experienced excellent academic success." She also taught the Prophet's virtues in all the aspects of his life.¹⁰ All in all, she considers that obedience to her father was the quality which helped her along her path as a qualified teacher.

INTERVIEW WITH SHAYKH WALI AL-DIN FARFOUR

Shaykh Wali al-Din was favoured with being a son of Shaykh Salih. Like all his brothers and sisters, he grew up under his father's educational care. He has a diploma (*ijāza*) from each of the four main Sufi orders in Syria: "the Shadhiliyyah, Naqshabandiyyah, Qadiriyyah, and Rifa'iyyah orders".¹¹ However, it is his practice to cite diplomas only from the Shadhiliyyah order, the one taken up by his father. He read a lot of books during his childhood with his father, such as the classics *Sharh al-Tawhīd 'ala al-Tawdīh* (a book on Hanafi legal theory), *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Islamic Sciences), *al-Risalah al-Qushairiyyah*, *al-hikam al-'Ata'iyyah*, *Ma'arij al-Quds fi Marifat al-Nafs* (The Journey of the Holy Spirits to the Seven Heavens into Knowing the Self), *al-Mustasfah* (a book on legal theory), and *Shifaa al-Galil* (a detailed book on the life of the Prophet Muhammad (praise be upon him)).

Sufism is a science that emerges from the Qur'an and Sunnah. Its foundation is ethics, proper behaviour, morals, and correct application of Islamic laws. Followers of this science are divided into three groups. The focus of the first group is literal application of Islamic laws and avoiding exceeding all limits. The second group stresses the importance of intentions in every action in Islamic law because their consideration is only Allah. Others are advised to try to understand their discourse and avoid denying or reproaching their acts without deep knowledge. The third group allows the mind to judge more than the heart, as al-Ghazali did. He experienced what others

10 This part I took from my interview with Lutfiyya Farfour.

11 All are Sufi schools.

did, such as al-Hallaj (the famous Sufi scholar), who made statements which were outwardly blasphemous. Al-Ghazali said: "There was what there was, which I won't mention. But you must assume the good concerning what he said without asking about the content. The heart only knows what actually tastes." In this case, the mind was victorious over the heart and it is the best step towards balance. Ibn Arabi had still another way, which he expressed with signs instead of clear words.

Shaykh Wali al-Din hopes to write a book on rules of Sufism in order to clarify its real regulations and connections, which are the Qur'an, Sunnah, and scholarly consensus. Clarifying the Sufi sciences is a task open to every person who would like to follow this path. For example, he would differentiate between the terms "the existence union" (*Wihdat al-Wujud*) and the "situation of witnessing" (*halat al-shohoud*). The first term is considered as "disbelief" if it means that creation can be unified with the Creator. The second term is considered to be acceptable by Islamic law if it means that the heart's insight is directed toward the Creator. This status implies living your life as if you were witnessing Allah's attributes, His majesty and beauty. The heart is the most honoured part of the body, and it is the focus of Allah's concern.

Shaykh Salih Farfour used a special method to teach his students Sufism. All the time, he would encourage them to purify their hearts through *dhikr*, remembering Allah's names and attributes. As the Qur'anic verse explains: "verily, in the remembrance of God [men's] hearts do find their rest" (Qur'an 13:28).

Usually, a human being seeks his/her own desires and lusts without being concerned with the consequences. Therefore he/she needs to refine his/her education with personal struggle (*mujahada*), which will compel the self to uprightness in many ways, according to Islamic law. For example, a human being loves to sleep at night, but offering prayer in the middle of the night and performing ablution (*wudu'*) with cold water increase willpower throughout the day.

Shaykh Wali al-Din's way depends, essentially, on individual conviction. It may take a long time to reach agreement; however,

it is better than when the agreement comes out of coercion, compulsion, or shyness. He quoted a story of Ibn Arabi's in which his students one day asked him: What is the destiny of these trees? He said they will dry, be cut, and then be used for making fire. They asked him why they had this future although they give us fruit, wood, shade, and are pleasant to look at. In response he used a metaphor between the person's desires and the wind. He said that the trees have this outcome because they incline wherever the wind went. Then he mentioned the Qur'anic verse: "for, unto him who shall have transgressed the bounds of what is right, and preferred the life of this world [to the good of his soul], that blazing fire will truly be the goal!" (Qur'an 37:37-39).

I asked him, "What do you think of the saying that this student of Sufism, *murīd*, should be as submissive to his teacher as the corpse is to the person washing it?"

"Now, there are a lot of religious groups spreading different ideologies. Some have an inclination to deny the practices of Sufi shaykhs and scholars. It is as if they would like to take the *murīd* out of Sufi methodology. For example, they object to kissing the shaykh's hand out of respect. From the point of view of knowledge, this relation is a student-teacher relationship, which includes discussions, different opinions, and exchange. The student will not accept concepts unless they are accompanied by evidence and justification. The Sufis' relationship imposes upon the *murīd* additional obligations when dealing with his shaykh, as he must refrain from denying the shaykh's sayings. At the same time, I do not agree with the idea of absolute submission, no matter whether the *murīd* agrees or not. If he has something to ask, his obligation is to use his right to ask in a polite way. Every rule or statement in Sufism has a proof from the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Also, there are those who deviate from the clear meaning of Sufi terms, exaggerating the meanings far beyond one's understanding. Therefore, as to the statement that the person has to be as the corpse in the hands of the washer, I do not agree. I prefer, and I would recommend, taking the middle course, avoiding any extreme statements of this kind. By asking questions, the student practises his right, and in turn the teachers should do their job and

reply. There's nothing to prevent you from answering questions. Don't you like them to complete their path with full understanding and certainty, without compulsion or duress? The laws of Islamic law (Shari'ah) don't allow compulsion in religion. All Muslim scholars define religion as the divine systematic way which guarantees happiness to its follower in this life and in the Hereafter, where he will be rewarded with Paradise or Hellfire. Allah has granted the human being the choice of either way. This concept of conviction and not being forced agrees with Shari'ah, science, and the human consciousness. Statements such as this would open the doors to secularism, Wahhabism, and others, and interfere with Muslim life. They discourage Muslims from Islamic law. We can prevent this vicious circle by avoiding exaggerations because they are considered outside Islamic law. Qur'anic verses often encourage human beings to reflect on every matter in their life, except two types of Qur'anic verses which do not follow this rule. The first type is about Allah's attributes and the hidden world of the Hereafter; the other type is about the fundamental elements of the Islamic creed. We must believe in them as they appear in the Qur'an and hadith, and refrain from speculating about their inner meaning."

I asked him, "Are there any difficulties as regards teaching Sufism at the Fatih Institute?"

"Not all of the teachers of Sufism at the Institute have reached a spiritual level combining theory and practice which allows them to heal correctly the spiritual sicknesses of the students' hearts. Therefore, students don't always apply the rules of Sufism, but limit themselves to theory not practice. Such teachers will diminish the usefulness of these rules. Qualified Sufi teachers have to have a strong ability which encourages all students to actual practice. Thus, I would suggest applying my father's way of gathering all the students at the last class of the week and having a special session for Sufism, one for men and another for women. I know that it is not easy to adjust the timetable of every branch to accommodate for one class, especially with our schedule now."

INTERVIEW WITH SHAYKH ADNAN AL-SAQAH¹²

Shaykh Adnan al-Saqah is an example of one of the main teachers of Sufism in Fatih Islamic Institute. I have interviewed him during more than five appointments, which could be a separate book on Sufism. Sections of these meetings are here.

Shaykh Adnan al-Saqah grew up in a religious family. He was fortunate to have his father as his fount of spirituality. Then the imam at his masjid, Abd al-Jalyl Murad, continued his spiritual teachings by using the method of teaching him with his practice before his words. The most important and effective scholar in his life is Dr Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Bouti. He was his teacher during secondary school in Homs. Al-Saqah was attracted by al-Bouti's soft words, venerable expression, strong influence, and solicitude for Muslim needs. Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir 'Isa (d. AH 1312), the author of *Realities of Sufism*, also had a deep impact on his spiritual life. Shaykh al-Saqah finished secondary school with the intention to study medicine. However, Shaykh 'Isa advised him to study religious sciences at Damascus University. He said that if Shaykh al-Saqah continued on the right path, he would notice a great benefit for himself and for the people around him, so much so that doctors would crowd at his door. His deep love and respect for Shaykh 'Isa made him follow that advice. Therefore, he was encouraged to begin the blessed journey of seeking spiritual knowledge, which opened the gates of his mind to allow both the enlightenment of his thinking and the elevation of his soul. This integrated approach provides the essential balance of the intellect and the spirit, which prevents human beings from going to extremes either way. While studying at Damascus University, he met the great spiritual teachers Shaykh Muhammad al-Hashimi and Shaykh Saïd al-Burhani. When com-

12 Shaykh Adnan al-Saqah is friendly and close to every student, even though there is awareness of his tremendous knowledge. He is a practising Sufi all the time, as was another teacher I had for jurisprudence, Shaykh Adib al-Kallas. Once while in class I asked him a question, preceded with the word "Please". When he read it out loud he said: "I must answer this question whatever it will be." From that time until now this word has a remarkable place of respect for me.

menting on the variety of his teachers, Shaykh al-Saqah said "human beings are just as a field that produces different fruits and various flowers of many different scents".

He said about his role as a teacher at the Fatih Institute that "Allah granted me the gift of teaching Sufism years ago, because He has put His trust in me. I devoted my efforts to offer students at the Fatih Institute a correct Islamic character as required by this science. Some people who call themselves 'students of knowledge' are hostile to the word Sufism as a term. They refuse its terminology although they accept its meaning. Unfortunately, they are blinded by the misleading actions of misguided Sufis, and in turn they falsely accuse Sufism." Then, he explained the path that Sufism went through, saying: "How amazing is it to say that Sufism is like water that comes of a pure spring but flows throughout the land and loses its purity. Whoever wishes to drink from the water has three options: he can go back to the pure source or drink from this impure water or he can purify the water."

I then asked Shaykh al-Saqah about Sufism at the Fatih Institute.

I received a very surprising answer: "There isn't such a thing as Sufism at the Fatih Institute or, for that matter, at al-Azhar. It is as if we said, Would you speak about Islam at the Fatih Institute? Both of these concepts are much broader than we think. Sufism is part of *Ihsan*,¹³ the third state of religion. Purification (*tazkiya*) is another name for Sufism. The Qur'an talks in the following way about the tasks of a prophet: 'indeed, Allah did grant favour on the believers, when He sent among them a messenger from among themselves, reciting to them the Signs of Allah, and purifying them, and instructing them, in [the Holy] book and in wisdom, while before that, they had been in manifest error'.

"The importance of purification is as follows. First, it cleanses the heart of all illnesses, arrogance for example. Secondly, it grants the heart essential eternal happiness. Purification makes the heart pure, clean, happy, secure, and responsive to the meanings of life.

13 *Ihsan* is the third part of Islam, as the Prophet said, explaining the steps of Islam. It means to complete in perfection every action you intend to do.

Hatred, hostility, and loathing would deprive it of this treasure. Thirdly, purification provides a strong means of social success by means of kindness. Social relations won't reach a high level unless you have a society with people of pure hearts who are concerned about each other. Every high virtue comes from purification. Usually, when people praise someone, they describe him with ethical virtues, such as generosity, piety, trustworthiness, dependence on Allah, and reliability.

"I would like to comment on Sufism as a term. After the Prophet's death, the Muslim community started to spread outside Arabia, and the need to protect knowledge from any corruption considerably increased. Therefore, scholars invented new rules and linguistic terms for the sciences that had already existed, to preserve them for the following generations. Some of these sciences have more than one term. Thus we don't hold strictly to the terms but we are more concerned with their meanings. Sufism is one of them; it has different names such as *Tarbiyyah* (Nurturing), *Inaya Ruhiyyah* (Spiritual Care), or *Ihsan* (Excellence). We may forget the essence while talking about terminology. Sufism has always had a lot of detractors because of the wrong practices of misguided Sufis. We, as Muslims, need to unify our ranks and keep away from any fruitless discussions, especially now that we have more relevant and important issues facing our community.

"The means of purifying the soul have to be according to Islamic laws. There are some Sufi orders who used some means which are far from the Islamic laws. The proper means, however, aims to purify and cure the inner self from evil desires. If the person prevented himself from indulging in unlawful desires, it would be acceptable, but if he prevented himself from permissible desires, it would contradict Islamic laws. As the Qur'anic verse explains: 'Say: Who hath forbidden the beautiful [gifts] of Allah, which He hath produced for His servants, and the things, clean and pure, [which He hath provided] for sustenance? Say: They are, in the life of this world, for those who believe, [and] purely for them on the Day of Judgement. Thus do we explain the Signs in detail for those who understand' (Qur'an 32:7).

“All the proper means of purification have to be in accordance with Islamic laws and wisdom. All these ways have to have their religious proofs, such as, for example, the optional fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, the recommended prayers after midnight, and repeatedly mentioning Allah’s names. However, if a person did prevent himself from deep indulgence in the permissible desires, it would go beyond the Islamic system. It is the same as preventing oneself from falling into forbidden actions. In some Sufi orders religious innovations of new practices may not agree with the wisdom of our Islamic system, such as preventing a person from permissible matters in hope of attaining certainty.

“Soul purification consists mainly of removing vices and acquiring virtues. It is destroying the bad aspects then replacing them with correct qualities in order to have a sound, righteous foundation. This is exactly what Islam does for the soul of human beings. This deep process of purifying the soul has various stages. Sincerity, for example, has many stages, such as humbling the heart and softening the heart.

“One can acquire these attributes through a lifelong pursuit of attaining and practising them. This pursuit exposes the seeker to many challenges to purify the self. It is not like taking a course, then preparing for an exam. Rather, we have to live these attributes in order to obtain their results of tranquillity and divine pleasure.

“It is good to know some types of the human self. I will focus on the three main types: the incessantly demanding self (*ammara*), the blaming self (*lawama*), and the tranquil self (*mutmaina*). Each of them has its own features and qualities. Evil directs the *ammara* self; all of its efforts are sinful. It is the same as those insects which cannot live except in swamps, because they die if they smell a musky perfume. The blaming self, which blames itself for wrong actions or bad behaviour towards others, is a healthy state, like a seriously ill person in an intensive care unit, who was on the verge of becoming brain dead, when his eyes or fingers started to move. All people around him are filled with joy and hope because his vital signs begin to appear. In our case, the self has started to recognize its wrong actions.

“Generally, the human being goes through the three stages of the self. One stage usually dominates, but it has the ability to change

periodically to the other two states. In addition, there are many stages of each type. A Sufi student can be aware of his state by reflecting on his current thoughts. For example, the *ammara* self would disorder its owner with base sin and disliked acts.

“There are many books which cover this topic, written in different styles according to people’s conditions and the status of the age. The most important entries of their method are knowledge and righteous company. I advise those who would like to expand their knowledge of these concepts to read *Realities of Sufism* by ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Isa, which illustrates these cases in their correct Islamic form. Some concepts, of course, of Sufism are repentance, fear, hope, secure faithfulness, and lover.”

I asked about the foundations of Sufism at the Fatih Institute. What are its needs? What are its horizons?

“The founder of this Institute, Shaykh Salih, chose *al-Risalah al-Qushairyyah* as the main resource of the ethical courses. I use its summarized version because of its length. I use, in addition, *Risalah al-Mustarshidin* by Harith al-Muhasibi, and *Muhammad Rasul Allah*, which was written by Abdullah Seraj al-Din on the merits of the Prophecy, which confirm the spiritual path. I think teaching this subject needs pure hearts more than a course book. I am grateful to this prestigious institution for its concern about the spiritual side. I will say that it could be given more attention by increasing the number of lectures on Sufism and asking spiritual guides to teach it instead of the normal teachers.”

I asked about the stage of spiritual purity (*al-safa’ al-rouhi*). How is this term defined?

“The human soul usually has two components: a longing to pursue lofty things and an inclination to descend to base desires. This meaning is expressed in the wisdom of ‘Ibn ‘Ata’illah al-Iskandari: ‘Light is the soldier of the heart, and darkness is the soldier of the self.’ Each side has its soldiers and resources. If Allah wants good for His servant, He enlightens his heart and leads him away from having partners with Allah (*al-Aghyar*), from attaching his heart to all that is other than Allah. This enlightenment would open the windows of the heart

to let the sunshine enter it. We can nurture it with remembrance, obedience, knowledge, wisdom, and keeping righteous company. In contrast, base desires work to bring down human beings through committing more sins. These desires are like stinking, rotten water with plenty of flies which disturbs people with its smell and its form. Spiritual purity leads the self to the right habits of obedience until it purifies the soul, because the purity of the spirit increases with the light of obedience. Just as the human body is strengthened with proper food, vitamins, sports, and cleanliness.”

I asked how to maintain the balance between Sufism and the materialistic world.

“When weather becomes extremely hot, we need a stronger air conditioner. This is like the relationship between material and spiritual aspects of human life. They are in positive proportion with each other; if one increases, the other also does. People now, even in Europe, seek all sorts of relaxations to relieve themselves from modern life’s burden. In fact, they went astray by resorting to a tragic reality because of their sins. However, if they instead return to the true faith, they will gain a tranquil life and great satisfaction, which would increase with remembering Allah’s names, seeking refuge in His powers, and invoking Him. Whenever his circumstances became hard or complex, the Prophet (praise be upon him) would rush to prayer.¹⁴ So the Prophet would resort to prayer as a spiritual means. Yet, this is far away from such people’s reality because they do not believe in the roots of these matters. They think that comfort comes from getting away from the bustle of life by having a glass of alcohol and indulging in more wrong actions. In fact, they sink more and more into darkness. Their situation is similar to that of somebody who tries to cure a sick person with more poison.”

I asked how we can prevent the extreme spiritual stages caused by emotions and temper with the intellect.

“Most spiritual stages (the Sufi name is *spirit tastes*) are very beautiful and attractive to human nature. Entering such states may cause

14 Narrated by Imam Ahmad and Abu Dawood with the number 1319.

one to become fixed so that it weakens his inclinations towards other desires. When they are related to the self and to emotional pleasure, they definitely need boundaries to prevent them from exceeding other desires. From another angle we can say that the spiritual tastes have different dimensions: love and fear of Allah with all their levels, as well as affability and humbleness before Allah. Being familiar with various stations of the Prophet and his companions would help to direct the person toward the middle way and would help him achieve a balanced stage. The Sufi teacher is a nurturer. His duty, when he sees that his student has started to stray away, is to adjust him by gentle directing. For example, crying could be of fear, love, asceticism, etc. If it is based on fear of Allah, then it is a preferable situation. However, letting oneself go further may prevent one from working or performing everyday activities. All of this can be summarized with the saying, 'Beauty needs restraint'."

SUFI TEXTS AT THE INSTITUTE

Now as an example of how the Fatih Institute teaches Sufism, I will review three texts that are taught at the school.

Biographical Layers of the Friends of God (Tabaqat al-Awlyia') by Ibn al-Mulaqqin: This is an important book in the literature of Sufism as it contains hundreds of biographies of Sufi Masters from the fifth until the eighth century. The author chronicles biographies up until the scholars of his own age. A beautiful supplication starts the book, followed by the introduction on the author's life. He recalls how his stepfather took responsibility for his education and supported him during his lifetime. This inspired him with a great longing to achieve more knowledge. His own library was vast and he himself wrote around 350 books. This book contains 230 lengthy biographies, followed by a few shorter ones and a conclusion. The biographies are arranged in alphabetical order. He gives a detailed account of the main facts of their subjects' lives and adds related stories. Finally, he concludes his book by listing the chains of the transition for each Sufi order, mentioning the historical links of Sufi orders, followed by teaching poems that summarize all the Sufi masters with a short description of them.

Al-Qushairi's *Treatise on Sufism* (*Al-Risalah al-Qushairiyyah fi 'Ilm al-Taşawwuf*): The writer of the *Treatise*, Abd al-Karim al-Qushairi (d. AH 465), was an Arab born in Iran. Although he was an orphan, he had outstanding abilities, which helped him to acquire deep knowledge of the Arabic language as well as Arabic literature. Then he learned mathematics at Nisabour, until he met Aba Ali al-Daqqaq, "the big Sufi master", who drew his attention because of his enlightened knowledge and sincere heart. This master granted him a special status among his disciples and gave him his daughter's hand in marriage. He wrote many books on Sufism, as well as Qur'anic and prophetic traditions (*hadith*). This book is considered one of the main textbooks on Sufism, describing the elite Sufis who are the minarets that enlighten people's hearts from the darkness of sin. The author is one of the Sufi masters who became very concerned about the Sufi method of his time. So, he decided to write a letter to other masters with the objective of clarifying their ways and ideas. His goal was to illustrate correct Sufi teaching, which leads to the right path. He describes the Sufis, their creed, their attitude toward Shari'ah, their terms (especially the ambiguous ones), the stages of their hearts, as well as their character and their views on some esoteric ideas and concepts. In his introduction he describes the creed of Sufism in their own words and the special meaning they convey. Then he talks about the attributes of eighty-three Sufi masters, their stories, their sayings, and gives a brief history of Sufism. In addition to this, he explains the states of the misguided. His method of elaboration is different from those of the previous book and of the next book, *al-hikam al-'Ata'iyyah*.

The Book of Aphorisms by Ibn 'Ata'illah (*al-hikam al-'Ata'iyyah*): The author of this book, Ibn 'Ata'illah (1250-1309), was born into a highly educated family. His grandfather was an expert in *fiqh*, *uşûl* (legal theory), and the Arabic language, but he was hostile to Sufism. Ibn 'Ata'illah shared this hostility. But after he accompanied Abul-Abbas al-Mursi for twelve years during a long journey, he corrected his misconceptions. Then he became his successor in Shadhiliyyah order, with a constantly increasing number of followers. He left us many valuable books, but perhaps the most famous one is his *Book of Wisdom*. This book, with its numerous commentaries, became widely popular with all classes of society. Some of the important topics discussed in this book include the Hereafter, Islamic creed,

proper behaviour, spiritual refinement, acceptance of fate and destiny, and self purity.

Reading *al-hikam al-'Ata'iyyah* with Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm: The influence of *al-hikam al-'Ata'iyyah* on me was no different than any other book of mysticism. Particularly, because I did not have the benefit of reading it during my university studies at the Institute. Once I started reading the introduction, I could feel the spiritual meaning emanating from his words. Shaykh Abdul-Fattah al-Bizm required that I read it before he granted me an interview. Shaykh Salih Farfour at the end of his eightieth year asked al-Bizm to teach *al-hikam al-'Ata'iyyah* at the Institute. Abdul Fattah al-Bizm wrote a commentary on it. He mentioned in the introduction the book's profound effect on him which worked to build a strong link between the Islamic creed and his faith. Also the author's words clarify the path of Sufism for everyone who wants to walk it. The interesting idea of the personal connection in Sufi orders attracted my attention. Sufism sums up the whole Islamic journey through simple ideas such as Sufism or purification, honesty in worship, and getting rid of hidden polytheism.

CONCLUSION: MY PERSONAL VIEW OF SUFISM AS A STUDENT IN THE FATIH ISLAMIC INSTITUTE

Sufism is like a single, beautiful, special, coloured flower with a fragrant scent surrounded by weeds which make its beauty unnoticeable. Sufism had a special space in my heart from the beginning of my studies at the Fatih Islamic Institute. I saw how spirituality had coloured all my teachers' lives, not only those teachers who taught Sufism. Fortunately, I had Lutfiyya Farfour as a Sufi teacher, who accompanied me during my first steps on the path of knowledge. The second phase of my study was with Shaykh Wali al-Din Farfour and Shaykh Adnan al-Saqah; even though their courses weren't in Sufism, it was an integral part of their lectures. Both Shaykh Wali al-Din, with his lengthy yet interesting lectures, and Shaykh al-Saqah, with his logical spirit, enlightened our hearts. These two exemplify correct behaviour in their classes and in their personal life. They both planted in our spirit that Sufism is not theoretical knowledge but a living science.

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During my studies at the Hartford Seminary in America I was most attracted to courses that dealt with spirituality. This opportunity to study in America changed my attitude and widened my perspective. I learned about other views of Sufism. I discovered that Syria is only part of the world and has only part of the knowledge of Sufism. Therefore, I decided to travel to get a clear picture of Sufism from its main sources. However, Syria was the first place which Allah chose to start my real journey towards Sufism. This is what I like to call "the divine tour" that drives one to his beneficial path without a previous conscious plan. In fact, the main element of this tour was writing this article and meeting my teachers again with my new perspectives, as well as my new position as a teacher at Fatih Institute.¹⁵ My increased interaction with them gives me a greater understanding of their personal life. Their sincere and generous qualities allow me to discover a correct image of some Sufi principles.

I consider this work only a brief summary of how the Fatih Islamic Institute approaches Sufism. Each interview contains a wealth of information and insight which could fill many volumes. Perhaps I will relate the information I learned from them by publishing a separate book on this topic.

15 There are several questions which I neglected to ask most of these scholars about their opinions, out of respect for them, when they were my teachers at Fatih Islamic Institute. I did understand that Sufism is one direction of Islam that colours the whole life of Muslims. It also directs everyone to purify his heart and achieve earthly Paradise before his journey towards heavenly Paradise.

Chapter 4
Islamic Perspectives on Extremism
Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm

Extremism is a comprehensive term, which modifies any action and divert it from the moderate methodology based on justice and fairness. No doubt that it has its danger on the world as a whole. Since Muslims are part of this world, the danger of extremism undoubtedly will result negatively on us. In order to enjoy security and peace, including all its diversities, the world should cooperate to overcome the consequences of that danger. Therein, the world will live in tranquility that guarantees human rights and dignity for all peoples under a universal canopy of justice that all humans seek to achieve.

I am wondering why the mass media has recently ascribed the terms "extremism," "terrorism," fanaticism" and "fundamentalism" to Islam and Muslims who as people of faith should be far away from these hateful and grudge accusations . Islam, as a religion of mercy, justice, love and tolerance, which is distinguished by piety and good deeds, is innocent of these dangerous accusations. An Arab is not better than non-Arab; a non-Arab is not better than an Arab; a black man is not better than a red nor a black is better than a red except with piety. God said, " O you People! We have created you of a male and a female and made you into peoples and tribes so you may know one another. The most honorable of you are those who are the most pious; verily God is the All-Knower, All-Acquainting." (Qurán 49:13) According to this verse, the addressee is humanity as a whole. Thus, human beings are created to be acquainted not to fight and hate one another, and the best human in God's eyes are those who are being good to themselves and humanity as a whole.

One can say that among the most prominent features of this religion is tolerance. It originally refers to a state of moderation that ranges between difficulty and ease. In fact, Islam preserves the concept of tolerance along with its legislations which are based on forbearance, removing difficulty and preventing mischief. Ibn Abbas, the prophet's cousin, narrated that the Prophet said, "The most beloved religion to God is the true and tolerant religion," that does not have distress or hardship. Islam adapts gradualism in legislation as a mythology, taking into consideration human nature and the legal capacity of an individual. The one who analyses connotations and implications of the word 'tolerance,' finds how it expands on to include all fields of life: spiritual and material.

Lenience of Islamic Discourse:

Among the major elements of forgiveness in Islam is lenience of religious discourse which is based on endearment, giving glad tidings, gradient in legislation, cope with common instinct, forgiveness and showing mercy. God says, "And give the believers glad tidings of great favor they will have from God." (*surah al-Ahzab: 47*) The prophet told *Mu'azh Ibn Jabal* and *Abu Mosa al-Ash'ari* before sending them to Yemin, "Pleased not obstructed, give glad tidings and do not deter."

However, the highest point of tolerance in Islam shines in its establishment of a distinctive set of ethics that controls the self and provides it with principals and eternal values in order to light the self's path and guide it to the means of eternal happiness. Through his sayings and behaviors, whether in his staying or travelling, peace or war, the prophet himself was the first one to commit to these high values. God praises him by saying, "Verily, you are of great manner." The prophet summarized his call and mission by saying, "I was just sent to fulfill high morals."

Samples of Prophetic tolerance:

In fact, the great ethics of Islam were not just slogans void of their human implications but they were a living reality exemplified by the Messenger as a bright figure of a human being. This sense can be seen clearly, when the prophet was hurt by Quraysh in the battle of Uhud. It made their best to kill him and abolish his call. Leaving the battle with a broken tooth and wounded face. His only response for those who suggested, 'O God's Messenger! Why do not you pray God against them?' was, "I was not sent as a curser but a cause for mercy."

Another example of his mercy and kind-hearted is that overcomes in the hardships utmost diversities. This sense was represented clearly after the battle of Uhud. When the angel of mountains called the prophet and said, "Muhammad! Your Lord had heard what your people said to you. I am the angel of mountains and My Lord has sent me to you to be at your commands. If you wish I will crash them between the two mountains that stand opposite to each other in Makkah." The Messenger answered, "I rather hope that God will raise from among their descendants people who will worship God alone and ascribe no partner unto Him."¹

With the divine light, the prophet looked into the matters and rejected the idea of killing his enemies and wanted to make monotheists of their offspring. Thus, we can explore how tolerance in Islam is based on mercy, calls for love and judges with justice.

Through its principles, goals and values, Islam seeks to achieve security, stability and preserving discipline. This achievement is done through applying

¹ Al-Nawawi, tr. Hafiz Salahuddin Yusuf, *Riyad-us-Saliheen*, Vol.1, (1999: Darussalam, Riyadh), 555.

Shari'ah in a comprehensive way so that any extremist or falsifier cannot find means to fulfill their plans and achieve their goals.

Reality and Violence:

To say that the real world of the world today is witnessing violation of the human sanctity and terrible aggression that are practiced by the great powers in the world led by the United States that spreads horror and terrorism all over the world, from Afghanistan through Iraq, Sudan and lately in Syria the country of security and peace. America was the one who initiated aggression and hatred towards Arabs and Muslims. It is hard to survey the numbers of casualties and devastations of American terrorism on our lands in addition to the acts of robbery and violating human rights. The United States will not control the world with its political and military hegemony but only through spreading justice, cooperation, friendship and love among all peoples especially the Muslims and Arabs.

The American Support for Blaspheming Theology:

One of the most serious issues facing the world these days is the danger of spreading the extremist ideology which is based on misleading *fatawas* and false thoughts far away from the essence of Islam. Those people of borrowed ideology hold the culture of violence, radicalism and fanaticism that Islam is innocent from. The prophet announced that fact clearly, "This religion is flexible and whoever makes the religion a rigor, will be overpowered."²

²Al-Nawawi, tr. Hafiz Salahuddin Yusuf, *Riyad-us-Saliheen*, Vol.1, (1999: Darussalam, Riyadh), 151.

Being affected by radical Islamic ideology those extremists have violated the Muslims' blood, wealth and honor, forgetting that their crimes were rejected in the scriptures. God says, "And We have honored the children of Adam, carried them on land and sea, supplied them with good provision and favored them above a lot of what We have created." (Qur'an, 17: 70) He also said, "If a man kills a believer intentionally, his penalty is Hellfire staying therein forever and God will get angry of him, curse him and prepare a great punishment for him." (*surah: 4:93*)

Shari'ah was ahead of all the international charters, declarations and conventions in dealing with human rights and establishing these rights for over fourteen centuries,. Therefore, what was in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the subsequent international conventions and the United Nations' Charter was only repetition of some of what Islam has come with. In fact, human rights in Islam originate from monotheism which is based on the testimony that " There is no god but God." This testimony is the source of all human rights and freedoms which are derived from the Divine honoring that came explicitly in the texts. This is also part of the Islamic conception of servitude to God and the human nature that God has created them; since god is the One who created human beings as free individuals and wanted them to be free and instruct them to preserve the rights that have prescribed unto humans, defend them and forbid any kind of aggression on them.

Islam gives a great importance to covenants and charters which considered a rejection of Shari'ah for violence and terrorism. God says in the Qur'an, "(As for the treaties) not to be dissolved with those idolaters, with who you entered into alliance, and they did not decrease anything of your rights, nor have they conspired against you, so fulfill their treaty till their term, for God loves the righteous ones." (Qur'an, 9:04) Through its objectives and principles, Islam seeks to achieve security, stability

and discipline in the society; so that it never leaves any gap into which the extremists and terrorists could find a way to carry out their plans and achieve their goals.

Exposing the phenomenon of extremism in the world demands uprooting the problem from the communities by fighting ignorance, increasing knowledge and preserving human rights within the framework of the heavenly standards which were sent and made by God as source for a dignified life. God says, "Whoever does righteousness, male or female, while being a true believer, verily We shall give them a good life." (Qur'an, 16:97) It also demands great efforts of the Muslim side to introduce the Islamic standards and values to the West who should search and realize the noble values and ethics that Islam urged its followers to apply in order to guarantee them and whole humanity a secure and peaceful life.

From what have been discussed earlier, the cure of extremism can be summarized in the following points:

- 1) The necessity of holding on to the teachings of the Qur'an and the *sunnah* and the consensus which is agreed on by Muslim scholars. God says, "And hold fast, all of you together, to the rope of God and do not divided among yourselves." (Qur'an, 3: 103);
- 2) Introducing the correct faith that the Qur'an has come with, articulated by the Sunnah of the Prophet and committed to by the first generations of the prophet's companions and their followers. This faith is a moderation in all the branches of religion;
- 3) Seeking the right religious knowledge which is based on proofs far from fanaticism and extremism or excessiveness and negligence. This should be done through adapting moderation and relating this knowledge to reality so

that jurisprudence originates people's behaviors and heals the diseases encounter our societies; and

- 4) The necessity of paying scholarly attention to the deviant ideas whether they were accusing others with disbelief or fanatic, refuting them and proving their falsehood.

As a conclusion, we can say that Islam is not a threat for humanity nor source of terrorism and violence. It is rather a religion that should be a source of mercy, equality, justice and peace for all mankind in case it is applied in the shadow of the religious standards that the Qur'an has come with.

Finally, I ask God the Almighty to guide the nations' scholars and leaders to return to the heavenly religions that God has revealed upon His messengers, seeking good resolutions from the seal of the messages that God has testified to with perfection and fullness. Thereof, humanity will be honored with a great worldly life and eternal happiness in the hereafter, for He is the All- Hearer, All- Responding One.

Chapter 5

Originality and Openness in the Construction of Muslim Religious Leadership

Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm

Tr. Sabrina al-Oukla

Praise is to Allah, the Lord of all worlds, the good consequence is for the righteous, and peace and blessings of God are upon the one who was sent as a mercy to human being, Prophet Muhammad, and upon his family, companions, and those who followed him appropriately till the Day of Judgment.

It is a great honor for me to participate in the annual seminar of *Ulama* and professors held by the Islamic council of Singapore under the title “Originality and Openness in the Construction of Religious Leadership.” I will start with a saying of the Prophet that was narrated by Imam Malik in his *Muata'*: “I have left to you two things to which if you hold, you will never go astray; the book of God and my tradition.”

The main protector from falling into slips and the solid rule in the construction of the religious leadership is to stick to the basics and unchangeable principles (stabilities), in the forefront are the Book (the Qur'an) and the *Sunnah* (the Prophet's tradition). As the call to God is the most honored action and the mission of apostles and prophets, it is necessary that callers to God (preachers) and scholars be armed by solid rules in religion, especially after the campaigns of questioning the parameters of religion and postulates of faith, and this is the concept of “originality.” They then should come to be aware of what increases their knowledge of the people of their time, such as science, education, arts and so on. The Former grand Mufti of Damascus, Shaykh Dr. Abi al-Yusr Abdin, requires the

Mufti to be a person of his time, referring to the new developments. Thus, the scholars and the preachers should be conscious and aware of the knowledge and culture of their time, so they do not talk to people from a top of a mountain, inside a cave, or a belly of a valley.

Moreover, the importance of education in the preacher's life lies in the great influence of the intelligentsia presenting their ideas to others. The problem of some preachers is to be found in the daily interacts consuming their knowledge and information, and this would undermine their influence on their audience, and makes people feel desperate and tired of on paper, repeated, and duplicated articles which have lost their creativity. The rapid cultural change and the accumulation of information have made devaluating any traditional preacher an easy matter; as a result of cessation of his growth and constant interaction with renewable cultural and creative requirements of his time.

The adherence of some preachers to the heritage and the past has led to a morbid state in thinking, intellect, and dialogue. The domination of the logic of the Arabic proverb "there is blessing in activity" has also led, without the cultural improvement, to the consumption of information, because the essence of civilization progress depends on accurate things not on abundance and quantity.

The Need to Balance between Tradition and Modernity:

Detachment from stabilities is failure, and abandonment of modernity is loss. And since the Divine method is a moderate one, the nation of Islam is that of moderation, and the place of most virtues is in the middle way not in the side areas, the mission of the

preacher lies in his being in the balance point. The most prominent types of balance might be between the adherence to the heritage and the inclination towards modernity, between excessive idealism and powerless realism, and between inflexibility in reading the texts and twisting their meaning in order to fulfill one's desires and needs.

This divine method, which we are honored to belong to and carry the banner of, the banner of knowledge and calling for God, belongs to the scope of sheer, beyond time and place, and from here this divine method derives its immortality, steadiness and permanence. For that, many preachers get caught in the dilemma of modernity, and renounce the stabilities and basics, especially after the emergence of satellite channels and the pounce of many preachers upon them seeking a mirage called "fame." One of the things that befall these preachers has been their hastiness in giving *fatwas* (juridical opinions) that are contrary to the consensus of Muslims. Here are some examples:

- Allowance of the handshake between men and women.
- Allowance of smoking during the fast.
- Underestimating the veil of Muslim women.

These *fatwas* have aroused a considerable controversy among people, and they might be resulted from what is so-called "the intellect luxury." The following might, however, be of the main causes of this phenomenon:

- The lack of supervision of religious institution and leaders.
- The publication and circulation of controversial books.

- The panting of TV channels after agitator *fatwas*.

An explanatory example would be what happened in Egypt regarding the published *fatwa* that prevents the woman from becoming the head of the state. Then a converse *fatwa* was issued allowing the woman to stand as a candidate for presidency. After that, a distinction between presidency and the grand leadership was made.

Comparing the Texts and the Objectives (*al-Maqasid*)

There is no doubt that Allah the Almighty has revealed His books and sent His messengers to attain the welfare of people, because Allah is independent of His creatures, and has no need to give instructions to people. These instructions, however, return finally to the mundane and otherworldly advantages of people, and this is what every Muslim, who realizes the wisdom and mercy of Allah, believes.

One of the most beautiful names of Allah is *al-Hakim*, the all-Wise, and this name is mentioned in the Qur'an more than ninety times.¹ Thus Allah is Wise in what He creates and orders. Allah never creates anything in vain as the people of reason would say: (Men who... and contemplate the (wonders of) creation in the heavens and the earth, (with the thought): "Our Lord! Not for naught hast Thou created (all) this! Glory to Thee!) (Qur'an 2:191). Allah creates nothing in vain, nor does he legislate anything futilely or arbitrarily. He orders, prevents, legalizes or prohibits naught but for a wisdom known to some people and unknown to others. People might not know the particular wisdom, but by the passage of time they will detect it. The trustworthy Muslim scholars

¹ See the Qur'an (2:32), (2:129), (41:42), (3:6) and many others.

have confirmed that everything legislated by Allah should have an advantage for people in this world and in the world to come.

Between Understanding the Text and Understanding Reality:

The interest in the science of *al-maqasid* (objectives of Shari‘ah) has emerged during the recent decades for two reasons: the expansion of the Islamic world, and the apparent coherence between the two notions of *al-maqasid* and the renewal. The *maqasid* of Shari‘ah is not outside of the Islamic law; rather it is at the core, because Islamic law has made these *maqasid* as a sign for God’s regulations in regard to human actions... *Al-Maqasid* exist with the text from the beginning, and the real scholar is the one who finds out the objective of shari‘ah through observation, thinking and composing. Imam Jwayni said: “I never invent nor contrive anything. I rather perceive the rule of the Islamic law, and evoke along with it what I see and examine.” The impact of *maqasid* becomes manifest in the consideration of the laws for the reality, because these laws are changing by the change of the time and place, and had the *maqasid* been absent, the laws would have never changed by the change of the time and place. Yet the status of *al-maqasid* is admitted by the Muslim scholars to secure the interests of people in this world and the hereafter. *Al-Maqasid* are stated in the schools of Islamic jurisprudence as follows:

- *Al-maqasid* were not codified by the founders of the *hanafi* school, but they were applied in the jurisprudence branches.
- Imam Malik treated exhaustively the concept of *al-maqasid*, the unspecified public interests (*al-masalih al-mursala*), and the prohibition of evasive legal devices (*sad al-dhara’i*).

- Although Imam ash-Shafi‘i rejected the *istihsan*, and did not frequently use *al-masalih al-mursala..*, his followers have been adopting *al-maqasid*, such as al-Jwayni, al-Gazali, and al-‘iz ibn Abdul-Salam.
- Imam Ahmad paid attention to *al-maqasid* in his *Musnad*.

However, the contemporary scholars divided *al-maqasid* into three types:

- **General:** recognized in all types of legislations (i.e. facilitation, toleration, justice, liberty).
- **Specific:** exists in particular categories (i.e. aleatory in financial interactions, deterrence in punishment).
- **Partial:** means the wisdoms, secrets, and purposes observed by the Islamic law (i.e. truthfulness, eligibility of witnesses, and alleviation of the hardships in worship).

Some contemporaries, such as Ibn ‘Ashour, have criticized the science of the Islamic jurisprudence rules (*Usul al-Fiqh*). The reason was his interest in deducing the laws without paying any attention to the *maqasid*. Abu Zahrah, ‘Abdullah Darraz and others have agreed with him, and they called to an approach in which the entirety of *maqasid* controls the particles of jurisprudence.

Patterns and Examples of texts in which *al-maqasid* are taken into Consideration:

- 1- The companions of the Prophet disagreed on the interpretation of his saying: “No one should do pray *‘Asr* before they get to Banu Qurayzah.”

- 2- The Prophet said “no charity (*zakah*) is due from a Muslim on his slave or horse,” but ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab applied it on horses.
- 3- There is a share for those whose hearts are inclined towards Islam (*mu’alafah qulubuhum*) from the zakat, but Umar ibn al-Khattab did not allow ‘Uyainah and al-Aqra‘ to take it.
- 4- According to the Islamic law, the one who perpetrates manslaughter should pay one hundred camels as a wergild. However, ‘Umar allowed the people of Sham and Egypt to pay their value instead.

All the previous cases were issued to the contrary of their literal meaning, taking into consideration the purposes of shari‘ah (*al-maqasid*). Thus *al-maqasid* is a compromise approach between those who always adhere to the literal meaning of the text and those who always follow the opinion.

Observing *al-Maqasid* upon Conflict:

A conflict between *hadiths* occurs because of the lack of one or more conditions of the narrators. Although this conflict is rare, the Muslim scholars have found solutions for it; combination, abrogation, giving preponderance to one of them... but to resolve this conflict through *al-maqasid* we should:

- 1- Understand the actions of the Prophet by observing the essential *maqasid*, such as the prohibition of saving the meat of sacrificed animals after three days, then allowing it afterward, and the prohibition of visiting graves out of fear of what was being practiced in front of them before Islam, then allowing it afterward.

- 2- Take into consideration the toleration of shari‘ah in terms of diversity, gradation, respecting the social custom:
 - a- Through diversity; as the Islamic law is based on leniency and facilitation, so it suits every time and place.
 - b- Through gradation; because of the difficulty of the transition of the man from one state to another at once.
 - c- Through social custom; since the Prophet ratified some verbal and practical pre-Islamic customs which did not contradict the Islamic law.

Procedure of Dealing with Contemporary Issues:

Given the large number of emerging contemporary issues and matters, and given the conflict in opinion upon them, there are some important points to be considered in addressing these issues:

- Turning to new and contemporary research papers published by academic research centers, such as the Islamic Research Academy at al-Azhar.
- Drawing upon the decisions of the international jurisprudence councils, such as the international Islamic Jurisprudence Council in Jeddah, the Sudanese Fiqh Council, and Aal al-Bait Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman...
- Being acquainted with contemporary juridical encyclopedias which were approved and supervised by competent committees.

- To put the (facilitation jurisprudence) into practice as much as possible in conformity with the spirit of religious texts.

In closing I would like to thank the organizers and sponsors of this meeting, asking God the Almighty to grant us success and guidance, and to make us all of the bearers of the standard of guidance and understanding.

Human Rights in Islam

Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm

Tr. Omama Diab

Human Rights are bestowed by God abundantly and unconditionally to all human beings without any discrimination. Compared to man-made laws, the divine law is revealed by God as a reality not as a consequence of temporary situations. God says, "O mankind! We have created you from male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Allah is All-Knower, All-Aware." (surah 49: 13) According to the previous verse, Islam, as a religion, never has prejudice. It never discriminates between an Arab and Non-Arab, a white and black, a rich and poor except with piety.

Human rights in the Qur'an and the Sunnah are represented in many features, the first of which is noticed in creating human beings in the best shape, as God says "Surely We have created man of the best stature." (Qur'an, 95:4) Moreover, God has raised man above other creatures, subdued everything to serve him and given him heart, sight and hearing in order to realize the truth and be acquainted with his Creator. Therefore, Islam forbids people to insult any human under any circumstance and preserves human dignity even if someone is absent. " O you who believe! Shun much suspicion; for some suspicion is a crime. And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would one of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You abhor that (so abhor the other)! And keep your duty (to Allah). Lo! Allah is Relenting, Merciful." (Qur'an, 49: 12) If this is the case during someone's absence, so how would it be to live in peaceful coexistence within one nation?

Islam teaches its followers ethics and considers human behavior as a reflection of individual discipline and religious commitment. In this regard, the art of socializing with people is considered as a strict adherence to the true faith in God. Furthermore, Islam does not care about façade as much as it does about hearts and minds in order to build ideal human beings in an ideal society. This is obviously noticed in the Prophet's companions' manner. They received the prophetic ethics and rushed into applying them willingly. God says, "A good deed and an evil deed are not alike. Repel the evil deed with one which is better, then lo! he, between whom and thee there was enmity (will become) as though he was a bosom friend. But none is granted it save those who are steadfast, and none is granted it save the owner of great happiness." (Qur. an, 41: 34-35)

As it was stated earlier, human rights in Islam were bestowed to human beings long centuries ago before any " International Declaration of Human Rights" has come to light. The human rights of life, justice, privacy, ownership, self-defense, equality, peace and security in addition to guarantee of freedoms of belief, thought and moving for all human beings were among these rights which were revealed in the Qur'an and declared in the Sunnah,.

Regarding the right of freedom, we know that Islam came with emancipation and made it an act of worship and devotion in a time when humanity was sinking in slavery till a day came and one could hardly find a slave to free. Human rights in Islam also includes the right to have self-esteem and stand in dignity even towards the captives. By watering them with his hand and dressing them of his own clothes, the prophet presented a real example of human sympathy and mercy to all people and especially the captives. He even assigned a share of the booties for the wicked

incarcerated from Banu Quraydha in a very hot day and said, "Do not overload them with the heat of the sun to the harshness of the arms."

Islam also has preserved women's rights since its beginning. The demand for declaration to preserve women's rights that our world is suffering from today indicates nothing but degradation and ill-treatment of women status as human beings. One of the Prophet's very well-known saying is the answer when he was asked about who is the most one that has to be treated benevolently by a person. The phrase "Your mother" three times repeated while "your father" was mentioned once, shows women's great rank in Islam. By saying that, the prophet did not degrade males but he shows women's status as a recognition of their role in building up personalities and members of a community. It is sufficient to mention one example of the practical and real incidents that took place during the companions life. When Abu Baker, the first caliphate of the Messenger recommended Osama, who was leading the Muslim army to fight the Romans, he asked him to be committed to a will that should be taken for granted by military leaders today. He said, "Do not kill an infant, a woman or an aged man. Do not cut a tree, nor light fire up with plants. Do not devastate a house. And you are likely to pass by people who have devoted their entire lives to monastic services; leave them to that which they devoted their lives. " What we see of the twenty-first century civilization is totally on the opposite side of these recommendations. This is how fighting/jihad in Islam should take place as a means of conveying God's message to all humanity. It is an act of defense not initiating aggression. The ethics of wars were not known by any civil discipline or legislation. Here, we can ask: Does not the time come for advocates of modernity to see the light and reality of Islam and to take its teachings and ethics as principles for reformation?

Should not the Muslim nation hold on to the Islamic approach and thought and seek to revive its call that dignifies human beings and grants them all human rights?

Chapter 7

Jesus, Son of Mary

Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm

Tr. Manal El-Zayat

C..... the verses in the Qur'an on God's Prophet, Jesus son of Mary, one finds the story of his birth truly amazing. Jesus lived a normal life; he had all the natural desires of a human being. As the Qur'an puts it, "The Christ, son of Mary, was but an apostle: all other apostles had passed away before him; and his mother was one who never deviated from the truth; and they both ate food like other mortals. Behold, how clear We make these messages unto them." (5:75)

The source of some people's confusion about Jesus is his birth from a mother without a father, and this has been used to defame his prophethood. Yet, this is actually not different from the birth of the father of all mankind, Adam, who was created with no father or mother. Whoever believes in God knows that He is the Creator, the Evolver, the Fashioner, who is capable of everything. Nothing is impossible for Him. God Almighty says, "Verily, in the sight of God, the nature of Jesus is as the nature of Adam, whom He created out of dust and then said unto him, 'Be'—and he is." (3:59) The Qur'an always reminds us of the truth about Jesus and his mission, and of the fact that he is a Messenger from God, sent to call the Children of Israel to follow the true religion and to respect His commands. In God's words, "Behold, We have inspired thee, O Prophet [Muhammad], just as We inspired Noah and all the prophets after him—as We inspired Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendants, including Jesus and Job, and Jonah, and Aaron, and Solomon; and as We vouchsafed unto David a book of divine wisdom." (4:163)

To support his prophethood God gave Jesus miraculous signs to prove the authenticity of his mission. Amongst these miracles were his revival of the dead, healing the sick, especially those with incurable illnesses such as blindness and leprosy, in addition to other miracles that are mentioned in God's words, "O Jesus son of Mary, remember the blessings which I bestowed upon thee and thy mother - how I strengthened thee with holy inspiration, so that thou couldst speak unto men in thy cradle, and as a grown man; and how I imparted unto thee revelation and wisdom, including the Torah and the Gospel; and how by My leave thou didst create out of clay like the shape of a bird, and then I breathed into it, whereupon it became a bird; and how thou didst heal the blind and the leper by My leave, and how thou didst raise the dead by My leave; and how I prevented the Children of Israel from harming thee when thou camest unto them with all evidence of the truth." (5: 110)

And amongst Jesus' miracles is God's response to his prayer to bring down a table full of food from the sky at the request of the disciples for them to trust his prophethood more; elaborating on this miracle, the Qur'an states, "And lo, the disciples said, 'O Jesus son of Mary, could thy Sustainer send down unto us a repast from heaven?' Jesus answered, 'Be conscious of God, if you are truly believers!' Said they, 'We desire to partake thereof, so that our hearts might be set fully at rest, and that we might know that thou hast spoken the truth to us, and that we might be of those who bear witness thereto!' Said Jesus son of Mary, 'O God, our Sustainer! Send down upon us a repast from heaven: it shall be an ever-recurring feast for us—for the first and the last of us— and a sign from Thee. And provide us our sustenance, for Thou art the best of providers!'" (5:112-114)

Jesus was not spared from his enemies' mistreatment, to whom he was sent as a guide; they even conspired to kill him, then they decided on a fabricated lie, which was subsequently refuted and denied by the Qur'an, and proved another fact which many have been unaware of, namely that Jesus was not crucified, but raised by God to Him after he was

interchanged with someone who looked like him—it is said that he was from his companions, and it is said that he was from his enemies—so they crucified him in the belief that he was Jesus. “And they boast, ‘Behold, we have slain the Christ, Jesus son of Mary, who claimed to be an apostle of God!’ However, they did not slay him, and neither did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them as if it had been so; and, verily, those who hold conflicting views thereon are indeed confused, having no real knowledge thereof, and following mere conjecture. For, of a certainty, they did not slay him: nay, God exalted him unto Himself—and God is indeed Almighty, Wise.” (4:157-158)

The Qur’an has Jesus vigorously denying any claims of godhood, “And lo! God said, ‘O Jesus son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, ‘Worship me and my mother as deities beside God?’ Jesus answered, ‘Limitless art Thou in Thy glory! It would not have been possible for me to say what I had no right to say! Had I said this, Thou wouldst indeed have known it! Thou knowest all that is within myself, whereas I know not what is in Thy Self. Verily, it is Thou alone who fully knowest all the things that are beyond the reach of a created being’s perception. Nothing did I tell them beyond what Thou didst bid me to say: worship God, who is my Sustainer as well as your Sustainer.’” (5:116).

And God Almighty wanted His noble Prophet Jesus to be one of the great signs of the end of time, thus he will descend from the heavens to the earth, where he will join those who surrender themselves to God and adhere to the teachings of self-surrender unto God, and will put an end to the ongoing arguments between the three major faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. With this Qur’anic narration of Jesus, every Muslim has a clear image of his personality, easy to understand and absorb. These can be summarised in simple words: except that Jesus’ birth was a miracle from a mother and without a father, he is similar to the other Prophets. He is a human being who was sent from God to the Children of Israel to call them to the truth; the Bible was revealed to him, and he was supported by signs and miracles to be

a proof and for the truth of his Prophethood, and evidence against those who opposed him and deviated from his message. “Such was, in the words of truth, Jesus the son of Mary, about whose nature they so deeply disagree.” (19:34) ò

Chapter 8

Holding Fast by the Covenant of God is our Only Way

Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm

In the Name of God the Merciful the Compassionate. I thank God as the grateful do. I thank Him as the patients do. I thank God with the deepest blessed and sincere gratitude. I thank God who protects those who refuge to his Path and grants His mercy to those who ask His favor. He demolishes the oppressors by his justice. I do testify that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is His servant and messenger, the best prophet was ever sent. May God grant His peace and blessings over him, his house hold and all of his companions.

Our Lord mentions, in the chapter of “The Prophets”, a number of the chosen early prophets, like Abraham, Moses, Aaron and Jesus may God bless them all. He narrates some stories about their lives, their standings, their opposition to evil and their endurance of the harm they had to face in order to provide us with role models around which we are asked to form our lives. Then God says: “verily, this nation of yours is one and I am your Lord, so worship me.”

God also says in the Chapter of “the Believers”: “Verily, this nation of yours is one and I am your Lord so have consciousness.” In both verses there is a declaration from God Almighty to all humanity that all the prophets, from Adam till Muhammad, may God bless them all, are servants of God who had gone through hard times and tested by kinds of calamities. However, they showed great patience and held to it fulfilling their servitude to God Almighty. They have the same religion which is the religion of Islam in the sense that indicates the meaning of surrender oneself to God the One the Unique the self sufficient. God

says: “verily, In the sight of God islam is the religion,” and says: “whoever follows a religion other than islam, it would not be accepted.”

Today, we are in a desperate need to come together and live in the shade of our servitude to God so we work as a unity against all plots and conspiracies. All the nation should be gathered in the light of the verse: “And hold fast, all of you together, to the Rope of Allah, and do not separate. And remember Allah's favor on you: How you were enemies and He made friendship between your hearts so that you became as brothers by His grace; and (how) you were on the brink of an abyss of fire, and He did save you from it. Thus Allah makes clear His revelations to you, that you may be guided.”

The nation should gather to follow God’s order, it should abstain from diversion and conspiracies. The prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, says “the Devil acts as a wolf for human beings. He does Just as a wolf that hunts the sheep which goes away and stands far from the rest. So be aware of narrow roads among mountains, and stick to the group, the public and the mosque.”

The Prophet has warned us against divergence so that we learn that the basics for our security and survival are cooperation, getting along and donating to the servants of God Almighty. God says: “And spend in the cause of God, and cast not yourselves into ruin with your own hands, and do good; surely God loves those who do good.

We reaffirm the established axiom that we will never change our convictions or stands. We will rather be firm about asserting the truth, standing all together shoulder to shoulder asking God for His help against all the endeavors made to manipulate our future, prejudice our dignity and religion, and to exploit our resources. We do that by assembling social, economic and cultural capacities to work on holding tight to the Path of God for which He called us.

Indeed, facing challenges with the utmost resolution and steadfastness can observe the entity of the nation and keep its strength and dignity, restore its might and sovereignty. It keeps evil genies and evil humans away from the group. Our prophet, peace be upon him, says: “Be with the group and stay away from diversion. The Devil is closer to the one and more far away from the two.” Our Lord the Almighty says: “and do not dispute (with one another) lest you lose courage and your strength depart, and be patient. Surely, Allah is with those who are patient.”8:46

Let us be united to face the enemies who plotted against us to spread corruption among us. Diversion is the sign and the title of defeat and disorder because it is the way to disturbance and destruction. We had not fallen as victims for conspirators except when we got fragmented to various religions, sects, minor states and armies. This policy is the ever followed policy of all tyrants and colonizers since the era of pharaoh. God says: “Lo! Pharaoh exalted himself in the earth and made its people castes. A tribe among them he oppressed, killing their sons and sparing their women. Lo! he was of those who work corruption” (Qur’an, 28:4).

Our nation faces serious challenges and goes through hardships as a consequence of the ongoing conspiracies have lasted for centuries and are apparent on the international stage nowadays of discrimination based on hatred against our nation, targeting one state after the other, particularly targeting Syria because its support for truth, its resistance for occupation of Arab lands and its refusal for humility and degradation. Have been doing so, Syria is reserving its heritage which God has granted it, condemning the injustice which God has forbidden.

It is narrated that Abdullah Ibn Salam, may Allah be pleased with him said: “when God created the human beings and they stood up on their feet, they raised their heads and asked: O

Lord, whose side are you on? He said: “I am on the side of the oppressed until he gets his right back.”

We, Muslims, should trust in God who supports the oppressed and makes him victorious. We should trust in God who forbids injustice among His servants and makes it forbidden for Himself too. It is narrated in the authentic hadith, that the Prophet narrated about God saying: “O my servants, I have forbidden injustice for myself and I have made it forbidden among you. Do not be unjust towards each others.”

We should trust in God who has protected our country, Sham, because it is the best of lands. The Prophet, peace be upon him says: “things will turn until you become groups of soldiers, in sham, in Yemen and in Iraq.” The narrator said: ”O messenger of God make the choice for me, had I lived to that time.” The Prophet, peace be upon him, said: “hold to the sham, it is the best of lands to which God gathers the best of people.”

It is also narrated that the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: “ the pavilion of Muslims in the day of daring is in al-Ghouta, next to a city called Damascus, one of the best country sides of Damascus.” Sham has been protected by God hence He asked the angels to spread their wings over it as to keep it and to shelter its inhabitants. It is narrated by Zaid that he said: “we were sitting by the Prophet, peace be upon him, collecting the Qur’an from the pieces on which it was written. The Prophet said: “Blessed is the Sham. We said: “ O messenger of God! What for?” He said: “because the angles of God have spread their wings over it.” Sham area is victorious by God’s favor and guidance. No matter how many people let it down as long as it established truth and as long as it follows the commands of God. It is narrated that the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: “if the people of sham go corrupted, there would be no good in you. A portion of my nation will remain victorious even if others let them down until the Hereafter comes.”

Let us have consciousness as God has granted this land all these blessings, and let us live in peace with Him. The one who is in peace with God, God makes him at peace with all human beings. Who purifies his inner world, God beautifies his outer look. Who works for the hereafter, God helps him in the affairs of this world and in his religion. Let us attach ourselves to that and cooperate. Let us be aware and watchful for the conspiracies. Let us put our trust in God as did the group of the Companions who went to Badr along with the Prophet. There, God threw horror in the hearts of the infidels and they retreated in loss while the believers had firmed their belief, steadfastness and their trust in God. God says: "Those (i.e. believers) unto whom the people (hypocrites) said, "Verily, the people (pagans) have gathered against you (a great army), therefore, fear them." But it (only) increased them in Faith, and they said: "Allah (Alone) is Sufficient for us, and He is the Best Disposer of affairs (for us)" (Qur'an, 3:173).

Indeed, we should enhance our trust in God and our belief in Him. We should be steadfast on the truth, despite of calamities and hardships in the face of conspiracies because we are the people of truth. We refuse all kinds of pressure on our country, following in that the saying of our Lord: "Lose not heart, nor fall into despair: For you must gain mastery if you are true believers" (Qur'an, 3:139).

With such belief, trust and cooperation, alongside with hard working in sincerity and truthfulness, we exhort the best of our efforts to oppose the harsh attacks against us and to convert our words of enthusiasm, our poetry and speeches into good ideas, fruitful actions and disciplined behavior , following in that the saying of our Lord: "Say: Work, for God will see your work and so will His messenger and the believers do. Then you will be returned

back to the One who knows the hidden and the revealed so He will tell you about what you have done.”

We should have belief in what our Prophet said: “There shall remain a group of my people steadfast on the commands of God. No harm shall affect them because of those people who oppose them or those who let them down until the command of God comes while they are superior over people.” We quote the invocation of our Prophet when said: “Oh God! We seek refuge in you against the dismissal of your blessings, the change of the health you granted us, the sudden of your anger and against all your antagonism.”

Chapter 9

Islamic Reflections on Terrorism

Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm

The use of the term “terrorism” has been increased considerably in the last decades, particularly in the recent years after the events of September 11, 2001. It has been used in different writings and speeches, as well as in many discussion groups, seminars, and conferences. Authors, researchers and political leaders have used it in condemning terrorism and terrorists. Furthermore, groups, here and there, have been described as terrorist. Many people, however, have left the state terrorism away from their consideration, the kind of terrorism that was mentioned in the United Nation’s suggestions for defining terrorism. I will also mention it while talking about the definitions of terrorism in the dictionary of social sciences and the Arab Countries League and the United Nations definitions of it. However, I will say: terrorism is one of the social phenomena that emerged and grown up according to specific psychological and social factors, and to specific political, economical and cultural conditions as well. All these factors and conditions participate, one way or another, in producing the phenomenon of terrorism in the painful reality that human societies live today. Therefore, any serious remedy to this phenomenon requires a true reformation for all these factors and conditions that participate in its existence and growth.

Hence, it is necessary to have a clear definition for terrorism to differentiate between it and defending the Truth, the faith, the homeland and the self. There are many definitions of terrorism, but the international society has adopted none of them:

- **The definition in the social sciences dictionary:** the term “terrorism” refers to a specific kind of tyranny which is not subjected to any law or rule, nor does it care about its victims’ security. It attacks its intended targets in order to create a sphere of horror and fear.
- **The Arab League Definition:** an agreement among experts on one definition for terrorism is of a great difficulty, and this might be the start point on the right direction towards reaching an acceptable definition, hence the Arab League adopted one definition for terrorism. The Arab charter to cease terrorism determines a definition which states that terrorism is: every action of violent or threatening by it, whatever its motivations or purposes are, carrying out an individual or collective criminal plan, and aiming to frighten and scare people by hurting them, or endangering their lives, freedom or security.
- **The United Nations and the Definition of Terrorism:** the special committee of terrorism emanating from the United Nations has faced in-depth and fundamental disagreements trying to find a precise definition acceptable to all delegations of various countries of the world. Some of the delegations of countries members in the committee participated in determining the definition of terrorism, and most important proposals are those that stated the following acts in the context of international terrorism:
 - 1- Acts of violence and oppression perpetrated by colonial, racist or foreign regimes against peoples struggling for liberation and to obtain their legitimate

right to self-determination and independence, and for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

- 2- Assistance of some states for the organizations that engage in terror against other sovereign countries.
 - 3- Acts of violence perpetrated by individuals or groups, which would endanger the lives of innocent people, or violate human freedoms without prejudice to the inalienable rights of all peoples to give it, such as: the right of self-determination and independence of all peoples who are under the control of the colonial and racist regimes, or any other forms of foreign control, or the legitimate right to struggle.
- **Definition of terrorism in the Islamic concept:**

The Islamic Fiqh Council emphasized in its meeting held on 26 October 1422 (January 10, 2002) in the Muslim World League in Mecca at its sixth session **that extremism, violence and terrorism have nothing to do with Islam.** They are dangerous actions with implications for serious sin, and they violate and do injustice to humans. The one who looks attentively to the two sources of Islamic law, the Holy Qur'an and the *Sunnah* of His Prophet (peace be upon Him), s/he will find nothing of the meanings of extremism, violence and terrorism which mean the abuse of others without any right.

In the council's final statement terrorism was defined as: a global phenomenon not attributed to religion, nor belongs to a people. It is a result of

extremism which hardly exists in all contemporary societies. It is also the aggression practiced by individuals, communities or states against man's (religion, blood, mind, wealth and honor). It includes forms of intimidation and abuse, threats and unlawful murder, frightening the wayfarer, cutting the road and every act of violence or threat. It has the implementation of an individual or collective criminal enterprise aiming to spread horror among the people, intimidate or harm them, or endanger their lives, freedom or security. It includes kinds of damage to the environment or to any public or private facilities and properties, or exposing one of the national or natural resources to risk.

After these definitions, let us shine a light on the Islamic principles in opposing terrorism:

- Islamic shari'ah is a tolerant law founded on tolerance, disseminating justice and liberating people from their slavery to the creation to the slavery to the Creator. The prophet peace be upon him said: "I was sent with the true tolerant Islam."
- Islam has addressed the treaties and charters with great interest, and this concern is an evidence of Shari'ah rejecting violence and terrorism. Allah says: ((But the treaties are) not dissolved with those Pagans with whom ye have entered into alliance and who have not subsequently failed you in aught, nor aided any one against you. So fulfill your engagements with them to the end of their term: for Allah loveth the Righteous.) (Qur'an 9:4).

- Islam recognizes the sanctity of human blood. Allah says: (On that account: we ordained for the Children of Israel that if any one slew a person - unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief In the land - it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be As if he saved the life of the whole people.) (Qur'an 5:32).
- Islam has urged to work towards a society in which love prevails, all differences disappear, and various reasons of violence and vandalism are to be vanished. God says: (O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, His mate, and from them twain scattered (Like seeds) countless men and women.) (Qur'an 4:1), and He also says: (O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know Each other (Not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the Most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (He who is) the Most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).) (Qur'an 49:13). This contains an address from the Almighty God to human beings and a statement from Him on the unity of mankind in spite of the existence of different peoples and clans, and that people should know each other instead of ignoring, disagreeing and fighting each other, and then make the race of precedence between humans according to piety and righteous deeds which will reflect good and blessings on the whole human community.
- Allah also urges for mercy as He described the Prophet of Islam ﷺ by saying: (We sent Thee not, but As a Mercy for all creatures.) (Qur'an 21:107), and as the

Prophet of mercy ordered people to be merciful toward each other when he said: “Have mercy upon what in earth, so the One in heaven will have mercy on you,” and he says: “the one who does not show mercy to others, will not be treated mercifully by others.”

- Islam seek through its objectives, principles and values to achieve security and stability and to maintain order by applying the legal boundaries. Therefore, Islam did not leave any gap that terrorists and saboteurs can use to carry out their business and achieve their goals.

On the basis of this urgent statement, I will move to explain the ways of eliminating terrorism and combating it in a systematic and scientific manner that includes addressing political, economic and social problems. And as much as these problems are treated, terrorism resulted from them will be eliminated.

Ways for Addressing Political Problems:

- Identifying the duties and rights of the ruler and his subjects, and educating people about the meaning of the concept of leadership.
- Impartiality of the judiciary and supporting courts to decide in these issues.
- Adopting dialogue as a method of treatment.
- Using negotiation to solve problems between nations, or resorting to international bodies and organizations to resolve these problems and conflicts rather than using force.

- Implementation of decisions of international organizations and respecting them.
- Respecting the sovereignty of states and non-interference in their internal affairs.
- Fulfilling of states to their promises and pledges that they made in front of people.

Ways for Addressing Economical Problems:

- Approaching affective economical planning to solve economical problems.
- Economic openness and using modern technology to save time, effort and money.
- Economizing of consumption and reducing spending on weapons and turning money into development projects and on the development of economic resources.
- Reclamation of agricultural lands to solve food shortages.

Ways for Addressing Social Problems:

❖ Education:

- Work on spreading education and reducing the illiteracy rate as quickly as possible.
- Improving the quality of education and directing it to the basic and urgent needs of the community.
- Directing young people towards vocational and technical training and scientific research.

❖ Health:

Continuous focus on the health aspects of the members of the society, and finding qualified medical staff.

There are also some things that need to be addressed specifically to curb the phenomenon of terrorism and extremism, such as:

- Educating people about the correct Islamic knowledge which ensures that people know their rights and duties, so they fulfill their duties amicably and ask for their rights with kindness. And this will lead to harmony prevailing under justice and equity and the absence of injustice and oppression. Allah says: (Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and Liberality kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion: He you, that ye may receive admonition.) (Qur'an 16:90).
- The contribution of the scholars in demonstrating the truth and calling to God with sagacity.
- Improving economy and securing a decent life for communities.
- Paying attention to human rights within the parameters and intrinsic values that Allah has placed in the contents of the divine messages revealed to His messengers.
- Participation in decision-making and non-uniqueness which leads to the ruin of public interests.

However, it is a fact that addressing the phenomenon of terrorism in the world requires:

- Tracing the roots of the problem of terrorism in communities, and employing human knowledge to combat it.
- Clarifying the link between the crimes of terrorism and other problems.
- Paying attention to scientific method in facing problems, and considering solving them in the framework of policies and strategies of states and not in the framework of the security services only.
- Repairing errors in a way that is based on firmness, justice wisdom and with the disclosure of the various aspects of terrorism.
- Paying attention to the security of intellect.
- Applying conventions and strategies that are special for combating terrorism.
- Protection of human rights and dignity within the parameters and values revealed by Allah to be a reason for the good and decent life for Allah says: (Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has Faith, to Him will we give a new life, a life that is good and pure..) (Qur'an 16:97), and seeking to explain human rights in Islam for the West since it is the Muslims responsibility to present these values and rights to others.

Finally, I ask God that such conferences come out of the space of lectures in the indoors to the space of reality, and that all institutions and human societies cooperate

with each other, and so do states with different positions and sizes, to refute injustice and spread justice and peace among the all peoples of the earth through the divine law that God has chosen for His servants, is based on justice, equity and right, and is encouraged in all divine religions that were concluded by the message of Prophet Muhammad. Allah says: (This Day have I perfected your Religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam As your religion.) (Qur'an 5:3).

Chapter 10

Crisis of Contemporary Islamic Thought

Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour

This chapter purports to convey a comprehensive and dialogical reformist project in contemporary Islamic thought while addressing a select number of religious intelligentsia in the Muslim world. I am quite open to criticism and correction in this project, which is a modest contribution on my side to enrich contemporary Muslim debates about the above important matters. I do hope and pray that I will reach my target invoking the famous prophetic *hadith*: "If a jurist were to make a judgment that proves to be right, he would earn two rewards, and if he were to err, he would earn one reward."

Religious scholars apply this *hadith* on condition that the legal judgment (*ijtihad*) should be constructed by a qualified jurist (*mujtahid*) following its own conditions and made in its proper context. Surprisingly, it is claimed that the door of *ijtihad* is closed despite the authenticity of such *hadith* which states that the *mujtahid* who errs is rewarded and praised. This reward remains valid in spite of the fact that his error might be related to Shariáh, it might affect the rights of God and the rights of people, and it is possible that even people's honor, their reputation and money. It reflects the limitless wisdom of God and His immense mercy.

What is true about the human health being ruined by the passage of time, is also true for the human thought. If the thought is not rejuvenated, if *mujtahids*, with their *ijtihad*, do not bring back its purity and free it from inner and outer defects, its

life will come to its end. History, then, will be the best place for it. This is why the succession of divine messages has always served as a renewal for the religious approach in human thought. When God willed to seal Prophethood by revealing the Qur'an to the Master of Messengers Muhammad, peace be upon him, reformation has continued to be an established way in Islam and through it qualified scholars would purify this religion from the occasional diseases and the influence of centuries- be it extremism, negligence, excessiveness, falsehood or wrong interpretation.

Reformation in this sense in this final message is what we understand from the saying of the Prophet which is narrated by Abu Dawood: "God sends at the beginning of each century to this nation someone who reforms its religion." And in another narration: "the matter of its religion." Anyone who ponders on the situation of the Islamic community nowadays can see that it suffers an intellectual crisis which throws it into a dangerous cultural calamity as it is relegated (to the end of the line of civilizations). This mission of reformation is a mission of salvation for this community until it is present again at the club of human civilizations before it is too late. In order for it to return to the position of leadership and headship which God has granted it, the reformation is a must.

Reformation and Heritage

Reformation from the point of view of Islam is not the same as from the point of view of the West. In the West it is an attack against the essentials. Actually, reformation should draw its authenticity and legitimacy from those. Otherwise it is not reformation but rather abrogation of essentials. Abrogation should not be carried out except by using a well known text from the Quran or the Sunnah. We must stress that reformation is of two kinds: First, the reformation which comes from outside the

Islamic perspective. This kind is rejected. An example would be what is written by some modernists who try to apply modern western theories on language, history, jurisprudence and thought on Islam. The linguistic analysis and historical reconstruction, focusing on the stability or mobility of the text and such like take them to the manipulation of the text, emptied of its content, which eventually leads to the destruction of religion in the name of reformation. The second one, which is desired by us, is the reformation which is carried out according to the Islamic perspective, safeguarding its frames, limited to its texts and subjected to its measures.

In my opinion, reformation is required in two main areas: Upcoming events, issues and subjects for which we need legal opinions (ijtihad) embodying the truth of the rule “Islam is valid for any place at anytime”, which is derived from the finality and universality of Islam. Another proof for it is as Mu’adh’s hadith in which the Prophet asked him about the methodology he used to find the rules and apply them in case there was no evidence for them in the Qur'an or hadith. Mu’adh replied : “I exert myself and I do my best.’

We have some of old ijtihad issues which have been narrated in the books of jurisprudence and do not follow the change of circumstances of time and place. In these cases jurists are asked to contribute and make up their legal judgments. This is following the well established jurisprudential rule that states : “It is not illicit to change rules according to the change of times.” While the statement : “The former has left nothing to the latter” was not known among our early scholars. Moreover, it is denied by the majority of people of knowledge, one of whom is al Haidh ibn Abd al-Barr al-Qurtubi. On the contrary he says: “How much the former have left to the latter!” The rejected statement contradicts what our scholars have agreed upon that no

epoch should lack a *mujtahid* capable to clarify the rule of God Exalted is He. If there is no *mujtahid*, the entire community will be held accountable for their negligence.

Some examples of these old issues would be the following:

Defining places

in terms of
domains of war
and domains of
peace.

Developing the following areas in a way that takes into consideration the ultimate benefits of the community and fulfills the aims of Shari'ah:

- 1 jurisprudence of obligatory charity (*zakat*)
- 2 consultation (*shura*)
- 3 commanding good and forbidding evil
- 4 system of justice

Examples of new issues

- 1 anonymous societies
- 2 new kinds of companies
- 3 new kinds of trading
- 4 money exchange through banks, insurance and stocks
- 5 modern medical practices such as child-pipe, organ transplant, cloning and others.

Features of Reformation in Jurisprudence

- 1 *ijtihad* is applicable to new issues and some old ones;
- 2 the sources for it should be: books of legal rulings, opinions and cases;
- 3 documenting the opinions of jurists following the primary sources and explaining their legal evidence from text and by reasoning;
- 4 enlightening writings on jurisprudence by spiritual dimension so that legal opinions encompass spiritual purposes such as prostration and what it contains of nearness to God, and pilgrimage and what it contains of purposes and spiritual elements of its rituals;
- 5 benefiting from the writers who have considered these aspects such as Dr. Qaradaei, Muhammad ‘Amara, ‘Ali Jum’a, Muhammad al-Ghazali, Dr. Muhammad Sa’id Ramadan al-Bouti and others; that is reviving the knowledge of religion by linking heart and reason, and mind and spirit, as did Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali may Allah have mercy on him;
- 6 establishing communication among the recognized schools of thought and benefitting from them for the purpose of maintaining the unity of the community, especially in the field of codification of Islamic jurisprudence.

New canonization and categorization of Islamic jurisprudence which includes:

- 1- Connecting faith with jurisprudence, as in the book by Abu Hanifa “The Greatest Jurisprudence”;
- 2- Simplicity and ease within legal rules and regulations;

3- Indexing books of jurisprudence current and old ones according to both modern and traditional terminology to simplify the work of researchers and students.

Finally, we advocate a reformation which rescues Islamic community from its crisis and restores its leadership. This reformation should hold tight to the essentials and should respond to the changes by building up Islamic modernity on the foundation of its heritage. We want this community to be able to keep one eye on the first centuries after the migration of the Prophet Muhammad and another eye on the twenty first century so that it fulfils the verse that states: “you have been the best community created for people.” Qur'an 2:110. It is understood from this verse that you are the best community, so be as you were meant to be. Maintain the position of the best community by fulfilling this trust, conveying the message and applying shari'a. "Be good servants of God, commanding good and forbidding evil, believing in God so that you inherit the earth and become the leaders of nations and models for all people. Allah says: “Before this We wrote in the Psalms, after the Message (given to Moses): My servants the righteous, shall inherit the earth. Verily in this (Qur'an) is a Message for people who would (truly) worship Allah. We sent you not, but as a Mercy for all creatures.” (Qur'an, 21:105-106).

Chapter 11

Objectives of Islamic Message

Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour

In defining the objectives of the Islamic message, it is pertinent to deal with the following issues:

1) What is the meaning of Islam?

Linguistically speaking, Islam means to "enter peace". Because the use of the letter "A" in Arabic, represented by *hamza* as a prefix indicates entering a particular time or place. The verb "*Aslama*" means "entering peace," and its nominal form being "Islam". It also means to surrender to Allah, and thus a Muslim is somebody who surrenders to Allah.

Technically speaking, Islam is the religion which Allah has approved for His servants and has sent all the prophets and messengers to convey it to mankind. Then He has perfected it by sending the Seal of Prophets, Muhammad, peace be upon him. Muhammad was commanded to preach to all human beings, not only to his people. He received the Holy Qur'an from Allah and transmitted it to people exactly as he received it. He followed his instructions, applied it and explained it by means of his own practice. Every generation received the Holy Qur'an from the previous one exactly as the Prophet received it. It was thus protected and reached us complete and untouched exactly as it was first revealed. Allah says: "It is We who have sent down the Qur'an and We guard it." (15:9)

2) The characteristics of the Message of Islam:

- A) It is the last and final message.
 - B) It is universal. Allah says: "We have sent you (Muhammad) only to bring good news and warnings to all people" (34:28)
 - C) It is complete and comprehensive. Allah says: "Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed my blessings upon you, and chosen Islam as your religion." (5:3)
 - D) It goes beyond place and time. This quality is implied in the three previous ones.
- 3) Explanation of the Purpose behind His Creation:

It is twofold:

- A) To worship Allah; Allah says: "I have not created Jinn and mankind except to worship Me."
 - B) To establish the perfect human civilization on earth. "It is He (Allah) who brought you into being from the earth and made you inhabit it." (Qur'an, 11:61).
- 4) The Purposes of Islam:

Scholars of Shari'ah summarize them as follows:

- A) To secure a benefit, or to increase it as much as possible.
- B) To prevent evil, or to reduce it as much as possible.

- C) To promote ease, and eliminate hardship as regards those who are liable to hold religious responsibility.

However, Muslim scholars formulated these three general purposes into five more specific instructions and called them *al-Kulliyat al-Khams*, (the five ultimate purposes) of Islam. They are:

- A) The preservation of religion,
- B) The preservation of life,
- C) The preservation of progeny,
- D) The preservation of intellect, and
- E) The preservation of wealth.

Some contemporary scholars consider the above mentioned five purposes as concerning the individual (to be the first category) and add the following categories:

- A) Shari'ah's purposes concerning the family. Seven goals are included here.

The first goal: to regulate male-female relationship so that sexual intercourse is only possible within marriage.

The second goal: to protect progeny and ensure the continuation of life by prohibiting homosexual marriages, castrating, monasticism, and removing woman's uterus with the objective of avoiding pregnancy.

The third goal: to ensure mercy and compassion by propounding high principles regarding the relationship between husband and wife.

The fourth goal: to protect the lineage: to achieve this goal Islam forbids adoption and fornication. Moreover, it forbids for a woman to conceal the fact that she is pregnant. Furthermore, Islam establishes for a wife a period of waiting after the divorce or the death of her husband in order to safeguard the rights of the progeny, if any.

The fifth goal: to protect adhering to Islam among the family members. Fathers are responsible for the righteousness of their families. The governmental institutions are also exhorted to perform the same duty.

Allah, Glory to Him, says: “And enjoin your people to worship and be constant therein.” (Qur’an, 20:132)

The sixth goal: to organize family life. The ground on which family rests should be firm and the relationship between its members well established. These include: *qawama* (guardianship), *shoura* (consultation) and obedience. Islam goes beyond nuclear family to include more distant relatives and in-laws, that is the extended family. It, thus, organizes the relations among all partners and establishes regulations regarding social and emotional aspects.

The seventh goal: to organize family’s financial issues: among those are the laws regarding the dowry, the expenses of wife, children, divorce, nursemaid, suckling mother, and relatives; and the laws concerning inheritance, will, and endowment.

It must be noted that the purposes of Shari‘ah concerning the Muslim community are seven:

The first purpose: the institutional organization of the Muslim community.

“The Muslim community” is considered a distinct entity which has its own properties and values. However, Shari‘ah does not take into consideration the concept of “ legal personality”, an assumed concept that turned the modern state into a monster, As a result of that, individual rights as well as social institutions become neglected.

Shari‘ah stresses the following points related to the unity of the Muslim community:

- The unity of Muslim community embodied in one faith and one language, the language of the Qur’an.
- Islamic republic of Iran is to be credited for making Arabic language an obligatory subject matter in schools, a thing that many non-Arab Muslim countries have failed to do.
- The unity of belief does not exclude the existence of differences among Muslims in some matters related to it. These differences are to be understood within the principles of *ijtihad*, individual legal reasoning, in accordance with the general principles of Islam.
- The unity of belief does not exclude the existence of different legal schools and various political trends within the frame of Islamic norms.
- The unity of language does not exclude the existence of different dialects, and of different national or local languages besides the language of the Qur’an.

- Various differences are accepted, provided that they do not transgress the mainstream limits.

The second purpose: Security. The Qur'an says: "And [He] secured them from fear" [106:4]. It includes internal and external security.

The third purpose: Justice. It should be established at every and each level of life: (in the international arena, judgment, the system of rule, among people and nations). The Qur'an says: "Never let hatred of anyone lead you into the sin of deviating from justice." [5:8]

The fourth purpose: to observe religion and proper conduct:

It is the responsibility of all of us to accomplish this purpose through observing various religious duties and principles. In this regard, the Prophet says: "Whoever amongst you sees an evil, he must change it with his hand; if he is unable to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is unable to do so, then with his heart; and that is the least faith." Also he says: "I was sent only to perfect the noble manners."

In my opinion, some morals are to be regarded absolutely essential, such as being truthful and trustworthy, since the very existence and preservation of the Muslim community depends entirely on them. Some others are of less importance and can be regarded secondary.

The fifth purpose: Cooperation and solidarity: they include all spheres of life, cultural, social, political and economic, Needless to say, cooperation and solidarity must be to establish virtue and goodness. As the Qur'an says:

“Help each other in doing what is good and pious, and do not help each other in doing sin and enmity.” (5:2)

In this regard, the Prophet says: “Muslims is their mutual love and affection are like one body. When one of its limbs aches, the whole body aches, because of sleeplessness and fear.’

The sixth purpose: Dissemination of knowledge in general, and of fiqh (religious knowledge) in particular, and safeguarding the intellect of the community.

It is worth mentioning that the first revealed verses of the Qur’an are the following: “Read in the name of your lord who created. He created Man from a clot. Read, and your Lord is the Most Bountiful, It is He Who taught with the pen. He taught Man what he did not know.”

Defining the *fiqhi*, jurist Abu hanifa said: . it is to be aware of your rights and of your duties.” Indeed, this is a comprehensive definition.

As for safeguarding the intellect of the community, it entails two things:

- A) To protect it from harmful materials which damage it physically, as wine, and drugs.
- B) To protect it from other destructive things which damage it psychologically, such as falsehood, misleading principles, and brainwashing by the media which controls people’s minds, feed them with fantasies and spread corrupted systems of values. In opposition to this, Islam exhorts to stand by knowledge, truth and real values.

The seventh purpose: the establishment of the perfect human civilization of earth, and the preservation of the resources of the Muslim community.

It is common knowledge that Man is regarded the vicegerent of Allah on earth and that he is told to establish good and prevent evil. Besides, Man is ordered to be generous and to help the needy. Allah says: “And spend out of what He made you trustees on.” (57:7). The Prophet says: “Property belongs to Allah, and I am His servant.”

Therefore, we need to join forces to develop our Muslim community in every aspect: education, both at schools and universities, health, research centers, hospitals, ... etc. One meaning of the term development is to prohibit aggression against the environment, human beings, animals, plants, water and buildings even in time of war, let alone peace.

Abu Bakr, the first guided caliph, orders the Muslim army thus: “Stop, O people, that I may give you ten rules to keep in your heart: Do not commit treachery, nor depart from the right path; you must not mutilate nor kill a child or elderly people. Do not destroy palm trees nor burn them. Do not cut any fruit trees. You must not slay any of the flock or herds of the camels, except for eating. You are going to pass by people who have devoted their lives to monastic service. Leave them to what they are devoted to. You are likely to find people who will present to you meals of many kinds. You may eat but do not forget to mention the name of Allah.” Also, the Prophet says: “If the hour of resurrection is about to happen, while one of you holds a seed, let him plant it.”

The purposes of Shari‘ah concerning the humanity are five:

The first purpose: getting to know each other. The backbone of this service is the following verse: “O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and then rendered you nations and tribes so that you might know one another. The most honorable among you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous.”

Highlighting that, the Prophet says: “you all belong to Adam, who was created from dust.” And he says: “No one is superior to anyone, except by righteousness.”

The second purpose: making effective the fact that Man is Allah’s vicegerent on earth. At this point, it should be clarified that this refers to all humanity, not to a specific race, or a nation. Therefore, the claim and discrimination.

The Third Purpose: the establishment of international peace and security, based on justice and truth.

It is doubtless that the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is originally built on peace not war. Islam is the first religion to prohibit war except in some special situations. Furthermore, wars, in Islam, are subject to many rules and regulations which control them.

The word ‘Islam’ is derived from the Arabic word ‘silm’ which means peace. Allah says: “If they restore to peace, so shall you.” 98:61)

Nevertheless, some Muslim scholars have been charged with the claim that the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims should be based on war. This

claim lacks support from the Qur'an, Prophetic sayings or the general principles of Islamic law.

Allah says: "We (Allah) have sent you as a mercy towards the whole mankind." (21:107) So how the prophet Muhammad could be sent as a mercy while his relationship with others is based on war? On top of that, many Qur'anic verses strongly emphasize the freedom of faith. For example, Allah says: "there shall be no compulsion in religion." (2:256) And; "You shall remind, for your mission is to deliver the reminder. You have no power over them." (88:21-22). Also, "Do you want to force the people to become believers?" (10:99)

The claim that those Qur'anic verses and similar have been abrogated by 'the sword verse' is a baseless allegation. Surprisingly enough, some believe that the sword verse has abrogated nearly 200 verses in the holy Qur'an!

Imam Abu Hanifa and many other religious scholars disagree with the idea of abrogation and hold that the reason for war is to avert aggression and offence of the other, and not to eradicate disbelief on earth.

Some argue that disbelief is in itself a reason for killing and the relationship between Muslims and others is based on war. This argument is again invalid. Those who hold this opinion have taken religious texts out of context, and interpreted them improperly. Moreover, they have discarded texts which oppose their opinion.

The international peace which Islam pursues stands on two principles: truth and justice. Allah says: "O you who believe, enter into complete peace" [2:208], and "We

[Allah] sent our messengers supported by clear proofs, and We sent down the scripture and the law that the people may uphold justice.”[57:25].

Imam Muhammad bin al-Hasan al-Shaaybani, a close student of Imam Abu Hanifa, was the first to write about international law, about which he wrote two books. The first one is called “Assiyar Assagheer” which has been explained by Imam Al-Sarakhsi. The Other book, in four volumes, is called “Assiyar Alkabeer”. Islam has urged its followers to fulfill all contracts and treaties including the international ones which constitute the primary sources of international law.

The fourth Purpose: International Protection of Human Rights:

According to Islam, human rights are in fact necessities and they are included in the Divine commands revealed by the Creator of Man. In this sense they stress our duty with respect to Allah to fulfill that as a response to his right over His creation. So to insult man is exactly like to insult Allah. The holy Qur’an concedes killing one man as killing the whole mankind. Allah says: “If anyone slays a human being- unless it be [in punishment] for murder or for spreading corruption on earth- it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; whereas if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all mankind.”[5:32]

Freeing Man from slavery is the fundamental principle of Islamic creed which is based on monotheism and rejection of all kinds of polytheism. This is exactly what all Islamic conquests proposed to achieve. They freed people from the oppressing empires in the Far East and Andalus (ancient Spain) in the Iberian peninsula. When Muslims went there they freed the Goths from their Tyrant rulers, the Visigoths, and redistributed all lands to indigenous farmers. Muslims also abolished all taxes and

tributes. It has always been the main concern of Islam to help the oppressed and to protect freedom and people's rights.

The Fifth Purpose: to spread the message of truth all over the world.

To call to Islam means to call to happiness. Therefore, this purpose is considered the most important among the general purposes of Islamic Law. Islam is a global message addressed to all mankind, and should be properly conveyed to them. It is a responsibility of every Muslim.

Here are some crucial points pertaining to the call to Islam:

- 1- The essence of the Islamic Call is to draw people's attention to the oneness of Allah and obedience to Him alone, carrying out His commands and avoiding all his prohibitions.
- 2- The best way to convey Allah's Call is by dialogue, wisdom and good manners, as the holy Qur'an instructs us: "Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner." [16:125].
- 3- There should be no coercion nor compulsion in calling to Islam. Allah says: "There is no compulsion in religion." [2:256] Man should always remember that he will be responsible for all his actions before Allah in the Day of Judgment.
- 4- With respect to this, people of the Book, Christians and Jews, are privileged. The holy Qur'an states: "Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans, whoever believes in Allah and the Last

Day and does good, they have their reward with their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve.”[2:62]

Accordingly, the call to Islam addressed to the people of the book is based on ‘just word’ and Muslims should keep protecting and preserving this word and make it a part of their policies in calling to Allah.

The objective is to fulfill the verse that states: “I have not created the jinn and the men except that they should worship Me.”[51:56] and “We have sent you as a bearer of glad news and a warner to the whole of mankind, but most people do not know.”[34:28]

Previously, the Call required travelling and making direct contact with people. Nowadays, the new means of communication added other dimensions through books, pamphlets, internet, radio and T.V channels, in addition to fast means of transportation such as planes, trains and cars. However, these means do not replace direct contact or the instruction of sincere scholars, who embody the ideal example through their manners, wisdom and understanding of culture, sincerity, knowledge of languages, and ways of thinking in order to know the right way to address the people to whom they are sent.

The Muslim nation is responsible for the misguidance of other nations, because it is not applying the lofty principles of Islam, and not conveying the message of Allah to them. Therefore, it will be called to account on the day of judgment: “ and halt them [there], [and then] behold, they shall be asked”[37:24]. For this reason, this nation has to awake and return to the glorious past, so as to deserve Allah’s words: “You are indeed the best community who has ever been brought for [the good of] mankind: you

enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and you believe in Allah.”[3:110]

Putting the Purposes into Practice:

After this bird’s eye view of the objectives of the Islamic Law, it is indispensable to talk about Putting them into practice. From this point of view scholars have arranged them as follows:

- Necessities
- Needs,
- Improvements.

Other scholars add two other groups:

- Secondary necessity purposes,
- Secondary improvement purposes.

It is worthwhile to observe the correct order of these purposes in the light of the accurate standards of Islamic Law, and this should be based on profound understanding of the texts and strict application of the rules.

Fifth Issue: the Ultimate Goals of Islam:

We can summarize the pursued goals of Islam as follows:

- Happiness in this life
- Salvation in the life to come.

These main goals require taking into consideration the following:

- The oneness of Allah, the Exalted, free of any kind of polytheism or attributing him partners. This can be obtained with pure and sincere worship of Allah alone in the way He orders us to worship him. “All that was asked of them was to worship Allah, devoting the religion absolutely to Him alone, observe the contact prayers (Salat), and give the obligatory charity (Zakat). Such is the perfect religion.”[98:5]
- Enjoining what is right and forbidding what is evil as revealed from Allah. “). And Allah wipes out falsehood, and establishes the truth by His words. Verily, He has full knowledge of what is in the hearts [of men].”[42:24], and “And say ‘It is the truth from your Lord’.” [18:29]
- Spreading justice and preventing oppression and transgression. “Be just. This is closer to be God-Conscious.” [5:8]and “Behold, Allah enjoins justice, and the doing of good, and generosity towards [one’s] fellow-men; and He forbids all that is shameful and transgression ; [and] He exhorts you [repeatedly] so that you might bear [all this] in mind.”[16:90]
- Calling to tolerance and love, rather than racism and grudge. Allah says: “O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female.”[49:13]. Hatred should be for the infidelity and bad deeds not for het people themselves. “I am indeed of those who abhor your doings.”[26:168]
- Tolerating diversity of color, race, language... etc. Allah says: “And of His wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colors: for in this there are messages indeed for all who are possessed of [innate] knowledge.” [30:22]and “[He] made you into nations and tribes that you might know each other.”[49:13]

- Accepting the concept of pluralism. Allah refers to that in a number of verses like “Had your Lord wanted, He would have made all people one united nation, but they continue to differ except those on whom thy Lord has bestowed His Mercy: and for this end He created them all.” [11:118-119], and “Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed. Do you want to force the people to become believers?” [10:99]. Elsewhere, “Say: O you who deny the truth! I do not worship that which you worship, and neither do you worship that which I worship. And I will not worship that which you have ever worshipped, and neither will you [ever] worship that which I worship. Unto you, your religion and unto me is mine.” [109;1-6]
- Getting to know each other as commanded in the Qur’an: “that you may know each other.”[49:13]. It should be noted that this sort of knowledge must lead to harmony and cooperation, not the opposite. In other words, this knowledge is to be constructive not destructive.
- Equality of human beings as such regardless of any differentiating factor. However, one’s rank before Allah depends on the strength of one’s belief and obedience to His orders. The Qur’an stresses this criterion: “The most honorable among you in the sight of God is the most pious of you.”[49:13]. Also: “It may not accord with your wishful thinking- nor with the wishful thinking of the followers of earlier revelations- [that] he who does evil shall be requited for it and shall find none to protect him from Allah, and none to bring him succor, whereas anyone –be it man or woman- who does [whatever he can] of good deeds and is a believer withal, shall enter paradise and shall not be wronged by as much as [would fill] the groove of a date-stone.”[4:123-124]

In this regard the equity of men and women is mentioned in terms of religious responsibility, as regards to which men and women are independent. In other words, man's corruption doesn't harm the woman if she is good. And his righteousness does not benefit her if she is bad. The Qur'an says: "for those who are bent on denying the truth Allah has propounded a parable in [the stories of] Noah's wife and Lot's wife: they were wedded to two of Our righteous servants, and each of them betrayed her husband; and neither of the two [husbands] will be of any avail to these two women when they are told [on Judgment Day], "Enter the fire with all those[other sinners] who enter it!" And for those who have attained to faith Allah has propounded a parable in [the story of] pharaoh's wife as she prayed, "O my Sustainer! Build , in nearness to you, a house for me in paradise and save me from Pharaoh and his doings, and save me from all evildoing folk." [66:10-11]

There is no contradiction between this equality and the rules established by Islam for men as regards custodianship, leadership, polygamy (under its own conditions), divorce, differences of shares of inheritance,... etc. These rules take into consideration human nature and public interest, as explained in the books of Islamic jurisprudence.

- Calling to righteousness and good manners: "The most honorable among you in the sight of God is the most pious of you."[49:13]. and "Behold, Allah enjoins justice, and the doing of good, and generosity towards [one's] fellow-men; and He forbids all that is shameful and transgression ; [and] He exhorts you [repeatedly] so that you might bear [all this] in mind."[16:90]
- Calling for mercy and compassion: "And WE have not sent thee but as a mercy for all peoples."[21:107]

Islam calls for mercy and compassion among all mankind. This is explicitly stated in the holy Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition. Allah's messenger peace be upon him says: "the Most Merciful, Allah, has mercy on those who are merciful." And "If you have mercy on those who are on earth, He, Who is in the heaven, will have mercy on you."

This mercy, of course, includes not only the believers but all humans as well. The opening chapter, which constitutes an essential part of the Qur'an and prayer, mentions a couple of divine attributes of the Almighty Allah, namely "the Most Gracious" and "the Most Merciful". These two attributes are also part of the initial verse of all chapters of the holy Qur'an.

If the message of *Issa*, Jesus Christ, is characterized by the call for love, Islamic Call is characterized as being a call for mercy and compassion in addition to love. Therefore, the human being in Islam is expected to be merciful to both those whom he loves and those whom he does not love. This is in conformity with Allah's Divine attributes and the Sunnah, the acts, of His Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Allah describes his messenger, Muhammad, as being "Merciful and gracious to the believers." [9;128]

Chapter 12

Muslim and Christian Relations in Syria

Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour

We thank God first of all and the Kings College/University of Edmonton, Alberta, second, for this gathering so that we can cooperate on behalf of the human good. And we thank the people who were behind our coming to Canada without mentioning any names. The discussion of Christianity and Christians in Syria would lead us to talking about not only Christians in Syria *per se* but in Bilad al-Sham or greater Syria, which includes, historically speaking, Lebanon, Syria, Transjordan, and Palestine. That is to say Syria before the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1917.

Islam was introduced to greater Syria in the year 637 A. D. That's when Muslim` conquered greater Syria and expelled the Roman B. zantine colonialists from Syria. It's a well-known historical fact that native people, the Syriac native people of Syria, had been colonized. The Syriac people had been Arabs in origin—they had migrated from the Arabian Peninsula, and these are the ones that are referred to as Aramaic people. And Aramaic, as you know, was the language of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not speak Hebrew.

There are some villages in Syria up till now that speak Syriac. These small towns are only 50 minutes away—40 minutes away—to the west of Damascus. The Syriac people were Jacobites and doctrine-wise they had a huge difference with the Orthodox Byzantine church, especially after the Nicea constitution or conference in western Turkey at the beginning of the fourth century, I believe, 425 or so—fifth century. Therefore the Jacobites had been oppressed by the Latin church.

The Byzantine Empire had been considering Syria to be their food basket, giving food or providing food for their armies. So the natives had been oppressed therefore by the Byzantine colonial power. When the Arabian Muslim army entered Syria, the Syrians took the side of the Arab Muslim army. And there were two reasons for that: one was that racial link between the Syriac people and the Arabs. And the second one was the doctrine or the similarity in belief between the Jacobites and Muslims. And the third their political oppression and religious oppression at the hands of the Byzantine Empire.

When the Muslims came to Syria, who were assisted by the natives of Syria, the Syrians became autonomous in a sense, they became free under Islam. In addition the Muslims also reconstructed the churches that had been destroyed by the Byzantine Empire. And that's what the Muslim conquerors did in Egypt when also the Byzantine forces were kicked out of Egypt. They fixed the churches that had been destroyed by the Byzantine government.

'Amr bin al-'Ass, who conquered Egypt at the beginning of the seventh century, the first thing that he did was to save the patriarch of Egypt, the Coptic patriarch of Egypt, to save him from execution by the Byzantine army. The Coptic patriarch had escaped to the Egyptian desert from the Byzantine army. He was returned to his church in Cairo and he was highly dignified and glorified by the Muslims and the Muslim conqueror used to seek him beside him and he would never issue an edict vis a vis the Copts without his consultation.

And the Muslims saved the Christians of Egypt and Syria of all sorts of taxes that had burdened the back of the Christians during the Byzantine rule and gave them their full

religious freedom and civil rights. And many of them were employed by the different administrations of the new army. That was true in the Umayyad state [658-750 AD]..

The Christians, the Arab Christians and other Christians, took a leading role in the Umayyad state, that is between 658 and 750 in early Islamic history. And they contributed greatly to the cultural renaissance of Arabs and Muslims at the time. And they translated lots of Greek books, scientific philosophical books, and books of literature from Greek and Persian into Arabic. Therefore the Christian Syrians have had a major role in the renaissance of Arabic culture and civilization since the beginning of Islam.

There is no doubt that Syria has been the cradle of monotheistic traditions. Jesus was born in Palestine, which is part of Syria. Saint Paul came from Damascus. And lots of believers were converted by him in Antioch and other Syrian cities. And as you well know, he was executed in Rome.

In the Holy Qur'an, there is a major concern about the peoples of the book, especially Christians and Jews. And I'd like to remind you that the Qur'an does not contain a chapter in the name of the mother of the prophet, Anna, or in the name of his wife, Khadija, or in the name of his daughter, Fatima. However, there is a major chapter in the name of Miriam, Mary, the mother of Jesus that talks about the history of the birth of Jesus and his glorification by God in the Qur'an in a highly detailed way. And the name given to her by the Qur'an is *Siddiqah* or the righteous woman. And there is another major chapter in the Qur'an of the family of Jesus, *Al Imran*. And there is a discussion of the family and the leaders of the family and there is a third chapter that is called Al Mai'da, or the table, that talks about the miracles of Jesus Christ, the Last Supper. And

the Qur'an is specific about the miracles of Jesus. There is also a famous verse in the Holy Qur'an about Mary: God has chosen you, purified you and chosen you as the greatest woman on earth or in history. And Mary is mentioned 34 times in the Qur'an. And no one is mentioned like her in the Qur'an.

After this historical phase, that the Christians were kept in their churches in greater Syria contributing to cultural renaissance and economic renaissance with their brothers and sisters in the Muslim camp. So we have lots of Christian businesspeople, political elites from the Christian side within Islam even during the rule of Salah ad-Din in the twelfth century. When he was fighting the crusades, his minister of finance was a Christian and not a Muslim. That doesn't mean that the Muslims were not worthy of that position. But this shows the tolerance of Islam.

When the crusades came to Antioch which is now part of Turkey, southern Turkey, they killed two kinds of people: The eastern orthodox Christians and the Muslims, which forced the orthodox patriarch to flee to Damascus and to seek the protection of Salah ad-Din. And from that time the orthodox seat was moved from Antioch to Damascus. So much talk about this at the present time in Syria. Syria has different Christian churches and denominations: Roman Orthodox Syrian, Armenian, Assyrian, Chaldeans with different religious doctrines, eastern and western, and protestant.

The protestant community came to greater Syria only in the nineteenth century, whereas the rest, especially the Syriacs and the Roman Orthodox have been there even before the Muslim conquest of Syria. The Christians in the Arab Republic of Syria nowadays constitute roughly around 9-10% of the population, whereas Muslims in their different

sects and communities constitute around 90%. The Roman Orthodox alone are at least 1 million people in Syria today. The Syrian Orthodox are around 300,000. The Catholic Syriac are around 100,000. The Roman Catholic are less than the orthodox—I don't have a major estimate of that. The Armenians are also limited in number and as you know they migrated to Syria. Some of the Armenians are protestant as well.

Since the nineteenth century, some local Christians converted to the protestant tradition. The protestant compared to the rest of the Christians are a minority in Syria. All of these different sects have their own religious freedom and there is a good number of ministers of Christian origin in the government of Syria. And they have their own representation in the parliament and they are powerful in the bureaucracy of the state, and in the army, and in the ministry of the interior. The general of the army is a Christian from Damascus and a large number of officers are Christian.

The best thing that you would see in Syria: this cordial relationship between Christians and Muslims. In any religious or national occasion in Syria, you would see Muslims and Christians. At our institute, the Fatih Islamic Institute, we've had direct relationships with all of the different Christian communities in Syria. The Mufti and myself have special friendships with Christian religious leaders and we do visit each other often. And this is not specific to us, but this is our method in greater Syria, in Bilad-Sham.

In all of the government of private schools in Syria, there are Muslims and Christians: Teachers students, administrators. In our cultural conferences that we hold, we invite leaders from every Christian community to speak as he or she wishes. They also invite us to their churches and we do talk in the churches, we do participate in their conferences.

And as the Mufti said, there are common business ventures between Muslims and Christians.

The Christians do not live in their private neighborhoods or ghettos; they live with the Muslims. And churches embrace the mosques and vice versa. This is quite normal for us, and I believe that this exists only in Syria.

Chapter 13

Extremism

Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour

Among the main characteristics of Islam is that the word “islam” is derived from the Arabic root S-L-M which means ‘submission’ or ‘peace’. The word *salama* means to be safe and *aslama* to surrender. Thus the letter ‘a’ in “*aslama*” in Arabic refers to entering or being involved in something. Muslims are those who surrender to God’s will or law, rendering them at peace with themselves and with God. God says, “God calls for the realm of peace” (Qur’an, 10:25) and He says, “O you who believes! Enter completely into peace.” (Qur’an, 2: 208)

In order to achieve peace and security, the Qur’an urges people to seek mercy and lenience and reject violence, harshness and extremism. God addressed His prophet, Muhammad, by saying, “And by the mercy of Allah that you were lenient with them (O Muhammad), for if you had been stern and harsh-hearted they would have dispersed from you. So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them and consult them in all matters.” (Qur’an 3: 159) God also recommended to “Call to the path of your Lord through wisdom and good advice and argue with them in the best manner. (Qur’an, 16:125).

Similarly, there is abundance of prophetic traditions that urge people to commit kindness such as: “Verily, Allah is kind and He loves kindness and confers upon kindness which He does not confer upon severity and does not confer upon anything else besides it (kindness)” (Reported by Muslim). And: “Kindness is not to be found in anything, but that it adds to its beauty; and it is not withdrawn from

anything, but it makes it defective.” (Reported by Muslim) And: “Verily, Allah loves kindness in everything.” (Reported by Al-Bukhari and Muslim)

Through many Qur’anic verses and Prophetic traditions, Islam is shown to be a religion of moderation and forbearance whether in theology, legislation and ethics. Depending on these texts, Muslim scholars have derived basics on which the Islamic Shari’a is built upon; such as “A hardship brings facilitation,” and “Necessities permit prohibitions.” The Muslim scholars keep the objectives of Shari’ah within three main points: bringing or amplifying an advantage, warding off or reducing harm, and seeking ease and avoiding hardship.

The foregoing, the fabricated accusations about Islam and Muslims of extremism, fanaticism, fundamentalism and terrorism are nothing but lies, slander and falsification that have been evoked by its opponents in their trial to diminish it. Most of the people are not aware of the fact that the terrorist actions that are committed by some religious groups are in fact a reaction to the international terror and oppression practiced by superpowers in the world and the United States.

Extremism, fanaticism, fundamentalism and so-called terrorism are not restricted to any one religion, ideology or group rather than another. These phenomena can be found within members of any religion, nation, sect, and political party throughout history. Nowadays, attitudes toward Semitism and what has resulted in so called anti-Semitism is noticeable by objections to actions represented by the State of Israel against the Palestinian people; the savagery, war and genocide Israel has committed in front of the eyes and ears of the civilized world has been exasperated further by Western support, in particular the U.S., under the name of

combating terrorism when in fact the worst forms of terrorism have occurred against those who are defenseless and are innocent people.

History cannot forget the genocide of the Muslims in Andalusia during the Spanish Inquisition during the fall of the Islamic State. Contemporary history has witnessed a similar war brought on by the Serbs and Croats that was aimed at an ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, Herzegovina and Kosovo. This was done through the support of the super powers of the world in total silence of the international community.

As for the Crusades, even though they had been launched in the name of the Cross and Christ most if not all Christians are innocent from. This fact is apparently a proof of the Western latent hatred and disgraceful extremism cloaked with the garment of religion and took place as a “Holy War.” The consequences of the Crusades were not restricted to the Muslims at that time. The Orthodox Christians suffered from similar slaughtering and killing. This in turn forced the Patriarch of Antioch to move to Syria to escape from the savagery of the Crusaders. There he was received by Sultan Saladin who protected him from the invasion of the Crusaders. Furthermore, the world cannot forget the massacres of many non-Communists, especially the Muslims, during the Communist Revolution in Russia.

However, the savagery, terrorism, torture and rape taken by European colonialism on Arabs and Muslims should be a proof of the extremist and terrorist actions applied by those who are accusing Islam with terrorism while their hands are dripping of the blood of innocents.

It might be useful to mention what Roger Garaudy says about the West who “places on every human’s head five tons of highly explosive blast, then invites the world for peace!? What impudence!”

What the West practices of cultural imperialism and central civilization is definite proof of the Western fundamentalism and extremism. These practices resulted from two facts:

First: The Western superiority.

Second: the Western privilege of subduing and controlling the world.

The Western extremism might exceed the limits when Professor Peter Steinacke, head of the Evangelical Church in Nassau Hessenund, declared in an interview that was broadcasted in 1996 on the German television: “God that Muslims worship is not exactly the same God worshiped by Christians.”

The American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq are examples of a brutal and barbaric war, domination, occupation, burglary, looting, killing, displacement and torture of human beings under the umbrella of the spreading democracy, civilizing peoples and fighting terrorism. The United States has refused to give a consistent definition of the vague term ‘terrorism’ which is floating about. The definition of ‘Terrorism’ for Bush’s Administration differed according to who was their opponent. Thus, the word ‘terrorism’ is a label for the current target of the U.S. administration as it sets out to destroy those who do not succumb to its hegemony and benefits. The ‘Preventive War’ led by the U.S. Administration practices is, to my mind, similar to what the Nazis were doing in World War II led by Adolf Hitler, the way extremist and terrorists behave.

In the end, I firmly believe that the right solution to the problem of extremism lies not only in study, diagnosis and treatment. It should also involve sincere intentions, strong determination and gathering efforts to build societies full of courtesy and free from evil through building individuals who represent God on

earth as illustrated in the Qur'an, "And verily we have written in the Scripture, after the Reminder: My righteous slaves will inherit the earth" (Qur'an 21:105)

Chapter 14

Dialogue

Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour

Tr. Sabrina Aloukla

Praise be to God who says: (O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other) (Qur'an 49:13), (and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious) (Qur'an 16:125), (Say: O people of the Book! Come to a common word between us and you) (Qur'an 3:64), (and when ye judge between man and man, that ye judge with justice) (Qur'an 4:58), and (but Allah doth call to the home of peace) (Qur'an 10:25), and peace and blessings be upon the prophet of mercy and humanity who said in his farewell sermon: "O people! Verily your Lord is one and your father is one. All of you belong to one ancestry of Adam, and Adam was created out of clay. The noblest of you in Allah's sight is the most God-fearing. There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab; nor for a white over a black, nor for a black over a white except in piety. Have I delivered the message? O Allah, be my witness," and he was narrated to have said: "man is the creation of God."

There is no doubt that Islam is a religion of dialogue, and its holy scripture is a spacious field for several types of dialogue in different styles and numerous themes including faith and doctrine, guiding and reminding the man, awakening and warning, stories and lessons, and education to other methods and topics of which the holy Qur'an is full. In the holy Qur'an there is a dialogue with angels, a dialogue with Adam and his

wife Eve, a dialogue with the devil, a dialogue between God and His prophets, a dialogue between the prophets and their peoples, and a dialogue with the children of Israel. The Qur'an also contains an open invitation to the People of the Book- Jews and Christians- to a common word (3:64). Thus the holy Qur'an is a book of an open dialogue that covers all what motivates good in its broad sense.

As for the *Sunnah*, the biography of our Prophet ﷺ containing his tradition, merits and life is one civilized aspect of the several aspects of the lofty humane dialogue between the Prophet ﷺ and his companions, between him and the polytheists of his people, and between him and the People of the Book, Jews and Christians, as his dialogue with the Jews of Medina and the delegation of the Christians of Najran is well known. Furthermore, the Prophet's dialogue outreached the kings and emperors through his letters inviting them to Islam, the invitation that was to symbolize the dialogue.

It is also known that dialogue came into being before the creation of man, since the first dialogue was between God and His angels. This contains a signal for human beings to adopt dialogue as a means to understanding instead of squabbling and confrontation. What humanity is suffering from today of what is practiced by the West from scourges, hegemony, genocide, injustice, oppression, crushing human beings, demolition of buildings, and dissemination of injustice and tyranny- despite the scientific excellence of the West and its conquest of space- has brought humans to a standstill where they lose their original human and spiritual essence. This would be through either Communism or Capitalism, since the state turns savage in the former, and the individual in the later. All this requires a quick and serious return of the humans to their essence

which they have lost and can hardly find available anywhere but in Islam and its striving for the ends without dwelling on the means, and its quest for wisdom not only for material.

The texts contained in the holy Qur'an, the *Sunnah*, and the biography of the Prophet which call for dialogue and argument in the best manner, for mutual understanding and harmony between human beings, and for peace, security and cooperation in righteousness and piety, are what made the Islamic world race to take the initiative to call for a dialogue among civilizations. This dialogue should be based on the values of the Islamic civilization in order to spread the culture of mutual understanding, coexistence and cooperation at all levels. The aim is to reach an international consensus and human understanding that lead to overcoming the problems arising from misunderstanding and mistrust which prevail human societies today, and they are called for and planned by the authors of *The Clash of Civilizations*, *The End Of History*, and *Seize the Moment* and their ilk who advocate the clash and the spread of hatred, wars and turmoil in the world.

The appeal made by Muhammad Khatami, former president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in which he called the United Nations to adopt a thesis of "dialogue among civilizations" rather than a "clash of civilizations," was a very important initiative that expressed the collective will of the Islamic world; governments, official institutions, public organizations, intellectuals, thinkers and academics. As a fruit of this appeal and this initiative, the General Assembly of the United Nations has named the year of 2001 as the United Nations' year for dialogue among civilizations.

“Alliance of Civilizations” or “Dialogue of Civilizations”?

As for the convening of international conferences titled “Alliance of Civilizations,” as happened in Madrid and Istanbul, I smell the smelling of military, since the alliance is often between warring nations and armies, and it is a temporary position based on shared interests, and as soon as these interests and circumstances change, the alliances break up and the allied parties scatter. On the other hand, the dialogue towards mutual understanding, coexistence and cooperation among human beings is a distinctive Islamic feature and a Qura’nic and prophetic principle that is called for in the texts of the Qur’an and *Sunnah*, and it was the basis for Muslim thought in all legislative and behavioral aspects.

The world is in need today of harmonious civilizations, and cooperating nations and people, not of allied forces. The “new world disorder,” which is claimed and called for by the U.S. administration under the ominous president George W. Bush, is the cause, in my opinion, of what is going on in the world today of wars, genocides, massacres, injustice, oppression and hegemony under the name of “the war on terrorism.” This “new world disorder” has been a setback, a decline in the world of humanity to the sludge of brutality and the predominance of the logic of power over the power of logic, as is the case in the “law of the jungle.” The best defense against this so-called terrorism is not war and aggression; rather it is to put an end to the injustice perpetrated by the powerful over the weak, and to establish the principle of justice which is called for by all heavenly religions including Islam, for God says: (be just: that is next to piety) (Qur’an 5:8) and says: (Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality kith and kin, and He

forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion: He exhorteth you, that ye may receive admonition) (Qur'an 16:90).

Why Dialogue between Muslims and others?

Since the non-Muslims' ignorance of Islam, among other things, is the first cause of their enmity to it, disparaging it, assaulting it, and accusing it falsely, and since the ignorance of Islam of the most Muslims today is the first reason of the spread of the hatred for Islam, attacking it, and accusing it falsely by foreign adversaries and enemies and their domestic adherents, it is important to have a constructive dialogue based on genuine scholarship, well-advised thinking, and sincere intention toward knowing the truth, holding on to it, and adopting it in pursuance of the saying: "O Allah, show us the Truth as Truth and help us follow it. O Allah, help us see falsehood as falsehood and help us avoid it," and the Prophet's saying: "wisdom is the lost treasure of the believer. Wherever it may be, the believer belongs to it."

The islamization of human soul to God through purifying it and making it submissive to God's law and free from personal interests, desires and from abhorrent fanaticism for Allah says (He is indeed successful who causeth it to grow, and he is indeed a failure who stunteth it) (Qur'an 91:9-10), is the right path to the correct knowledge which is released from the blemishes of errors, illusions and passions. Accordingly, if you bring together all knowledge and realities of the universe to speak as witnesses for the Truth, which is Islam, they would not be able collectively to overcome an arrogant soul tending to fanaticism and desires unless you address the owner to this soul, dialogue with and help him pursue an educational work that is compatible with the

Qur'anic way which was pursued by the apostles and prophets, and this was especially reflected in the biography of the seal of the prophets and messengers, Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, his family and companions.

To my mind, Western civilization has been off balance for some time because it stands on one leg which is material, and only material in every sense of the word; wealth, power, authority, pleasure, lust, oppression and injustice. It is a civilization which is occupied with the means, and fails to accomplish the ends. It is also busy with experimental science, and does not give attention to wisdom. And the knowledge in which this Western civilization has been busy is the knowledge of machine, not the knowledge of the man whom God made as the objective of this world. God also dignified this man by making him His vicegerent on earth, after He created him by His hand and made the angels prostrate before him. Therefore, this civilization has led its people to the destruction of the self and the annihilation of the destiny. However, the biggest problem in my view is that the West wants to pass its troubled, disabled civilization to the rest of the world, so they have the same destruction of the self and annihilation of the destiny it has. This is *the* problem in my opinion.

The people of Western civilization are in need today to preachers of high conscious who have a precious transparency melted by the feelings of devotion to the Almighty God out of respect, reverence and love. The world and all its pleasures, entertainments, delights and desires are small in their eyes. They start to reclaim the gaps of differences between them and others, and meet the aspirations of hundreds of millions deployed in Europe and America through dealing with their souls that are overburdened by material distresses in which they have been caught up from every side. These are the

righteous servants of Allah. Humanity needs today dialogists from this category of people; “righteous servants of Allah” about whom the Almighty Allah has told us in the Qur’an: (before this we wrote In the Psalms, after the Message (given to Moses): My servants the righteous shall inherit the earth) (21:105).

Conditions for Successful Dialogue between East and West:

We agree with the English historian Toynbee in his famous saying: “the question of the East is, in the first place, the question of the West.” Dialogue is doomed- as Roger Garaudy says- to reach an impasse if some people do not dispel the rust of centuries of persecution from their creed, and if the technocracy of others does not realize the radical corruption in its statute, which has never brought up the issue of its humanitarian meaning and purpose. The development of some and the underdevelopment of others are nothing but two inseparable manifestations of one poor planetary evolution. This is a fundamental fact that is manifest to those who consider the world as a whole, and do not lean only on Western view. This fact is the key to solve all our problems. Here I would quote Allah’s saying: (Verily, This, your *ummah* is a single *ummah*, and I am your Lord and Cherisher: Therefore serve me (and no other)) (Qur’an 21:92) pointing to the unity of the one human family as those who interpret the “*ummah*” in the verse as the “entire human family.”

One of the necessary conditions for the success of dialogue between East and West is to get rid of cultural imperialism and central Western civilization which resulted in the Western judgment on all other civilizations and their people as being backward, primitive and barbaric. This is after the West has made its own civilization as the

example to be followed and the only path to emulate. While on the contrary, this cultural narcissism is what led to the conclusion reached by the West of self-destruction and extinction of determination. Therefore, this civilization is not worthy of claiming to act as an impartial judge or a well-behaved guide.

The outrageous behavior of the West in the curriculum of its different educational stages, starting from the primary level to the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, does not serve the dialogue of civilizations which has become a necessity that is agreed upon by all free and honest intellectuals, academics and politicians of the world. This behavior would include broadcasting wrong preconceived ideas in the minds of students to urge them to pay tribute to their glorious history and to condemn the history and civilization of the others, distort it intentionally or out of ignorance, despise and belittle it because they see it less important. Consequently, defamation of Islam and Muslims remains a kind of knowledge that passes from generation to another as facts and axioms.

In the opinion of the French philosopher Roger Garaudy, if Christianity and Islam do not become conscious of their common history, or if they are not qualified enough to realize that each of them is an integral part to the other and that they are both parts of a whole, the dialogue between them, or between East and West, cannot be but a dialogue between two patients.

In conclusion, the real problems afflicting the world today; historical controversies, doctrinal differences, economical conflicts, colonial domination and others, cannot be solved on the basis of the relations of power and the alleged deterrence which is, in fact,

another name for blackmail, deception and justification of domination, oppression and injustice in the world.

The only solution to this flagrant global misery and intensifying worldwide problems lies in Allah's saying: (...and We have made you into peoples and tribes, that ye may know each other), since the mutual acquaintance requires proximity, cooperation and social agreement. In other words, the international community cannot become a human community but through this acquaintance and agreement that lead to understanding rather than confrontation, and adopt the method of dialogue rather than fight. This can be perceived only upon establishing a proper relation between the man and his Lord through a common faith which is beyond the private or collective interests for a system dominated by the guidance, mercy and morality, and based on truth and justice; the two terms which the humanity pursues and hardly finds in a world governed by the lie of "right of veto." The system we are talking about would be human only if it oversteps the man to the Creator of the man. By this way only we get beyond the "New World Disorder" which represents the national and individual law of jungle, and we get to a human family and real community that cannot stay without sublimation and faith in this sublimation.

The creation of an elite group of researching preachers and truthful thinkers, who are familiar with the heavenly religions and other philosophical traditions, who have roots that are penetrated into the Islamic heritage, especially into its spiritual and educational aspects, and who have a deep knowledge and understanding of the modern world, will have a significant impact on the future relations between Islam and the West

in this critical era in the human history. Thus, one of the most important conditions of the dialogue between the Muslim East and the non-Muslim West is that this dialogue of civilizations we are talking about takes the place of suicidal Western self-dialogue, since the West is suffering from spiritual distress that led it to suicide, destruction and extinction of determination.

Finally, I call to a formation of an international, ethical and human civilization which is derived from God's law, based on the divine revelation, follows the footsteps of the prophets, messengers and righteous servants of Allah, and our Islam has to have a big portion in shaping it, since Allah has saved all divine messages through it. This civilization has to make the sublimation of the man to the status of piety as its center and springboard, as the Prophet ρ mentioned this status in his farewell sermon, he said: "O people! Verily your Lord is one and your father is one. All of you belong to one ancestry of Adam, and Adam was created out of clay. There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab except in piety. The noblest of you in Allah's sight is the most God-fearing. God is the Omniscient, the all-Knowing."

Chapter 15

Finance and investment in Sha... ahh

Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour

Islamic banks are able to play a significant role to improve the declining situation of the Muslim world, and rid the Muslim world of dependency and negativity that have burdened it. These predicaments suffered by the Muslim world, the decadence, defeatism and failure are the inevitable results of the mentality of dependency and negativity that have spread therein. This state of mind and reality is of a great benefit only to the enemies of the nation who are keen to allow this kind of thinking to arise and be strengthened so that our community continues to be hindered in matters of thinking and development. It is hardly needed to mention that the Islamic community owns and controls one third of the economic resources in the world, and includes one quarter of the world's population, spread over one fifth of the Earth. However, their progress and development have been reduced because of the mentality of dependency and passivity.

On the first of Rajab 1406 AH\ the 11th of March, 1986, in Riyadh during the activities of King Faisal Foundation in his speech entitled: ((How I became a Muslim)), the French Muslim thinker Roger Garaudy stated:

"The Third World is dying because of lack of means, while the capitalist West and the socialist East are dying because of lack of purposes... Modern science and technology have placed huge capacity in the hands of a drayed dwarf who uses them to satisfy his personal greed for power, comfort and material prosperity, threatening the rights of

the majority and making it suffer hunger, deprivation and afflictions. This had led to what we call today "the uncertain peace", or to a hypothetical balance based on fear which may lead the super powers who are at odds to destroy the entire globe".

Millions of sincere people, all over the world, are searching for a meaning of their life, death and their common history in the midst of this darkness. It is Islam that can provide these people with light needed to arrive at the straight path which is the guidance given from God to His servants. Islam ensures human intelligence the fulfillment of its real dimensions, which are the following:

- 1 The dimension of scientific research on causes and means.
 - 2 The dimension of wisdom of seeking for goals and for Allah the Creator.
- This unlimited practice of intellect that combines knowledge and Divine revelation has established the foundations for the glory of the early Muslims.

"Muslims living up to the principles of Islam today would result in an increase in the number of its followers similar to that which took place in the golden age in the eighth century. At that time Islam was confronted by apparently great powers afflicted by disintegration and fragmentation, Sassanid Empire and the Empire of Byzantium. Islam was able to give millions of men and women a sense of their humanity and of the meaning of their life in this world, granting them happy new life through placing them on the road to the One true God, and through reflecting on their return to Him after death and being held accountable then."

"Who ever does an atom weight of good, shall see it; and whoever does an atom weight of evil shall see it."

Qur'an 99:7-8

"I have converted to Islam because I find in it what I was looking for all my life."

Characteristics of Islamic Economics

Any economic system is distinguished by its own characteristics that differentiate it from other systems. Such the case is with Islamic economic system. It stands with its unique and independent identity that distinguishes it from capitalist and socialist systems. It derives its identity, principles and objectives from a clear articulated theology, based on the divine legislation which, in its turn, controls these properties and elements.

Some of its values are: It is an economy that relates to the Divine, creed, morality, reality, humanity and to the globe. It establishes the balance between the interests of individual and those of society. Wealth is not its ultimate target, but just a means to a greater goal. Islamic economy in that sense has the sense of worship in which the ultimate ownership is only for Allah.

Islamic Economy is a Divinely Guided and Creed Related Economy:

Firstly: Divinely Guided Economy:

Man-made rules have created economic systems such as capitalism and communism and have legislated their rules, principles and characteristics in order to organize financial aspects for individual as well as for society. On the other hand, Islamic economy is a divinely based economy. That is to say that it derives its basics, principles, standards and characteristics from the sources of Islamic legislations that have been set by Allah himself. The Holy Qur'an and

the prophetic tradition mention many of Islamic economic principles. Some of which would be:

- 1- Wealth belongs to Allah and man is entrusted to it. Allah the Almighty says: "And spend of that whereof He has made you trustees." Qur'an 57:7
- 2- To respect the individual's right of ownership. Allah Almighty says: "Men shall have their share of what they earn and women shall have their share of what they earn." Qur'an 4:32
- 3- Beneficial economic freedom: Allah says: "Do not eat up your wealth amongst you illegally, but rather trade with it by mutual consent." Qur'an 4:29
- 4- Rationalization of consumption. Allah says: "'eat and drink but avoid excess." Qur'an 8:31.
- 5- Economic growth and establishment of life on earth: Allah says: "It is He who created you from the earth and settled you in it." Qur'an 11:61.
- 6- Social justice and holding balance among community members: Allah says: "so that it [money] might not become the property of the rich among you." Qur'an 59:7.
- 7- Protection of environment and natural and economic resources: Allah says: "And when it is said to them: "Do not make mischief on earth" they say: "We are only reformers."" Qur'an 2:11-12. and He says: "As soon as he leaves you, he hastens to commit mischief, and he destroys the crops and the cattle, and Allah does not love mischief." Qur'an 2:205.
- 8- To allow what is lawful and forbid what is unlawful. Allah says: "He will allow them what is lawful and forbid them what is foul." Qur'an, 9:157.

- 9- Wealth investing rather than wealth collecting. Allah says: "Do not give the weak-minded the property which Allah has entrusted you for their living, but feed them and clothe them with its proceeds, and, at the same time, say to them kind words." Qur'an 4:5.

In order for economy to become divinely guided, Individual and society -10 should be responsible for making sure that Shari'ah is not violated through any economic action. When Allah is disobeyed, hardship prevails over the life of the whole society and economic crises is the result. Allah says: "But he who turns away from my remembrance will live in distress." Qur'an 20:124.

Secondly: Creed Related Economy:

The creed basis on which Islamic economy stands and to which it connects in order to direct economic activity to result in outstanding effects. Islamic creed aims at strengthening the belief in one God who is the real owner of whatever exists and the belief in the Last Day in which every person will be held accountable. This kind of belief has an inevitable influence on directing individual and social economic strategies. Muslims believe that Man has been created in order to establish life on earth according to Allah's will. Allah says: "It is He who created you from the earth and settled you in it." Qur'an 11:61. Thus, whatever exists of blessings and gifts are subjected to serve human beings as Allah says: "He sends down from the sky water to produce all kinds of fruit for your sustenance.

Man's ownership is that of a temporary one because the real owner is Allah alone. Allah says: "We are the ones who inherit the earth and everyone on it; to us everyone will be returned. Qur'an 19:40.

Allah has not equated people in their sustenance. Allah says: "And Allah has preferred some of you above others in wealth and properties. Then, those who are preferred will by no means hand over their wealth and properties to those (slaves) whom their right hands possess, so that they may be equal with them in respect thereof. Do they then deny the favor of Allah?" Qur'an 16:71.

Islamic Economy has a Sense of Worship and is Connected to Morality:

Firstly: Economy and its sense of worship:

The ultimate purpose of creation is to worship Allah: " I created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship Me." Qur'an 51:56. He blessed human beings by expanding the concept of worship to include all aspects of life. Any good deed, in addition to ritual aspects, is a kind of worship.

The condition for a deed to be considered as worship is that it should be done with the purest intention and that it should be in accordance with what is legislated. Allah says: "Say. Surely my prayer and my sacrifice and my life and my death are (all) for Allah, the Lord of the worlds; Qur'an 6:162.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) has declared that all deeds of human beings which aim at maintaining their lives and those of their families and to improve their society are kinds of worship. So farmers are rewarded for their work on their farm. The Prophet states: "Any Muslim who plants vegetation or sows a seed from which a bird, a human or an animal eat will get a reward for it."

Secondly: Islamic Economy is connected to Morality:

There has been some dispute among economists about relationship between moral values and economic systems since the seventh century. Some deny any connection between the two of them, with the result of an economic system based on the separation between morals and economy. According to this system, what matters is whatever pleases man and fulfils his desires regardless of the rightness of these desires or the means used to satisfy them.

Islamic economy, on the other hand, does not differentiate between economy and moral values. Rather, it binds them together because most of the legislations of Shari'ah are connected to morality and based on moral values, especially those which concern finance and economic transactions.

As regards truthfulness and trustworthiness Allah says: "Oh you, who believe, do not betray Allah and His messenger nor, knowingly, betray your trusts."

Qur'an 8:27

The Prophet stated that: "the choice is open to the two dealers (the buyer and the seller) as long as they haven't separated (or left each other after the deal was contracted). If they treat one another with truthfulness and clarity, Allah will bless their trade. Otherwise, if they deal in an ambiguous way and they lie, their trade will be unblessed."

These moral basis order Muslims to remain trustworthy and truthful throughout their economic activities in the same way they should be in their everyday lives.

Scholars have drawn several kinds of economic transactions depending upon such moral values, and they placed the criterion of trustworthiness and truthfulness at the center to safeguard their validity and to draw their results. An example for them would be trust contracts, in which the price depends on the statement of the sellers regards the original cost of the goods he wants to sell. Trust Contracts are of several kinds:

- 1- *Al Murabaha (Cost Plus)*¹: which is to sell the goods with a known increase of its original price for which the seller obtained it in the first place.
- 2- *Al Wadi'a or Al Hatita*: which is to sell the goods at a lower price than its original price for which the seller obtained it in the first place, meaning with a loss.
- 3- *Al Tawliya*: which is to sell the goods for a price equal to its original price for which the seller obtained it in the first place, meaning neither gain nor loss.

These types of transactions are called trust transactions because the buyer trusts in the seller to tell him the price for which he obtained the goods.

What we have already mentioned is clear evidence on how Islam provides a real connection between morals and economy and it is not merely about inapplicable moral commandments.

Islamic Economy is Universal and Realistic Economy:

Firstly: Universal Economy:

¹ *Murabaha*: Sale at a specified profit margin. The term, however, is now used to refer to a sale agreement whereby the seller purchases the goods desired by the buyer and sells them at an agreed marked-up price, the payment being settled within as agreed time frame, either in installment or in a lump sum. The sellers bears the risk for the goods until they have been delivered to the buyer.

As Islam is a universal, humane, eternal religion, as Allah the Almighty says "We have not sent you except as a mercy for all the worlds" Qur'an: 21:107, so are all its aspects, including Islamic economy.

Evidence for that is that Islam has equated all peoples, nations and individuals. Its legislation is for all. Allah says: "Allah commands you to deliver back the trusts to their rightful owners, and when you judge between people, you should judge justly." Qur'an 4:58.

Secondly: Realistic Economy:

Islamic economy takes into consideration human needs according to the context to which individuals belong. It takes a close look at people's abilities, circumstances, environment, personality and their nature, so it does not impose on them the burden of demands which they won't be able to fulfill. Allah says: "Allah does not charge any soul with more than what it can bear." Qur'an 2:286.

Although Capitalism, on the other hand, succeeded and excelled in materialistic advancement, it failed to solve Man's problems or to provide him with happiness. The reason behind that is that it does not place Man as the master of this world. On the contrary, it does push him to keep rushing to collect wealth at all costs. Eventually, man turns into a machine while he has been created to be the engineer who makes it work.

Forbidding Usury in Shari‘ah is One of its Essential Characteristics

Forbidding usury is well established in Shari‘ah with proofs derived from the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet. Moreover, it was established in the previous legislations as well, as none of which ever allowed it.

Pieces of evidence about its prohibition from the Qur'an:

“Those who deal in usury will not come out of their graves except like one whom Satan has demented by his touch Allah deprives usury of any benefit, and increases the profit of charity. Allah does not love any ingrate and sinful person” [2:275] ... "O! you who believe! Fear Allah and give up outstanding dues from usury, if you are true believers, if you do not, then take notice that Allah and His messenger shall declare war with you ; yet if you repent, you shall have your capital sums. Deal not unjustly (by asking more than your capital sums), and you shall not be dealt with unjustly (by receiving less than your capital sums)."[2:278,279]

This verse refutes the opinion that usury is not prohibited unless it multiplies manifold, because Allah only allows the lender to get back his capital, but not the interest regardless of its amount.

From the Sunnah:

It is narrated that Jabir said: "The Prophet, peace be upon him, has cursed those who benefit themselves or others from usury, the one who has written the contract and its two witnesses." ²

It is also narrated that the Prophet said in his last speech: "Verily, all the usury from *Al-Jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic Era) is abolished..."³

And in another narration: " And the usury of *Jahiliyya* is abolished, and the first one I abolish is ours, that of 'Abbas, the son of Abdul Muttalib."

This is as regards the abolishment of usury initiated in the pre-Islamic era. Thus, the case for usury in the Islamic era would be more firm.

From Consensus:

Muslims all over the world have agreed upon the prohibition of usury. The four Imams have also agreed.

The prohibition of usury, however, is too evident to seek a proof for it or to seek evidence on its prohibition. Its prohibition is as clear as the obligation of the five prayers, the *Zakat* (obligatory charity) and the pilgrimage and there is no need to provide more material about this issue.

There is an interesting story related to the subject of usury. A man approached Malik Ibn Anas saying: "O father of AbduAllah! I have seen a drunken man stretching

² Narrated in *Sahih Muslim with An-Nawawi commentary* 11\26, *Ahmad* 1\83, *Ibn Maja* 2\764.

³ *At-Termidhi* 5\273, *Ibn Maja* 1015.

himself trying to get the moon in his hand. When I saw him I said: "I'll divorce my wife if there is anything worse than wine for a human being to let enter his body." Malik said: "go and I will ponder over this issue." The man came next morning and Malik said to him: "Your wife is divorced because usury is the worst thing to be let into the stomach of a human being because Allah says about the usurers : (be noticed that Allah and His messenger will declare war against you." Qur'an 2:279.

Prohibition of Usury in Previous Devine Messages:

The prohibition of usury has never been restricted to Islamic Shari'ah. It actually expands beyond its boundaries and exists as a well established rule throughout all heavenly revealed legislations.

In the Old Testament:

"If you lend money to one of my people do not take the attitude of the debtor, do not charge him more than what you have given him."

And it says:

"If your brother became poor, help him. Do not ask for a benefit nor a profit."

Nevertheless, the Jews have no problem in usurious dealings with the gentiles as it is stated in their book. They have also used tricks to allow dealing by usury among themselves. Qur'an reproaches them about it saying: "... And for their taking the usury while it has been forbidden for them and taking people's money by deceiving them." Qur'an 3:161.

They actually used to deal with usury applying tricks and manipulations despite the fact that Allah has forbidden it for them.

In the New Testament:

“If you lend money to people from whom you wait your reward, what good then have you done? Instead do good deeds and lend people not waiting for any reward. You will then be generously rewarded.”

Following these texts, the prohibition of usury has been agreed upon by all Christian churches.

According to man-made legislations:

Some leaders in the field of economy in the West are aware of the cons of usury on humanity and are waging a war against it, such as the British economist Kinz in the twentieth century, and Schacht, in Germany.

The latter delivered a speech in Damascus in 1952 in which he said: “Through a simple mathematical procedure, it becomes obvious that all wealth on earth is on its way to be exclusively owned by a few usurers. And this is because the usurer always wins while the borrower has to deal with the risk of losing or wining. Inevitably, wealth will end up in the hands of people who win constantly. This theory is on its way to total practical reality. Most of the wealth on earth is actually dominated and owned by a few thousands, while the rest of the owners and employees are indebted for banks and work for the real owner. The fruit of their labor is reaped by those few thousands.”

The Concept of Islamic Investment

A notable feature of Islamic investment is that investing money and working on improving the financials is considered a duty that is upheld by Shari‘ah as

demonstrated by the famous hadith: “Whoever has an orphan in their custody, they should invest the orphan’s money and not leave it until it goes for Zakat (charity).”

Protecting property or wealth is one of the aims of Shari‘ah as established by Ash-Shatibi: “To protect one’s belief, life, intellect, honor and property.”

Profits are considered essential to guard the capital. The jurists agree unanimously that “there is no profit except when the capital is safe from loss.”

Criteria for money investment in Islam:

- 1- The criterion of creed: investment takes into consideration that wealth belongs to Allah and it should be invested and used in accordance with Shari‘ah that is not applying usury.
- 2- The criterion of morality, according to which the trader should stay within the limits of moral expectations such as the avoidance of cheating or encroaching on other people’s rights.
- 3- The criterion of development, through which the total investment aims at social and economic advancement taking into consideration luxuries in addition to basic necessities and requirements.
- 4- The criterion of the connection between gain and effort: there is no gain without effort and every effort is rewarded.
- 5- The criterion of gain for loss: from which the following rule I derived: “the gain for the guarantee,” meaning who guarantees something has the right to enjoy what it brings about wither profit or loss.

Main Features of Investments in Islamic Banks:

- 1- Variety and diversity, which offers methods suitable to all needs.
- 2- Abstaining from usury.

- 3- Deep realization by the bank management that money is something to trade with using it and it is not a good by itself. As Ibn al Qaiyyim stated about money: “the capital is to be used in trade not to trade in it.”
- 4- Establishing the link between investment projects and real needs in society.
- 5- Working in accordance with Shari‘ah and observing its limits and regulations.
- 6- All methods should include investing in real economy, meaning that which is directed towards producing and distributing goods and services.
- 7- Fulfillment of justice for all parties.

To conclude, it is an investing productive economy aiming at the development of the society in fields of its material and spiritual life, and its religious and worldly aspects.

Formulas used in Islamic Banking

Islamic Banks offer numerous formulas that seek to meet the real needs of investors and customers through active transactions which include the following formulas:

- 1- Trade formulas
- 2- Rent formulas
- 3- Partnership formulas
- 4- Benefit formulas

As for trading formulas, they include formulas and methods are based on funding through sales, that is purchasing for the purpose of selling with profit. It provides

materials and different goods for those who need them. Some of the features of this formula are:

- It supplies individuals and institutions with various goods.
- Ownership of goods moves from being the seller's to be the owner's by signing the contract.
- Profits are merged with deferred payments and considered part of the overall value.

It is notable that this formula contains various kinds of well known exchanges such as prepaid forward sale (*Salam*)⁴, Commission for manufacture (*Istisna'*)⁵ and *Ajal*⁶.

In *Ajal* and *murabaha* the customer is indebted to the bank because the bank is the seller in this formula in which the bank sells its customer goods, it previously owned, at a price equal to the cost plus mark-up or profit, or as a post-paid sale.

While it is the opposite with *salam* contract, in which the bank plays the role of a buyer and the customer is the seller. The bank, according to this contract purchases particular deferred describable goods in exchange for the whole price been paid to the customer the time the contract is signed. The bank is funding its customers as being sellers. and according to the *salam* contract the bank receives its goods at the appointed time. However, the bank does not keep the goods it obtains. It sells them to get some more profit. Here the bank has a few options:

⁴ *Salam*: a sale in which the payment is made in advance by the buyer and the delivery of the goods is deferred by the seller.

⁵ *Istisna'*: it refers to a contract whereby a manufacturer (contractor) agrees to produce (build) and deliver a well-described good (or promise) at a given price on a given date in the future. As against *Salam* in *Istisna'* the price need not be paid in advance. It maybe paid in installments in step with the preferences of the parties or partly at the front end and the balance later on as agreed.

⁶ *Bay` mu`ajjal*, Sale on credit. i. e. a sale in which goods are delivered immediately and the payment is deferred.

The second group is the group of rent:

It differs from the previous group in that it does not transmit the ownership of the property or goods. Rather it grants the right of using the utility for specific period of time in exchange for a particular amount of money.

Throughout the whole period of tenancy the bank remains as the owner and renter so it takes the responsibility for any damages that might occur to the rented property.

There are three types of rents in Islamic Banking:

- Conventional lease: in which the bank rents the property as an ongoing process of series of rents in such a way that the property is always in use. The bank here bears the risk of recession on the market or the lack of ordering such kind of rents which lead to have the property unused.
- *Ijara Muntahya Bi Tamleek*: Lease that ends with complete ownership which differs from conventional lease in that the ownership of the tenancy turns into ownership after the lease payments have been fulfilled keeping the promise made by the seller to give the property or to sell it to the renter on condition that payments have been completed. This condition should be stated on a separate contract.
- *Ijara Mawsofa Fi Al Dhimma*: in this case the commodity is not available for leasing at the time of the contract, but the lease will be on an utility of described commodity and the hirer adheres to gain and give it in appointed date, and this *Ijara* is similar to the *Salam* contract but its not conditioned in it

to give the rent at once. In general the *Ijara* contracts are characterized as being the profit in it, is independent from the value of commodity.

Moreover, there are two groups more: Partnership formulas and The Cost Plus formulas, in which the first one contains different kinds of partnerships that the parties share offering the capital which it may be money as in the money partnership, work as in the bodies partnership or other jobs as known in the Islamic jurisprudence. This kind of partnership is characterized as being all partners are shared in the work, management and disposing of money. Furthermore, the partners are shared in profits according to their pre-agreed, but the losses will be borne according to their founders' shares in the capital or in guarantee the debts.

And this group differs from the cost plus group in financing, in which the last one there is no sharing between the partners in offering the capital and losses as well, so that there is complete separation between the owner side of capital and the manager side. In addition, the cost plus formula characterizes of that the funding side bears the losses if it happens, while the profits is shared according the pre-agreed.

The cost plus group contains:

- a. The *mudaraba* contracts if the capital were money.
- b. The *muzara'a* contracts if the capital were a land for agriculture to share the crop between each according the previous agreed.
- c. The *musaqah* contracts in case of offering trees to whom take care of them against a known common portion of crop.
- d. The *muqardah* bonds are considered as the first tools in the reality of the Islamic banking, those bonds represents portions in assets and utilities in which are made through subscription in some projects, and

it depends on the legal *mudaraba* in which the owner of bonds represents the *Rabbul Mal* (the funding), while the issued side represents the *mudarib*(entrepreneur) who has the right of management, investment and decisions to make profits which should be shared between.

- e. The *Salam* bonds which the government can issue them to meet the needs of the future resources against adhering of offering a certain quantity of possible described commodities in appointed date such: oil and gas... and those bonds are not accepted to deal with, which it is debts, and it is like the sale of commodity before holding it, which it is prohibition in Islamic Shari‘ah.
- f. the same previous formula is applied in *Istisna’* bonds, which the *Istisna’* according to the Shari‘ah scholars is: the *Salam* in industries, and the main difference between them is: that the commodity in *Istisna’* must be manufactured, so that the government may use this formula in financing the constructions, but those bonds aren’t able to deal with except after holding the manufactured goods which have the ability for rent.
- g. In addition, there is bonds of assets rent which the government may issue them by itself or through the banks, those bonds represent the possession of fixed assets which they do rent them to the government against specific wage.
- h. There is, as well, services rent which are good for the government when It offers certain services to the citizens such as the health services, communication services and the academic education etc...,in

this case the government can issue services bonds which their owner gains ,at the appointed time, the described service as debt against paying the price at the time of the bond purchase, in this way, the government gets benefit from the cash and the bond's owner gets the benefit from the low price paid comparative with deferred price.

It's useful to refer that all those bonds can be adapted by the banks to put them in the subscription, and the most important characteristic of those bonds is the ability for putting them in the circulation except some *Salam* and *Istisna'* bonds. The Islamic banks may play the role of the adhering of re-purchase the bonds to guarantee the continuation of the circulation.

Notice:

All formulas and contracts which have been differed in their legality, conditions, characteristics or rules, in this case we have to follow what the Islamic *fiqhi* committees decided, and when they differ then the Shari'ahh board in the Islamic banks can choose the stronger evidence among them with taking care of the public interest and matching the time and place achieving the last purposes of Shari'ahh (*Maqasid*).

Summary:

1. The banking services, in the conventional banks, are either service against wage or a loan against interest and its returns either money or interest. the first one is permitted because the lease is legal under condition which is being the wage is dedicated not repeated just when the service is repeated unless the

usury will be included, the second is the interest which it is prohibited in the Holy Qur'an.

2. The Islamic developing of the banking service keeps the rented services but it puts rules to its commission to secure it from usury, and replace the usurious contracts with an other legal ones which depend on trade, partnership or free interest loan (*Qard Hasan*).
3. The legal entrepreneurship contract (*Mudaraba*) is able, with some expansion of its rules, to meet the needs of the banking although the oppositions of the others.
4. The legality of the temporary *Mudaraba* and *Mudaraba* of the debt under condition of being the *Mudaraba* in the public.
5. The fixed return in the *mudaraba* contract spoils it, which the profit of *mudaraba* must be in common between the *mudarib* (entrepreneur) and the *Rabul Mal* (owner of the capital).
6. Islamic bank can depend on the others contract of investment such as *Musharaka*, *Murabaha*, *Salam* and *Istisna'* in the processes of its investment projects and no way to oppose it.
7. The legality of immediate *Salam* according to the shafi'e school, replacement of the *Salam* debt before holding it under condition which is: it's not allowed for the owner of *Salam* to make *murabaha* a twice as narrated from *Ibn Abbas*.
8. It's not allowed to whom bought some thing to sell it before holding it according to the majority of scholars, according to that the Islamic bank must apply this rule in practicing to avoid the *Garar* (uncertainty) which is the international exchange doing it.

9. The *murabha* in the bank differs from *bai'ul Ana*, which it's prohibited in Shari'ah, but under condition of the real holding of the commodity by the bank and reselling it to the commander of buying who can reject it. On the other hand the bank can have the choice to return the commodity to the first seller.
10. the banknote in circulation nowadays takes the same roles of gold and silver in terms of *Zakat* (charity) and usury in which each currency concerns a type by itself so that in case we sell it by the same type then the similarity and holding are obligation, but if we sell it by an other currency to different country then it's not allowed to be deferred only while the increase is permitted as in the gold and silver.
11. Fulfilling the promise is obligation and obligatory in case of debt and obligatory in case of judgment if it causes damage to the other party, then it has to fulfill the promise to avoid the damage according to the comprehensive rule in Islamic Shari'ah: No harm and no return of the harm, (*la darara wa la dirar*).
12. It's not allowed to deposit the money in the conventional banks even without interest because this contract contains the help of sins, which those banks don't keep this money in it but they use them in their loans.

Conclusion

- 1- The function in banks which admits usury aims either to offer services in exchange for money or to offer a loan in exchange for profit. The outcomes of such procedures are either poundage or profit. It is permissible to deal with the earlier according to Islamic legislation under the conditions that the amount of

payment should be known and it should not recur unless with the recurring of the offered service, so the poundage does not include any usury.

- 2- Islamic reformation of banking retains the offering of services subjecting its poundage to certain limits to keep it away from usury. It replaces usurious contracts with investment legal contracts which depend on trade, corporation, or good loans.
- 3- To separate – in the juristic rules – between the ones which depend on the text or consensus, and the ones which depend on the interest and analysis, which the first ones are holy and the others are able to replace them according to the places and times.
- 4- The interest is not enough – alone- for giving preponderance, when we find clear opposition in some matter, but we have to follow the strongest evidence according to the preponderance’s rules in the *Usul* science with concerning the *Fiqh Al Maqasid* .
- 5- In our Islamic banking we suppose to focus on the loyal application and Islamic practicing, not to exceed the limits of Shari‘ah.
- 6- We don’t have to follow the conventional banks in their applications, especially which they opposite the Shari‘ah, when we have a competition with them.
- 7- The leaders of Islamic banks have to concern about informing their employees of the real message and the important role which they have to do, in which they feel that they worship Allah through performance their job.

I recommend that most of Islamic banks have to open centers for training are responsible of teaching the Islamic view of banking, explaining the legal contracts

in Islamic banking then putting conditions to who want to work in Islamic banking in which guarantee that they have graduated from these centers and a great morals.

- 8- The function in banks which admits usury aims either to offer a service in exchange for money or to offer a loan in exchange for profit. The outcomes of such procedures are either poundage or profit. It is permissible to deal with the earlier according to Islamic legislation under the conditions that the amount of payment should be known and it should not recur unless with the recurring of the offered service, so the poundage does not include any usury.
- 9- Islamic reformation of banking retains the offering of services subjecting its poundage to certain limits to keep it away from usury. It replaces usurious contracts with investment legal contracts which depend on trade, corporation, or good loans.

Chapter 16

Salafiyyah is a Blessed Historical Phase rather than an Islamic Legal School¹

Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Bouti

Tr. Kholoud al-Nounou

It is incumbent on every Muslim man and woman to follow in the footsteps of the righteous ancestors in understanding and practicing both the Qur'an and Sunnah, especially if they are committed to God's Book and the Messenger's guidance. In the Qur'an, God commands the people to obey His Messenger: "And whatsoever the Messenger [Muhammad] gives you, take it; and whatsoever he forbids you, abstain [from it]."² On the other hand, the Prophet commands the people to pursue his Sunnah and that of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and to follow the path of the people of virtue, who belong to the first three generations of Islam. The Prophet says: "Beware of innovations in religion since they lead someone astray; instead, people should firmly follow my Sunnah and the path of the Rightly Guided Caliphs." In another *hadith* he says, "The most righteous are my generation, then the next, and then the next." The benefit from this superiority is to follow and go in their footsteps.

However, embracing a new legal school, called Salafiyyah, which is based on fanaticism, has nothing to do with following the right path, and differs from it in general and particular details. However, is there a difference between this type of belonging [*tamadhhub*] and following the ways of the ancestors?

To start with, the difference is huge. It is akin to our saying Mohammadans or Muslims. As is well known, for a long time Orientalists have referred to Muslims as

Mohammadans, which is not acceptable from an Islamic perspective, as well as from the perspective of righteous Muslim life. The term “Mohammadans” gives the false impression that Muslims belong to Muhammad and are committed blindly to his person; however, the term “Muslims” expresses Muslims’ submission to God’s authority and their acceptance of the divine revelation passed on to them by the Prophet. The Muslims’ commitment to the Prophet derives from their obedience to God, and their love of the Prophet is predicated on the fact that he is God’s Messenger.

This obvious difference between the terms Mohammadans and Muslims is the same as the difference between embracing Salafiyyah as a legal system and following in the footsteps of the ancestors, or *salaf*. In the former case, embracing the Salafiyyah would mean that the blessed ancestors possessed their distinctive school of thought expressing their character and collective entity, and that anyone following them represents the true form of Islam. In other words, from this perspective Islam would ally itself with this school of thought, adopt its principles, rules, and morals, and fight its enemies.

However, following in the footsteps of the blessed ancestors, without considering them as the founders of a legal school within Islam, means honoring those whom God’s Messenger has commanded to honor, those who lived in the first three generations and who were sincere in their belief in God and clung firmly to the Rope of Allah, which stretches out to them. Furthermore, it means following them—the *salaf*—in understanding Islam and imitating them through the *manhaj* (a clear way), which they follow to understand the texts of the Qu’ran and Sunnah and interpret their teachings and rules.

Islam is, in fact, the entity that must be followed, and its divine method in knowledge and understanding is the pillar of its foundation. The pious *salaf*, committed as they were to the divine path of Islam, are our guides to this divine foundation. Their standard, as our predecessors on the path, is measured according to their own commitment to the method and scale of this religion That is the difference between embracing Salafiyyah as a legal school and following the pious ancestors, or *salaf*, as a way of realizing God's Messenger's advice. It is clear that the latter ensues from the divine core of this religion and one of the primary foundations of the Prophet's Sunnah which God's Messenger has invoked, while the former is a theological innovation, not permitted by God, and a form of false consciousness without any historical basis.

The first three blessed generations of Islam never witnessed the emergence of a legal school in Islam called Salafiyyah, distinguishable from other Muslims. However, there was one distinguishing characteristic [in early Islam], which was how best to vie for the righteous application of this religion. Anyone honored with this trait [i.e., of vying in good deeds] became a full member of the Muslim community, regardless of time and place, and came to occupy a high status in this life as well as in the afterworld ...

It is well known that the age of the blessed ancestors had a great many heretical sects in addition to the People of the Book. Although some of these sects belonged to Islam, they deviated from the Islamic creed accepted by the religious scholars of the time. These sects included the Mu'tazilites, Murji'tes, and Kharijites, which in turn split into smaller sects, with each accusing the others of blasphemy.

In addition to these, the age of the ancestors included most of the Muslim masses who followed in the footsteps of the Prophet and his Companions in their understanding

of Sacred Scripture and its exegesis. These people were rightly called Ahl a-Sunnah wa'l Jama'ah (the People of Tradition and Community) ... This nomenclature was given to the masses of Muslims because of their commitment to a conceptual method based on close collaboration between reason [*'aql*] and emulation [*naql*] and their understanding of Arabic grammar in the interpretation of the Sacred Text. (The Qur'anic discourse, no doubt, alerted people to this conceptual method.) The best practice of this method was carried out by the Prophet and his closest Companions ...

We have never heard in over 1,400 years of Islamic history that any major religious scholar of Islam ever argued that embracing the so-called doctrine of Salafiyyah would be certain proof of the righteousness of their religious path. So, when did Salafiyyah emerge? This movement has been a seedbed for theological disagreements in most of the modern Muslim world and has created much noise in Europe, where a good number of people express an interest in understanding and even converting to Islam.

The banner of Salafiyyah was raised in Egypt [in the nineteenth century] during the British occupation of that country and when the Islamic reform movement, headed by both Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh, appeared The reform movement [of al-Afghani and 'Abduh] has had the greatest impact on disseminating the term *salaf* or Salafiyyah amongst the educated classed in the Muslim world, where previously it had had limited circulation.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the term Salafiyyah was freed from its limited theological and scholarly usage and chosen as a title for books and magazines and a name for presses, such as the Salafi Press [al-Matba'ah al-Salfiyyah] and al-Maktabah al-Salafiyyah, founded by the famous Egyptian thinker Muhib al-Din al-Khatib. From

that time on, the term Salafiyyah was widely used, especially for its association with the honor gained by the Islamic reform movement.

At the same time, the Wahhabi doctrine (*madhab*), ascribed to its founder Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahab (1703–92 CE), was widespread in Najd and other parts of the Arabian Peninsula. There was a common denominator between the Egyptian reform movement and the Wahhabi doctrine in that both aimed at combating innovations and superstitions, especially those of the mystics. Therefore, the term Salafiyyah was adopted by the leaders of the Wahabiyyah because of the common thread between the two movements mentioned above. These leaders preferred the term Salafiyyah because they disliked the term Wahhabiyyah, which suggests that this [Wahhabi] doctrine is premised on Shaykh Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahab alone, who asked his followers to change the name from Wahabiyyah to Salafiyyah. Thereafter, these followers began to promote this new nomenclature in order to prove to others that their Wahhabi thought was not the creation of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab *per se* but that its history can be traced to the ancestors or *salaf*. That is to say, in their adoption of the Wahhabi doctrine, they wanted to show that they were the true heirs and trustees of the creed, doctrine, and path of the ancestors in their understanding of Islam.

Thus, the term Salafiyyah mutated from a motto raised by the Islamic reform movement of the nineteenth century to a nomenclature given to the Wahhabis in the Arabian Peninsula, who consider themselves to be the only righteous Muslims. They further consider themselves to be the only heirs to and trustees of the ancestors' creed [*'aqidat al-salaf*], who alone understand and practice Islam correctly ...

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- ¹. Excerpts from Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, *al-Salafiyyah: Marhalah Zamaniyyah Mubarakah la Madhab Islami* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 2006). Translated by Kholoud al-Nounou.
 - ². Q 59:7.

Chapter 17

Preparing the Appropriate Climate for *Jihad*¹

Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti

The first steps of *jihad*: Having established a clear idea about the true meaning of *jihad* and the way each of its kinds leads to the other, there remain two more concluding subjects:

1. The appropriate climate which must be established as a precondition to the achievement of the kind of *jihad* permitted by Allah.
2. The first exemplary *jihad*, which imposes itself on the Arab and Muslim worlds, is represented in the Palestinian problem and the Zionist pillage of this sacred land and the dispersal of its people. Here we have a number of questions requiring answers: *How can we make this problem [of Palestine] a field of applicable methodology from which Muslims can draw an example to fulfill the injunction of jihad? What is the attitude of Islamic shari'ah to the peace treaty which Egypt signed with the Zionist state and which the West is trying to impose on us today?*

This chapter tackles the first issue, the establishment of the appropriate condition for *jihad*.

Combative *jihad* is the second kind of *jihad* (having established the first kind which is peaceful *jihad* or *jihad* by preaching). This type of *jihad* is a common rule addressed to the Muslim community represented by its imam. Unlike the other rules of

salat (prayers), *hajj* (pilgrimage), and *zakat* (alms), *jihad* is not an individualistic rule. Hence the obligation of *jihad* requires an appropriate social atmosphere; and achieving this requires a certain independent kind of *jihad*. Briefly, it needs a faithful and honest group strong enough to form both the framework and the unifying factor of the Islamic state or society. Ultimately, this group can fill the internal gaps through which the enemy may find its way to create problems and chaos. This body can never be founded by disputes or fighting, nor can it be an explosive creation erupting into existence like a new world. It requires much suffering and perseverance, that is by conveying Allah's religion and *shari'ah*; by following the various educational methods which purify the soul and help to establish, in people's hearts, the love of Almighty Allah. Conveyors of this message should not seek any self-secularistic interest or goal to gain worldly authority.¹ The aim is, hopefully, a great, independent kind of *jihad*, but most people seem to be heedless of its significance. However, this kind of *jihad* needs to be clarified as follows.

Jihad was legislated to defend something that already exists: by this we mean combative or violent *jihad*, which Allah devised only after He had endowed Muslims with both a territory and a state, and after He had strengthened Islam in their hearts. As such, Islam was/is a religion represented in a controlling *shari'ah* and an authoritative system, as has been shown above. This means that Muslims possessed a kind of "wealth" far more valuable than worldly treasures and funds—such a "fortune" would become simultaneously a target for enemies to possess and a source of anxiety to them; consequently, it is liable to attack by this enemy through various means.

In early Islam, when the Prophet and his Companions came to settle in Medina, all forces of evil conspired against them, aiming at destroying the God-given religion and spoiling the territory in which Muslims had founded their state. It was really the “wealth” which had aroused the enemy’s ambitions against Islam. And it was because of such aggression that Allah legislated *jihad* to Muslims to defend their endowment of land and state—this is what we mean by “*jihad* was legislated to defend something that already exists.”

We must always bear in mind that combative *jihad* was never formulated to found a state or gain “wealth” out of nothing. Allah’s Prophet never fought to gain a territory for Islam, or to found a state, or create a mass by whose power he would constitute a political body. It was only after Allah had given him land and a state that the Prophet resolved to defend and guard these possessions.

What exists today for the sake of which we must make jihad? What really exists is Islam’s territorial abode (*dar al-Islam*) because the once-united territory has been divided into small independent territories; nonetheless, this remains the most durable “wealth” Muslims possess today.

The second existing thing, emerging from the first, is the Islamic regimes, which are represented in countries belonging to Islam, regardless of whether these regimes apply *shari’ah* or not.

Jihad is a pre-eminent, legitimate obligation when the defense of these two rights is called for. *Jihad* is a legal duty against anyone who lies in wait to attack what Islamic jurists call “*dar al-Islam*.” We must bear in mind that if Islam’s right to possess

and rule a certain territory is an established one, then this territory becomes a permanent *dar al-Islam*. However, in the event that this land has fallen/falls under the enemy's occupation, it does not change the fact that, ultimately, it belongs to the Muslims whose duty is to continue fighting the occupants and aggressors by all means possible in order to regain it.

Most jurists, except the Hanafites, state that Islamic territory can never become an enemy's domain (*dar al-Harb*). The Hanafites, however, proclaim that *dar al-Islam* could become *dar al-Harb* in any of the following three cases:

1. if non-Islamic rules are performed [in a certain state] instead of Islamic rules;
2. if the territory concerned is adjacent to an enemy's territory;
3. if both Muslims and *dhimmi*s believe their lives are at risk.

If all these three conditions are fulfilled, Muslims would, according to the Hanafite school, presumably, no longer be in a position or under an obligation to restore it to the domain of Islam.

Jihad is also permissible against anyone who tries to destroy any of the Islamic states, no matter to what extent any of these states fail to apply Islamic principles and rules, so long as both its leaders and people did originally belong to Islam. This mostly applies to those who lie in wait for Islam and its followers like the colonialist states today. Hence, *jihad* becomes justifiable; Muslims must defend both land and state against enemies by all possible means.

Talking about combative *jihad*, we might ask ourselves: *What methods does jihad have to use to compel deviant, aimless, and sinful people to submit to Allah's commands and orders?* Of course, in this case, we must bear in mind that Arab and Islamic countries abound with people who were brought up in non-Islamic societies (or enemy countries). These people could have mixed ideas about Islam and its true sources. There is no doubt that Muslim leaders and preachers bear the responsibility of restoring those people to the domain of Islam and making them adhere to its rules and customs. *But must these leaders and preachers achieve all this through violent jihad? Should jihad be waged to restrain deviating people or depose a government and replace it with an Islamist one which could force people to submit to religion and commit themselves to its rules?*

As a matter of fact, *jihad* was never devised for such purposes: it was authorized to defend something that already existed, not to bring something into existence. Had this case of *jihad* been otherwise, the Prophet would have been the first to have used it as an example. He would have been the first to have fought the leaders of unbelief in Mecca and would have controlled them by Islamic rules in order to establish an Islamic state there, but he never did that. Hence, *jihad* was only permitted to maintain the already existing possessions and not gain new ones. But one might ask again, *Did not the Prophet himself send forces to areas outside the domain of the Islamic frontiers? Did he not sometimes lead some of these detachments with the aim of compelling people to join Islam, consequently, founding an Islamic state out of non-existence?*

Which method should be used to guide people and establish Islamic rule? The method is to follow the example of the Prophet who guided the deviants and unbelievers to Islam in increasing numbers until they formed a nation and, consequently, a state.

The Prophet continued to conduct such a unique peaceful *jihad* until he and his Companions achieved the most appropriate atmosphere for the second kind of *jihad*, combative *jihad*. Today, what we, as Muslims, lack are men willing to follow the unique example of the Prophet to create a suitable environment for this latter kind of *jihad*; by means of which we could fulfill the ultimate aim of the Holy War, that is, victory or success.

We have on our Muslim land many sacrosanct things—both physical and spiritual. Our duty is to defend and, if necessary, fight for these God-given possessions. However, it seems that there is no Islamic community today where faith and consciousness are mature enough to constitute a comprehensive unity aiming at creating the appropriate climate for the Islamic *jihad* that could shield these sacred things from the enemy's plans and dangerous tactics.

To follow the Prophet's example of establishing *jihad* requires another *jihad* of the kind the Prophet himself (aided by the minority of his Companions) conducted in the face of all kinds of difficulties and confrontations for its achievement. Sometimes such encounters were harder than real conflict in the successive battles which later took place, during the Prophet's life. Despite the many calls to combat, the kind of *jihad* which provides the best setting for the desired battle is missing or, rather, it is considered missing because of the very limited number of people who are really concerned about it, or even practice it.

There are a great many Muslims who now have no clear concept about the Islamic system or the Islamic state which we are striving for. There are a great many Muslims who are fascinated by democracy and its slogans. They, for instance, see how Islamists call for and insist upon the application of democratic rule, so that they [Islamists] seize power in the name of democracy. The proponents of democracy have always wondered whether *the Islamists would rule democratically if they gained power or not*. Many such questions remain unanswered.

Many Muslims nowadays are obsessed with Western civilization. They believe that we should apply the Western banking system (dealing with interest); and the Western mode of social relationships between men and women. They also believe that going back to the restriction of *hijab* is a kind of punishment which is almost impossible to impose.

There are many Muslims who have within them a struggle between the religious feeling that Allah is One and materialistic conceptions of life and nature, which deal mostly in terms of materialism. *But where are those who claim to be practicing jihad when trying to solve the problems of these [secularist] people in an attempt to free them from the domination of Western civilization and its legacy; who allege to fortify the roots of faith that Allah is One in the hearts of these people; who pretend to convince them that the Islamic state is a concrete, achievable reality; that the whole Islamic system is well disposed to the humanity of all kinds of people at large?* Surely, what is urgently needed is peaceful *jihad*, which is the safest key to the second kind of *jihad*, the combative one, which is the overriding subject of many of the Islamists who endlessly talk about it today. Combative *jihad* can never be conducted by other than committed believers who,

supposedly, conducted the original kind of *jihad* (*jihad* by preaching), for how could we impose an Islamic system on people before acquainting them with this system?

The enemies of Islam are enlisting “an army of temptations,” which will be their first “arsenal” with which they can confront their Muslim enemies. *How can these Muslims liberate themselves from these “lures and their fires” unless they are safeguarded by a sublime Islamic education and shielded with an honest submissiveness to Almighty Allah’s will?* A great many paradoxical ideologies and creeds are “cast” into the “arena” of Islamic thought to create divisions between various groups, in consequence of which they fight one another. *How can these warring factions, then, unite on the one path of jihad in the cause of Allah?* Wherever we look we see no one who might be concerned enough to solve any of these dilemmas, no matter how serious and grave they might sound and no matter how hard the colonialistic circles might try to maintain, if not increase, these problems in the Islamic society.

In fact, what we can hear in our Islamic societies is no more than loud, rhetorical, and stirring words and slogans; but when it comes to action, these calls are no more than accusations of blasphemy and treason committed by rulers. As a result, they wage war against these rulers. Surely, such rage and rhetoric, besides the wars against rulers, bear no sound fruit. It gives no true guidance to errant, apprehensive, and sinful people.

It is a known fact that rulers, in every age and in every place, basically belong to the kind of people they govern. Good and evil, in both rulers and ruled, stem from the core of the broad base in every society upwards in a hierarchical fashion. The best solution, as such, is that if there is unbelief, disloyalty, sin, and dissension, it must all be addressed by dialogue and guidance, which must start from the wide popular base and

work up to the ruling political elite. Of course, while calling for such a dialogue, there should be patience, endurance, resolution, and courage against difficulties and troubles. Naturally, if we followed the peaceful methods of persuasion, good results would be achieved; that is what Allah promised us. The result: a solid Islamic atmosphere will prevail; a fruitful and successful *jihadic* result can easily be achieved. Unless this kind of Islamic climate spreads in a clearly conducive manner, these Islamic groups will remain in a state of stasis; of *jihad* we will hear nothing but slogans. What we might see instead are problems and clashes occurring between these Muslim people and their rulers, and/or among Muslims themselves. Hence, Islam and Muslims will be destroying themselves; the colonialists, happy enough by events such as these, will have nothing to do than to sit and watch the outcome and prepare to benefit from the ensuing chaos.

I now call to mind a chapter in the biography of Salah al-Din (Saladdin), which reflects the great care he took in preparing the exact atmosphere for the kind of *jihad* we are talking about here; namely, the solid base of *jihad* and its most appropriate form to suit every age and time. Saladdin visited the foothills of Quassiun mountain (in Damascus) and the suburbs of Cairo (in Egypt) and, in both places, established legal religious sciences. Saladdin supervised, directed, and sometimes cooperated in the organization and teaching of the courses of these establishments. Sometimes, this Muslim leader himself attended the classes to add to his knowledge and education. It was out of these religious teaching centers in Damascus and Cairo that Saladdin formed the army with which he faced the Crusaders. Perhaps we all know the success that both Saladdin and Nur al-Din al-Shaid achieved in ridding the Holy Land from the aggressions of the Crusaders. The secret of this success was the essential founding of a good climate of

jihad by preaching, followed by combative *jihad*, which was the natural outcome of this climate.

Setting up Islamic educational institutes is an indispensable factor, but is by no means sufficient to establish the appropriate atmosphere for *jihad*. The various other factors are to be found in the traditions of our Islamic nation which are available to the leaders of *da'wah* and education in the nation.

The most important problems which delay the founding of the appropriate climate of jihad: despite the variety and abundance of these problems, we can point out the most urgent and most serious of these problems. We present here the best methods to overcome these problems, so that our Muslim brothers, who are aiming to gain power and establish an Islamic society, can exert their best efforts to minimize these problems as far as possible and establish the best mode of *jihad* for which they must have been calling in order to create the Islamic society they dream about. Here are the most serious of these problems and the best tactics to overcome them:

The first problem: a divided Islamic nation (the state of disunity from which Muslims suffer): This takes two forms—

1. Division at the level of countries and governments. It is a fact that colonial establishments did their best to create this state of separation by various means, the last of which was the [second] Gulf crisis, its war, and its consequences. Of course, I am in no position to explain this kind of disunity between governments and countries,

nor do we (individuals and scholars of humanities and knowledge) have the means to solve it.

2. Division at the level of groups, creeds, and sects. The colonial establishments not only have a hand in dividing Muslims at the level of states and regimes, but also have a hand in the division of Muslims into groups, and sects. Some examples have been given earlier.

But what is the solution to this sectarian “tearing up”? And what remedy is needed to restore these divided sects and groups to the “sanctuary” of Islamic unity? The primary remedy is that the leaders of these groups and sects should purify their hearts by showing self-denial by invoking Allah’s surveillance upon them. They should invoke their position in front of Him in the hereafter for reward or penalty. **Therefore, the most urgent cure is that Muslim sectarian leaders, having denied themselves pure and sincere work for the sake of Allah, whose Love will, then, dominate their hearts.** Hence, doubts and ambiguity will disappear.

The second most urgent remedy is that the leaders of the various Islamic sects and groups must have full knowledge of the priority of rules of *shari’ah* and its common purposes. Details about this are available in the fundamentals of Islamic law under the name of “Aims.” **Having become fully aware of the state of affairs and the differences in significance in terms of religion starting from the emergent and necessary ones.** What we see nowadays is a disregard of the major aims, like safeguarding the nation’s unity, and a concentration on minor, individualistic judgments and a persistent call for others to follow it.

Minor, individualistic judgments have always been controversial. In the past, it was the norm for most Muslim scholars to overlook the less significant issues when they faced major ones; sometimes, they would follow a common judgment. Those scholars must have been fully aware of the need to maintain their social and ideological unity and avoid differences of individualistic outlook.

The third significant solution is that these leaders should differentiate between an Islamic course of action and political activities at the basic level of Islamic *da'wah*, so that Islamic activity has a clear agenda, that is, calling people to join the truth (Islam), preaching to them, and commanding them to do good deeds and abstain from evil ones. The reason for this recommended differentiation is that Islam's political activities have mixed with Islamic activities; that the latter will be distributed between the various political terms and its various tactical moves. Islamic preachers must, in this case, be divided between different political centers, something which will nonetheless affect the state of the Islamists affiliated to these centers.

This is what we see nowadays: Islamic groups are always different from each other, and in this they have no choice since they originally have divergent trends. If these groups follow the three remedies cited above, they will be able to dedicate their work wholly and achieve solidarity, God willing.

The second problem: the influence of Western civilization and its moral effect [on Muslims]: this is a common moral and ideological problem and its epidemic is about to reach almost all people at all levels except for the few who have safeguarded themselves by continuously taking refuge with Allah and clinging to His commandments and

teachings. It is a widespread phenomenon that forms a significant climate for the interest of the West and their colonial establishment. It is in such a climate that they conduct their activities and from among the victims of this climate they are able to choose agents and employees. Hence, it is essential for the preachers of *da'wah* and for Allah's claimants of *jihad*, to start their mission by purifying society of this dilemma and uprooting its causes and reasons. It is the right of everybody to undertake this task; the method is recognizable, easy, and within reach of any Muslim who chooses to follow it faithfully.

Because of the nature from which Allah created man, there is hardly a human being trapped by the attractive, fanciful intrigues of Western civilization who is not liable to obey Allah's commands and follow His straight path. Since the makers of this civilization are liable to such submission to God's rules, then Muslims, who are deceived by the vanities of this civilization, are supposed to be more ready for submission to His will.

The problem of these Western vanities and ornaments is that they have penetrated deeply into our societies, influencing especially those who have no religious teachers capable of instilling the fear of Allah in them and warn them of the likely dangers of the lures of Western temptations.

If only Islam preachers in our societies dedicated their efforts to meet the errant ones in clubs, markets, schools, and universities, preach to them, guide them to the truth of Islam, and open up a dialogue with them in order to dispel their doubts, for no other reason but sincerity to Allah, then these straying ones would inevitably listen attentively and follow the proofs and advice of these preachers. As a result, faith and guidance would penetrate their hearts and minds: it is a law of Allah that He sanctifies some people to

preach; and rewards some for the sake of others. In these days, it is hard to find anyone who can revive the method, style, or manner that the Prophet used in his preaching for the cause of Allah. We can hardly find a single person in our societies who can follow in the footsteps of the Prophet's Companions, such as Mus'a ibn Umair, Mu'as ibn Jabal, Abu Musa al-Asha'ari, Abdu-llah ibn 'Umar, Abdu-llah ibn Mas'ud, to mention only a few ...

The third problem: the doubts with which Muslim brains are stuffed and through which problems are created. This comprises various confusions emerging mainly from the Western media, whether publicly or privately; whether through known organizations or underground ones—all in a furious, unceasing campaign. Undoubtedly, this is a powerful Holy War, but it is a war that aims to destroy Islam and its infrastructure. Hence, one might ask: where is the counter-Holy War? Where is the *jihad* that refutes this doubt and disproves this falseness and futility in the same informative way conducted by the plotters and deceivers? *Where is the jihad of academic dialogue and logical thought that can firmly evaluate the religion of Islam beyond doubt, inequity, and fables so that nobody can feel doubt it?* [Unfortunately,] we hear nothing but revilement of Muslim rulers and talks and speeches about establishing Islamic rule.

I am in no position here to answer all misconceptions about Islam—that is beyond the aim of this chapter; nonetheless, some examples might be mentioned, if only to draw attention to the degree of seriousness in case they are left to influence simple and naïve people, to refute the feigned falsity and delusion weaved around the truths of Islam and its humanistic, just principles, and to show the degree to which these Islamists neglect this serious *jihadic* duty. It is a duty which, at Allah's command, falls to the religious

scholars and preachers. In His words: “And remember when Allah took a Covenant from those who were given the Scripture to make it (the news of the coming of the Prophet Muhammad) known and clear to mankind and not to hide it ...”

Here are two examples which show the clamor of the biased people who act on their own judgment of religion and its rules. The aim here is to prove the falseness of this tumult and clear away the uncertainties which might find their way into the minds of some ignorant people. My second aim is to guide all men of Islamic *da'wah* and those who are interested in establishing Islamic rule to the best way of purifying Muslim thoughts of such falsehoods and negativities; and in consequence, to put an end to the deeds of promoters of false thoughts against Islam.

NOTE

- ¹. Excerpts from Muhammad Sa'id al-Buti, *Jihad in Islam: How to Understand and Practice It*, tr. Munzer Adel Absi (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr Publishing House, 2006).

Chapter 18

Religious and Philosophical Trends experiences by the Western Man Today¹

Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Bouti

Tr. Kholoud al-Nounou

The West today, both America and Europe, presents clearly two contradicting phenomena. The first is represented by plenty of people seeking Islam in order to know its facts and principles more than any other time before, while the other is represented by hatching plans against Islam, also more than any other time before.

Apparently, there is no paradox in this case. The phenomenon of seeking Islam to understand its essence is pervading the whole world, including all its social fields, and the phenomenon of conspiring against Islam is pervading the political domain, all its leaders and supervisors included.

There is a clear controversy within those two incidents. The more dangers the politicians and the leaders find in Islam, the more a layman desires to understand and recognize it. And the more the layman shows more interest in it, the more those politicians and leaders realize show enmity towards it. This is actually an incessant controversy.

In time that the political events in the West testify the emergence of cunning conspiracies towards Islam and attack it in its homeland, the markets and bookstores testify to a remarkable tendency represented by many people looking for translations of Islamic books, which is an entirely new thing. Notably, highly academic Islamic publications have been translated recently into English and French.

¹ From Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, Islam and The West (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 2007), 65-

The reason behind this controversy is explicit. The political cunning towards a specific idea somehow implies strong propaganda and drawing attention to it, and vice versa. And that is why the following question can be asked:

What is more worthy of concern? The issue that should occupy Muslims' minds is not the cunning that glows in the souls of leaders and decision makers in the West but the destiny that the Westerners seeking Islam hope for, owing to the increased interest in Islam and its reality.

The military cunning does not eliminate any power it faces, and the intellectual war based on conspiracies does not conceal the facts of Islam and its brilliant proofs. But the dilemma is that millions of people who pursue, because of some motives, to know and understand Islam and look for those who could enlighten them on the way of Islam. However, they cannot find anyone who is able to fulfill this desire. Moreover, Muslims turn away from this task due to their being engaged in their disagreements and conflicts. Thus, the longing to get to know Islam can convert on day to its contrary. This will happen, if none hurries to explain Islam as against the fabricated serotypes and illusions that are, in fact, denied by mind, reason and science.

There should not be a cause for such a fear, if Muslims were guardians of their religion, clinging onto its rope, walking on its way, and fulfilling the task of explaining Islam and calling for it.

Today, in spite of the emergence of Islamic awakening, there is a painful manifestation which includes unreasonable clashes among Muslims accompanied by a total neglect of calling to Allah and of informing people of the reality of Islam. Let us not worry about those who prefer to lose their identity and are fascinated by others.

This is the reality as regards the two ills that our Islamic world suffers from. This reality creates worries about the destiny that awaits the longing for Islam of millions of people all over the world and their desire to know its essence which nowadays threatens their politicians and rulers. The future of this longing, if the majority of the Islamic nation goes on like this, will be dissatisfaction.

Avoiding this dissatisfaction by coming together of the hearts of different Islamic groups and their realizing the vitality of this issue is a remote and rare possibility. However, they should remember that their first mission is actually the truthful and practical response to the longing of these people towards knowing Islam and understanding its essence. This might occur through a continuous endeavor aimed at revealing Islam free of tampering and fabrications.

Jihad is a pillar of the original foundation of Islam. Can Jihad have a more glorified and superior expression than the one given by Allah: “And who could be better of speech than he who calls [his fellow-men] unto Allah, and does what is just and right, and says, “Verily, I am of those who have surrendered themselves to Allah.”” (Quran 41: 33)

The time has come, after having been busy with our internal conflicts, to get away from the suffering that does not yield anything in our lives except more reasons for alienation and disgrace, and may with the passage of time kill the Islamic awakening which for many years we have been so hopeful about. It is time for this awakening to come back so our relations will revive. Hence, our secondary disagreements, which frequently threaten the Islamic unity, should be put away. Afterwards, we should co-operate to establish an integrated Islamic method upon which we can satisfy the longing of those yearnings to know Islam. Besides, we should also have at our disposal people who can undertake the teaching of Islam with sincerity and truthfulness, especially before this longing converts into dissatisfaction and the hope into despair.

What motivates the man of the Western Civilization to look for the alternative?

Having the answer to this question might be considered an introduction to the perfect way of establishing a dialogue with those who desire to know Islam.

What motivates many of the Western intelligentsia to look for substitute for the western civilization is the same reason that motivates them into looking for Islam and the desire to understand it *per se*. The reason might be a result of intellectual gap followed by a spiritual one, which, somehow, leads to unpleasant feelings. So, what is the factor that makes them feel such an intellectual gap? This factor might be represented in the following essential points:

The first point seems to be the relationship of this factor with the religion that it represents. It examines endless reports and tests that talk about the secrets of the universe and the Unseen, but passes over the reports supported scientifically that would upgrade them to the level of mental certainty or even to the level of likely probability. There is no doubt that the westerners persist in a critical and scientific study of the texts of their sacred books looking for their scientific and historical value. They end up being very skeptical about them, their resources and convinced that they are not products of revelation but rather human ideas that lack scientific proofs.

Stuart Mill says in his book “The Freedom”, answering the question he was asked ‘why is not he guided by the texts of the Bible that contain the complete Truth’:

“Most sayings ascribed today to the Messiah are not his; he did not even mention them. Most of what he said has not reached us. And the so-called hierarchical principals are the ones assigned by the Catholic Church gradually during the first five centuries.”

This point causes him a sort of intellectual gap which is mentioned above.

The second point is the gap which the methodology of the western culture suffers from in general and the methodology of the study of the human sciences in particular. Sciences of nature and the universe, once carefully examined by westerners, turn out to be discordant and unreliable.

What the West was and still is afraid of is admitting the fact that the cosmos is one interrelated entity. Then, it will be realized that the perfect knowledge will not be achieved in any grade unless through a vital and educational insight related to the scope of the universe.

The elements of the knowledge that the westerner has considered factual and independent from one another are but interrelated parts of a totality. This is similar to a book composed of successive chapters. It is taken for granted that the independence of these chapters is a matter of classification only. However, regarding the content and the subject they are connected to each other to the extent that the understanding of any chapter of the book is subject to the understanding both of the previous and of the following chapter. Moreover, it is also subject to the scrutiny of the theme of the book as a whole. Thus, the science of history, the natural history, geology, astronomy, physics, chemistry, medicine, sociology and others are but classified and interrelated chapters related to one book. This book is the universe *per se*. Who does not contemplate the entire universal map, will not gain a reassuring and actual science of any of these classified and scientific chapters. It is similar to the situation of a man who, wanting to locate a country on the world map, will focus on the center of the map looking for its name among the names of other countries, without recognizing the whole map itself and without distinguishing its symbols and directions, or the longitude and the latitude the map contains. The knowledge he has gained is useless and does not imply any intellectual tranquility.

The sign of that is the confusion that obsessed the thoughts of western philosophers and scholars at the end of the scientific journey undertaken by each one of them. This intellectual gap was the result of the second point revealed in many aspects of the western life today, for which Islam is the substitute.

The third point is the result of both the first and the second points as regards what engaged the soul and the thought of the western man concerning the increasing ambition to know the facts of this Life and the secrets of this universe, its end, and what is beyond it. What he sees and reads does not provide him with any sufficient answer to the above anxieties. No doubt that this reality makes him disappointed and adds to the intellectual gap increasing his problems and causing dangerous effects such as tension and psychological conflict.

The fourth point: the situation of western societies has recently added painful impact to dangers, limited so far, to the eyes of the public and in their thoughts, but which seem to some analysts to be gardens full of pure bliss. Most of the pleasures that the western man indulges in are, in fact, devoid of brilliant and expected content, such as the joys of sexuality liberated from all restrictions. Its painful and dangerous effects are an example of the situation mentioned above.

These four points constitute gloomy psychological gap for many of the westerners, motivating them to seek any vagueness or substitute. However, the increasing attacks against Islam of most of the western leaders and the successive declarations which focus on its danger and the necessity of confronting it make these seekers and searchers assume that the beneficial substitute might be the one which those politicians and rulers fear, that is Islam.

What is the standpoint of Islam towards the problem of the western existential gap?

It will not be an exaggeration to say that the attitude of Islam towards the gap that overtakes the souls of most of the western well-educated people is similar to the position of healthy food to the hungry and empty stomach.

Islam came as a remedy for that divided knowledge for which its seeker cannot find the strings that would bring its parts together to make a well-structured and complete unity. The Quran is a comprehensive definition of the universe and human life, and the relationship among them. It is the map which guides to the origins of the existence of the universe and the position of the human being in it. Thus, it is considered to be the most important door to know any of the numerous branches of knowledge related to this universe.

When the man gets enlightened by the Quran and by the true insight to the origins of the universe, the universal structure will appear before him exactly like a tall tree, which, observed very closely, will help him stand firmly on the ground and not fly in the clouds or confront never-ending obstacles.

In fact, the whole universe contemplated from the perspective of the guidance of the Quran, its recommendations and teachings is represented in such a way that the fanatic perplexities and desires that the western man might have been subjected to are eliminated. From now on he should start thinking deeply about the themes that he feels more concerned about. Thus, he will come out of the maze and stop being deceived by the glimpses of the fragmented knowledge. Moreover, he will be given the Quranic map that shows this universe and which protects him from anxieties deviations. His comprehensive understanding will motivate him to make a connection between the parts that seem independent from each other and how to activate them.

There is no doubt that the reason of the one with this clear insight will not lead him to studying the history or nature, for example, disregarding his scientific certainty about the universe, human life, or the Creator and His capacity to create. In addition, his reason will not lead him to studying the Islamic jurisprudence merely as a law for comparison and criticism without taking into consideration Muhammad's biography that comes from genuine resources, and without recognizing the Quran, its reality and its origin.

The one not enlightened by this Quranic map that shows the emergence of this universe and its resources is necessarily confused and looks at the scattered components, independent from each other, around him and contemplates that what holds them together is blind chance and chaotic order. His clear contemplation reaches in him the state of perplexity. Nothing can save him from such a dangerous condition except enjoying the journey to the science of the universe provided by the Quran.

The Almighty Revealer of the Quran has drawn the attention of the human being to this important and cognitive message that of the Quran exercises in the human life through this address: "O, people of the Book! Our Messenger (Muhammad) has come to you (now), making it known to you much what you used to hide in the Book, and bypassing much (that is now not necessary): There has come to you a (new) Light from Allah and a (very) clear Book (the Quran)-" (Quran 05: 15).

Thus, this huge intellectual confusion that many of the westerners drift toward today, and which leads them to a psychological gap makes them seek an alternative -an alternative to everything. Getting free from this situation is by resorting to the Quran, the fountain of Islam. Walking toward Islam needs a proof and looking at its tidings and clarifications needs a guide and a teacher. Where are the guides and instructors to save the increasing number plenty of Truth seekers?

A distinguished American medical doctor who converted to Islam years ago, Archuletta, changed his name to Hakeem and told me that the desire of getting knowledge about Islam is relatively increasing in the entire American society, and the number of people who embrace Islam increases remarkably with every day that passes. But the major problem faced by those who seek Islam is the unavailability of true Muslims who know true Islam in order to teach them its essence and introduce them to the message of the Quran. He says that every year in New Mexico they receive in a vast place called *Dar al-Islam* (Abode of Islam) numerous Americans who are taught Islam, Quran, its principals, teachings and rules by a group of American Muslims. He continued saying that they were looking forward to this duty being done by their [Arab] brothers who call to Allah, but unfortunately none of them takes this duty into consideration or even feels its importance. This leads them to look for someone among them having this ability, even partially, as a substitute for such trained people.

What is the place of Islamists in fulfilling the duty of calling to Allah?

Two approaches divide the Islamists today apart from their denominational and secondary conflicts that are on the increase among them. The first one intends to delay the task of calling to Allah and teaching people about His religion and His Word till they have the chance to remove the rulers of Muslim countries from their office and establish themselves as such. Regardless of how legitimate that target is and without entering into argument about it, there is no doubt that not fulfilling or freezing this duty, assigned by Allah, and leaving it until later is contradicting Allah's order:

“Invite all to the way of your Lord with wisdom and holy teaching, and reason with them by ways that are the best (and most gracious)-“(Quran 16: 125).

In addition, the awakening of Muslims in order to inform about the Word of Allah and define His religion sincerely is the shortest way to either destroying the tyrants or guiding them.

The second way is represented by turning some of the Islamists away from communicating with those straying people, who either surrender to their desires, content with their gloom, or complain about it and seek the alternative.

According to my experience, the knowledge that has no defects can be subjected to reforming but considering that it exceeds Islam and Islamization is something unreasonable to me. Being engaged in this issue and neglecting the dialogue with the people who long to be saved from the state of bewilderment through reasonable methods is avoiding the divine order that says: “Invite all to the way of your Lord with wisdom and holy teaching, and reason with them by ways that are the best (and most gracious)-“(Quran 16: 125). “And who is better in speech than the one who calls (men) to Allah, and works righteousness, and says, “I am one of the Muslims (who bows to Allah in Islam)?” (Quran: 41:33).

Islamization of Soul, not Islamization of Knowledge:

True knowledge should be regarded as balance and standard. Neither of them will perform its natural mission unless neutral. Among the balances established by Allah none is more holy and accurate than the balance of knowledge (in terms of the Arabic language and Islam it is science). Moreover, the knowledge coming after ignorance is even more comprehensive.

If you want to Islamize that knowledge or, in other words, to benefit Islam with it, to tear it from the authority of its neutrality, then, it will no longer be a reliable balance able to judge among the parties. Moreover, there will be attempts at christianizing or even judaizing it. There will be no one able to judge whether such an act is correct or not.

The mission of a Muslim is purifying the knowledge from the illusions and mistakes ascribed to it. Thereupon, that knowledge will not guide its disciple except to the truth which is Islam. Who distinguishes that truth but still does not care about it is victim of his fanaticism, desires and self-interest. The cure of that would be the purification of that man's soul through the educational means given by Allah in His Book, and through the example of Allah's Messenger Muhammad (s.a.s) and his methodology in calling people and purifying their souls. The remedy will not be, then, manipulating the types of knowledge to make them compatible with the principles of Islam.

If you gather all the types of knowledge and the facts about the universe, they will testify that the truth is Islam, but they will not be able to persuade an arrogant soul to accept this truth because of its fanatical desires until you help this soul to be able to apply the Quranic approach, embodied by the Messengers and Prophets, and explicit in the biography of the seal of the prophets Muhammad (s.a.s).

In fact, the task that has to be carried out is to inform about the Word of Allah. It also points out to the soul in order to purify it and awaken its pure instinct, as well as melt the piles of arrogance, prejudice and self-centeredness by means of glad tidings given in the Book of Almighty Allah, accompanied by sincere desire of Allah and His religion.

The western man does not suffer from the overloaded knowledge that prevents him from reaching Allah's religion, but rather from psychological hardships resulting from the materialistic life that burdens him. Thus, he is deeply in need of someone who can heal him and not of more types of knowledge, culture and thought.

The caller to Allah, especially the one among those who seek the alternative, is not in need of such thought and sectarian culture in order to protect himself, but is in need of a vital spiritual

approach full of feelings of servitude to Allah so that the glitters of this transitory life including all its pleasure come to be nothing as compared to the life in Allah's presence.

The western man needs guides who have reached this level. However, there is no doubt that if there is an adequate and qualified group of callers to Allah, who are qualified to satisfy the appeals of millions of people all over the World, the sun of science will rise from the West as it did before in the East.

Should we wish for a group of such people in the near future?

Is there any hope to end up the clashes existing among those people concerned? Will this hope turned into certainty that these conflicts are the result of their psychological situation rather than religious endeavor?

It is taken for granted that the one who delved into the mystery of Monotheism is veiled from people and their greed. So, he will be only concerned about the pleasure of Allah the Almighty. In contrast, the one who delved into the seas of the worldly pleasure and his base desires will be veiled from the vision of Allah and from enjoying the bliss of His Monotheism. As a result, he will only care to deserve the satisfaction of some type of people that he is intimate with, not caring at all about any other kind. Oh Allah! Make us happy through living Your monotheism, so we can see in this universe nothing except You, and do not covet anything except your pleasure, and do not fear except Your displeasure.

Chapter 19

International Conferences of the Fatih Islamic Institute

Khoulood al-Nounou

It has been widely observed that Islam and Western fear and anxiety towards each other emanated from their ignorance of each other. As a result, the relationships between the two sides are in tension nowadays. However, the dialogue between cultures and civilizations, and the need for eliminating the ongoing perplexities brought about by the events of 11 September are everybody's mission. Accordingly, the efforts are made to avoid such an undesired situation by some academic institutions, for example the Fatih Islamic Institute in Syria.

Hence, bearing in mind the verse:

“O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has *at-Taqwa* (pious). Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.”¹

And believing, together with many other people, in the necessity of a dialogue following the divine methodology reflected in the verse:

Holy Quran 49: 13. ¹

“Invite (mankind, O Muhammad) to the Way of Your Lord with wisdom and fair preaching, and argue with them In a Way that is better.”²

The Fatih Islamic Institute has launched a series of conferences over a 3-year period: 2006, 2008 and 2009. The titles of these conferences have been respectively: “What the divine messages have in common and how to activate it”, “The recognition of civilizations and messages in the light of the one human family”, “Islam and the West: Recognition and Dialogue”, “Islam and the West: Mutual knowledge and Dialogue for a Just Global Peace and a Secure Human Future”.

These conferences were meetings of Muslim and Christian elite scholars, professors of thought, dialogue and culture, and students from Syria, the USA, Canada and Sweden. Through them the Fatih could transform theory into practice, with aim to:

- convey to the West the essence, justice and tolerance of Islam in an understandable way in order to promote interaction;
- emphasize that Islam is the religion of dialogue and acceptance of the other;
- clarify that Islam is based on clear evidence and a moderate way to avoid excess and extremism;
- give a good example to the West of the peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Syria to refute Huntington’s theory of the clash of civilizations;

Ibid., 16:125.²

- remove the distortion and incorrect images about Islam in general and about Syria in particular which prevail in the West;
- remind that Syria is the cradle of civilizations and that it has played an important role in achieving peace throughout history, and nowadays it seeks to play this role again through dialogue with the West to restore peace to the area.

Islam and the West: Mutual Knowledge and Dialogue for Just and Universal Peace and a Secure Human Future

This joint forum was the final one in the series of the international conferences organized by the Fatih Islamic Institute. There might be more providing that the Fatih Institute continues strengthening its relations with western countries. This forum was held in collaboration with the University of Alberta (Edmonton, Canada), from 3 to 5 May, 2009. Its sessions took place on three premises in Damascus: al-Asad National Library, the Fatih Islamic Institute (Dirar Mosque), and Rida Sa'id Conference Center at Damascus University.

In this formal event around 30 research papers were presented by Muslim and Christian scholars from Syria, Canada and the USA, and there were thirteen sessions including the opening and the final ones. Two workshops were held at Dirar Mosque and some professors had an important discussion on the subsidiary topics which will be mentioned later on.

In addition, the Canadian delegation together with some other participants visited to the Minister of Islamic Endowments Dr. Abd as-Sattar as-Sayyed, the Minister of Information Dr. Muhsin Bilal and Vice-President Najah al-Attar. Furthermore, the Canadian delegation and most of the conference participants were invited to lunch by the Ministry of Islamic Endowments.

This symposium was a well-organized meeting which enhanced consultation, exchange of information and discussion, and followed a formal agenda. Interpretation English-Arabic and vice versa facilities were provided. The agenda focused on the following topics:

- peace: its meaning, importance, and prerequisites;
- Islam and the West: from struggle and clash to dialogue and understanding;
- human rights in the heavenly messages compared to those in man-made laws;
- Muslims living in the West and Christians living in the East;
- moderation versus extremism in the East and the West;
- the importance of Islamic economy for the solution of the world economic crisis;
- Syria as a perfect example of coexistence among the followers of different heavenly messages;
- Islamic community in Canada: issues and worries;
- the Muslim woman in the West, particularly in Canada;

- Israeli racism and 'God's chosen people' lie in the light of heavenly messages and international laws.

As regards ideas and thoughts presented by the speakers at this symposium, the most prominent, critical and controversial ideas will be commented on here.

The opening session was an attractive one to all the audience who gathered at al-Asad National Library to listen to the scholars who took the floor at the first panel session.

It is a matter of fact that Islam aims to build a peaceful society at all cost. More importantly, the human objectives cannot be achieved in the absence of peaceful circumstances. Herby, the concept of peace is essential for building a good society in which the individual has the suitable environment enabling him to build up the civilization. The concept of peace is mentioned in the Holy Quran:

“But if the enemy inclines towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace.”³

Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour, Vice President of the Fatih Islamic Institute, transmitted that meaning through his presentation in the opening session. It implies that Syrians and the President are essentially expected to call for peace, human brotherhood, and coexistence. People in *Bilad al-Sham* (Greater Syria) are a perfect example of applying these meanings. In its history, Dr. Farfur explained, there were no religious wars or genocides, not even sectarian conflicts.

Ibid., 8:61. ³

Arab Christian brothers have a brilliant history in this country. Muslims are proud of their history and attitudes. Muslims and Christians in Syria enjoy the sense of peace, love, justice, brotherhood, and tolerance. A Muslim in Syria is the brother of a Christian and a Jew. There is a Jewish sect called *al-Mosaweyya* who has always lived here peacefully. Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour commented that there is no problem with the Jewish people or the prophet Musa. There is a problem with the Israeli people who occupied our lands, destroyed our Jerusalem and killed our women and children. Their attack on Gaza is very recent... The man in the era of technology, who went to space, is unable to solve the problem of such genocides. It is time for humanity to wake up and return to God on the basis of servitude to Him.

Pluralism, globalization and secularism were presented briefly by Dr. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi, the Edmonton Council of Muslim Communities Chair in Islamic Studies at the University of Alberta in Canada and the President of the American and Canadian delegations that visited Syria to participate in the International Conferences of the Fatih Institute. However, pluralism is often used to point out diversity and acceptance of the other as well as to promote the system for the “common good”. He commented that the Canadian Society is a dynamic one and has a pluralistic nature but in comparison with Syria Canada is a young country. Syria is a very ancient country and pluralism has been one of the major marks and facts of Syrian history and Syrian tradition. Therefore, it is but natural for Canada and Syria to have this type of dialogue not only about pluralism but about traditional modernity.

Globalization has imposed its consequences on the modern Syrian society in many walks of life. There are many definitions of this concept and many are

talking about it nowadays and about its application on the Syrian society. However, the question which should be discussed in such a conference is whether globalization is something good or not? It simply means making things proliferate in the global scope, develop a global impact or begin on working within global domain. In the light of this meaning, Dr. Ibrahim called this time the age of globalization and he believes that in the context of today's globalization we need to promote and elevate the cultural and religious contexts not only among religious communities but also among nations. As evidence of such approach, there are, at the moment, here in Syria people from Canada and the USA. This is a relationship among nations not only individuals.

The positive side of the Canadian group visiting Syria is that this group, including outstanding academic scholars, has learned much about the extensive and rich history of Syria. It is the history that should be taught since it doesn't belong only to Syria. It belongs to all humanity and that is why our mission is to teach this history, the history of interfaith dialogue and co-existence, and this conference is a major example of the co-existence of different religious communities in Syria. In this respect, one of the aims of the Fatih Institute will be actively achieved by revealing a prosperous civilization and rich Islamic tradition existent in one hemisphere such as Syria through academic work in another hemisphere such as Canada. This group learned in their tour to *Bilad al-Sham* about the history of Syria, the history of interfaith dialogue and about the centrality of Islam in Syrian society. They learned about the relationship between Islam and secularism which is a major theme in the context of the nation state in the world in twenty first century.

Dr. Ibrahim concluded his presentation by the prophetic *hadith*: “Islam began strange and will return strange as it began, so *tooba* (blessedness) is for the strangers.” He speaks well of the generosity as a landmark and sign of Syria to its own visitors, and that the Islamic and Christian traditions are full of generosity to the strangers.

With complete courage and transparency, Dr. Muhammad Sa’id Ramadan al-Bouti, the Head of the Beliefs and Religious Department in The Faculty of Islamic Law, Damascus University, a well-known Muslim intellectual in Syria, and has a unique style of writing among his contemporaries, presented his thoughts. His lecture might lack a kind of compliment and flattery; even though it was presented during a conference for dialogue. In spite, it was received by a remarkable feedback from the whole audience. There was a need for such a discussion on the way of clarifying the real picture.

He started his talk by being afraid from having a conference for dialogue because this means there is a conflict or boycott between two sides reclaiming a meeting to solve the situation. He believed that people in Syria are one family and there is a sort of cooperation among them reaches to a higher level. He commented that Muslims and People of the Book are under the Divine Will and both are addressed in the following Quranic verse: “God does not forbid you to be kind and equitable to those who have neither made war on (your) religion and nor driven you out of your homes. Indeed, God loves those who are equitable.”⁴

In the light of this fact, terrorism is a criminal act that influences the others through violent ways. Dr. al-Bouti believes that the West starting by the

Ibid., 8:60.⁴

seventeenth of the last century lives a state of fear from what is so-called an Islamic terrorism.

A study shows that it is not a fear from the Islamic terrorism rather that Islam per se. This has been shown from the oldest report written by William Clifford the observer of many conferences held at the Arabic league for resolving the crimes, and it is directed to the UN and others by and the director of the criminal institute in Australia. The report contains: There is a probability of set up an Islamic and serious awakening emerged in the Arabs countries. We noticed that these countries societies are dominating the recourses of oil. Therefore, we should know that there is a great danger might threaten the stability of the western civilization dominated nowadays. When this serious awakening embraces the unity of Arabs countries, this means there is an immense danger should be resolved. Since that time the west is in fear from Islam and covers this fear by reclaiming what is so-called terrorism and extremism.

Having a solution for such a dilemma, I believe, is that the human mind should work in a way different from what it usually assumes. For example, if it is mentioned that most terrorists are Muslims, you wouldn't be saying something bad about Muslims or Islam. Still, it is difficult to deny the existence of terrorism, when such expressions are repeated constantly.

Dr. al-Boutisent a message from his pulpit to his brothers in the West in America and Europe that Islam is not a danger, but it is the medicine which should be sought for the senility of the Western civilization. The danger that the West suffers from nowadays is the corruption which intensifies in its societies. Human in the Western societies is a servant to the machine; while the right

process in the light of the human civilization results the opposite. He thinks the Western civilization today reaches through the materialistic technology to a one way direction. Since someone cannot go back as long as the material acquisitions should not be get rid off, and he does not know the intellectual map beyond this technology. Al-Bouti mentioned the term *scientific bottleneck* which some western thinkers search a way to save the West from. He suggested improving the Science to the level of knowledge or what is so-called the new order of science: the science of human and his holiness, his reality, his origin and his end, and the science of beauty including its all dimensions contemplated by the sight and insight

By this measure, the essence of Islam will be known not to be embraced rather than to be guidance for reaching the stage that is beyond the Technology. At that time, we all will be happy to find out the Western civilization starts over and come back from its senility to its prosperity, and the real meaning of globalization will be achieved. The question that is raised: could it be understood from that conclusion whether the corruption including its immoral fraction is a tendency to make an exception, or a lack of restrictions and any ritual principles?

From the Canadian side, a public invitation in order to activate the academic exchange between Syria and Canada offered by David Goa, a professor of Christian studies and the director of the Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life. He came to Syria in his mind and his heart for many years through texts and through idea. Also, he came to Syria to hear the mind and the heart of colleagues and friends in the midst of a deeply disturbing period in history that is challenging to all and it is not easy to bear it. His rich experience in

Syria, the heart of civilization which is profoundly civil, speaks with a kind of thoroughness about what we are about here, and about the initiative that we are able to make in the Republic of Syria under a leadership of a secular government which holds the religious cultures of this place gently.

What is this dialogue? What is the fruit of dialogue? It bears fruit in the civil sphere, in the religious sphere, in the cultural sphere, and in the personal sphere. Surprisingly, in Canada for at least 50 years the teaching in the civil sphere of history and culture of which religion is the center has been thin to nil of all religions not just for Islam. Islam was never taught. Likewise, Christianity has been not taught either. It is a kind of culture of amnesia that develops as a result of this.

There is enormous task calls for a help from the audiences and their representatives. It is about knowledge so that the young may know the gift that have shaped civilization with its great capacity to bring man and woman together as Muhammad and Jesus have spoken so clearly. Consequently, all will glimpse that hidden wholeness obtained from the faith of every human being that God created. At the University of Alberta, there is a new opening for this kind of consideration. In addition, there is a new sense in Canada that there is a serious work to do and at the center of this work is a regard for the religious life.

The west colonization and imperialism, the American hegemony and Christianity are not one. The Christian community struggles with all its diversity with the enormous challenges that are faced in the 21 century aged of biology. But for that very reason it must be an age of theology. For modern science with all its enormous gifts, has no gift for judgment and no ground upon which can judge

what does this mean to our understanding of the gift of being a human being.

Prof. David has later written his impression of his visit to Syria including an invitation to Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour and the grand Mufti of Damascus. His write-up subtitle's is "Walking Straight Street in Damascus" and published in the Chester Ronning Centre Newsletter. He wrote:

The awful ways of international politics, both recently and over the last century, marked most of the scholars' presentations. We were invited to think in sustained way about the struggle of the Palestinian people, of whom a million or so make their homes in Syria, about Iraqi refugees, and about the somewhat older plight of the Americans, many whom also sought refuge in Syria. The question of the capacity of Islam for the modern world came together with the question of the modern West's capacity for local and regional culture and for a religious tradition that informs so much of daily life and refuses to be privatized. We will be examining these compelling questions in this year's offerings at the Ronning centre.

A Number of these questions will be considered in "Christianity, Islam and Modernity: Nostalgia for the absolute and dream of Freedom", a course I am teaching with Dittmar Mundel and to which the Public is invited. We are pleased to host the Mufti of Damascus and Shaykh Farfour along with a number of other Muslim scholars listed in the program...I hope you will be able to join us for the occasions when we gather to think together."⁵

The Christian voice represented by Ma'en Bitar, a member at the Presbyterian Church in Syria and Lebanon, declared that the Canadian delegation is not foreign in many ways. The real foreign is the one who

⁵ David Goa, . Walking Straight Street in Damascus," *The Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life*, Fall 2009.

does not know God, who is stranger to himself, to his neighbor, and the whole cosmic. In addition, this one does not believe in the Creator, the resource of blessings, love, power, and peace. As a result, he will consider himself as a divine and will be an enemy to himself.

Mr. Bitar considered this man an enemy so he invited all to look for this symbol in all over the world. By this measure, there should not be West, East, Islam, Christianity or Judaism as long as there is a belief in a great God who goes beyond the borders of any embodiment. The question that is raised: is that an invitation to integrate the Abrahamic religions in a melting pot? However, he learned through Jesus who is the enemy of dialogue and humanity.

He asked the delegation in public: what do you know about Islam? Do not you have misconceptions and stereotypes in your mind? He introduced himself as a brother to the Muslims in Syria because they see him as a Muslim. Islam regardless its jurisprudence, theology, rules, and commands, it is per se the belief in a great God to whom you submit and surrender. He said: the prophet Muhammad was entitled by reaching this religion to his group; although, to my mind, there is no certain group related to Muhammad rather than others as long as one of Islam's characteristics is the universality. In addition, this idea is not acceptable from an Islamic perspective as well as from the perspective of righteous Muslim life.

He suggested two conditions to achieve a universal peace in stead of the dialogue; first of all, the holy war but not through the concept of

Crusades, and to know the meaning of freedom. The responsibility of frees in the world is to be armed by the power, freedom and knowledge to be able to resist this enemy. The solution must be a battle between the *Right* and the *False*.

In conclusion, this symposium was received by a notable concern from the Syrian Press and Media. Prior to the very number of speakers, discussions and debates during the sessions were almost not satisfied unless the informal ones. In addition, the voice of woman was not as it should be; though I had a chat with some females from the Canadian delegation who are students. They told later about their wonderful experiences in Syria; especially the welcoming, hospitality and the impression that Syria is the country that has preserved its history and civilization incredibly well and remains true to its culture.

Over all, this conference is a crucial step in the history of the Fatih Institute since it confirms the necessity of dialogue between Islam and the West. As Dr. Abdullah Nizam, the director of Islamic Studies College at Sayedah Ruqayah Institute, declared that a serious and influential dialogue needs to have good representatives for both sides. Who talks on behalf of Islam? Who talks on behalf of the West? Accordingly, there is a need to rebuild the internal construction of each side to be able to dialogue with the other. However, some of the recommendations included in the final report of this conference focused on the following ideas: neither a real and universal peace nor a secure and human future will be achieved aside

with the hegemony of unjust power; the mass media controlled by the Zionist lobby has a great impact in distortion the features of Islam and Christianity; revealing the essence of Islam and its crystallization through its ambassadors who are truly dedicated themselves to this endeavor.

Chapter 20

The Fatih Islamic Institute and Globalization of Dialogue

Souhaila Ramadan

It has been widely observed that Islam and the West have fear and anxiety toward each other, emanating from their ignorance of each other. As a result, the relationship between the two sides is in tension nowadays. However, the dialogue between cultures and civilizations, and the need to eliminate the ongoing misunderstandings brought about by the events of 11 September are everybody's mission. Accordingly, efforts are made to avoid such an undesirable situation by some academic institutions, for example The Fatih Islamic Institute in Syria. Hence, bearing in mind the verse:

.O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has at-Taqwa (pious). Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware."(Qur'an 49: 13)

And believing together with many other people, in the necessity of a dialogue following the divine methodology reflected in the verse:

"Invite (mankind, O Muhammad) to the Way of Your Lord with wisdom and fair preaching, and argue with them In a Way that is better."(Qur'an 16:125)

The Fatih Islamic Institute has launched a series of conferences over a 3-year period: 2006, 2008 and 2009. The titles of these conferences have been, respectively:

1. "What the Divine Messages Have in Common and How to Put Them into Action"

2. “The Recognition of Civilizations and Messages in Light of the One Human Family”
3. “Islam and the West: Recognition and Dialogue”
4. “Islam and the West: Mutual Knowledge and Dialogue for a Just Global Peace and a Secure Human Future”

These conferences were meetings of elite Muslim and Christian scholars, professors of thought, dialogue and culture, and students from Syria, the United States, Canada and Sweden. Through these conferences, the Fatih could transform theory into practice.

The aims of the conferences were to:

- ❖ convey to the West the essence of Islam, its justice and its tolerance, in an understandable way in order to promote interaction; emphasize that Islam is the religion of dialogue and acceptance of the other;
- ❖ clarify that Islam is based on clear evidence and a moderate way to avoid excess and extremism;
- ❖ give a good example to the West of the peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Syria to refute Huntington’s theory of the clash of civilizations;
- ❖ remove the distortion and incorrect images about Islam in general, and about Syria in particular, which prevail in the West;
- ❖ recall that Syria is the cradle of civilizations, that it has played an important role in achieving peace throughout history, and that nowadays it seeks to play this role again through dialogue with the West to restore peace to the area.

The first conference, “What the Divine Messages Have in Common and How to Put Them into Action” was held in collaboration with Hartford Seminary of Hartford,

Connecticut, in the United States. It took place on 15-16 November 2006 AD, in Kafarsusah Arabic Cultural Centre, Damascus, Syria. The participants were honored guests from Hartford Seminary, along with scholars and students from the Islamic Universities League, the University of Al-Azhar and Cairo University, and graduates of The Fatih Institute and researchers from its English Unit.

The conference held eight scholarly meetings discussing the commonality among divine messages. Forty research projects, study and working paper were presented, on the values and shared principles of the divine messages. Topics included: human rights; values of justice and fairness in the divine messages; the value of peace based on justice, and how it can be achieved in the lives of people; the value of tolerance; cooperation in righteousness and good deeds, and the rejection of cooperation in sin and aggression; the values of hard work and devotion to God; cooperation between human beings on reconstruction of the land and investing its resources to benefit humanity.

These meetings were addressed by a number of Muslim and Christian researchers, intellectuals and scholars. Among them were:

- Grand Mufti of Syria Sheikh Ahmad Badr Eddin Hassoun warned of the danger of using religious names for states and political movements. He said: “‘Israel’ is the name of Prophet Jacob, peace be upon him, and we must be mindful not to name the states after prophets like Muhammad or Jesus ... ‘Israel’ is the name of a Prophet which is used as a name for a State ... this is racism. Then, they used the word ‘Knesset’ to name their Parliament, the Congress, and the Senate ... Why do not we also call our parliament a ‘Mosque’ and the Christian parliament a ‘Church’? There is a danger in using religious terms as names for political movements. We hear

nowadays terms like “The Religious Extremist party”, “The Christian Democratic Party” and “The Muslim Brotherhood”. We must keep religion away from our political parties. If a political party which has a religious name loses an election, this will mean that a religion has been threatened. We must be attentive here ... I just want to draw the attention to how religious parties are moving toward extremism and intolerance, and if they are toppled in the elections, it will be said that the religion is toppled. This is what happened in Germany when the Christian Democratic Party was toppled: the church was angry because it was a Christian democratic party. You can make it a democratic party, or make the political parties in our country practice the values of religion, but do not use religion to reach positions of power. Religion must not be used except for purification of morality among people.”

- Dr. Hossam El-Din Farfour, the Vice Rector of The Fatih Institute, spoke on behalf of the Rector of the Institute, Sheikh Abdul Razzaq al-Halabi. He described briefly the peaceful coexistence in Syria. He said: “Syria is an example of acquaintance and harmony among members of the human family. This is not racism or fanaticism, hence ‘Christianity emerged from here and Islam came to protect this emergence.’ That was what our President, Dr. Bashar al-Assad said to the Pope from the Vatican, on his visit to Syria. Muslims and Christians in Syria live as brothers and sisters, loving each other, enjoying tolerance and cooperation while retaining their own identities. This national and religious unity is called for by all the divine messages and confirmed by Islam ... I think Syria is a role model to be followed.”

-Dr. Jafar Abdul Salam Secretary-General of the Islamic Universities League spoke about two other important things shared among the divine messages: human rights and

freedom. He focused on the problems faced in the application of these rights in our modern life. The first problem is the double standard in the policy and application of human rights among different countries. He denounced the daily killing of civilians that has been committed by Israel in Palestine and supported by the American veto in the United Nations Council. The phony excuse for these massacres, as Dr. Jafar said, is that they are committed under the motto of “self-defense;” this is far-fetched. Most statistics show that a large number of the Palestinian casualties include children, women and the old who never hold any weapons. He also denied the unjustified war on Iraq as a war on terrorism. This violates international law as stated in the United Nations Charter, Article 2, Number 4: “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.”

The second problem, as Dr. Jafar stated, is that Muslims have not introduced their heritage and their theories regarding human rights and coexistence to the world properly. He gave a single historical example: the covenant establishing the Islamic State, set up by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This covenant, after naming the original tribes in Madina, including the Muslims, pagans and Jews, confirmed that the Muslims of Quraysh, their Helpers (al-Ansar), and whoever endorsed the covenant are one nation. Dr. Jafar indicated that establishing a state should not be based on the unity of faith. This unity might be important, but the state should not exclude other faiths living with Muslims on one land: this is what is called citizenship. Dr. Jafar showed how the right of citizenship was based on political satisfaction. Muslims laid the foundation for eliminating discrimination among peoples according to certain principles, values and ethics found in all divine religions. He refuted the Western

claim that these principles are their own invention. He concluded by saying that the solution is to write pamphlets about Islam, in clear English, to be published and distributed in Islamic centers, on the Internet and in other places, or to use audio-visual means of communication between Muslims and non-Muslims.

- Dr. Heidi Hadsell, President of Hartford Seminary, confirmed that we should practice dialogue among ourselves, and then we can ask others to practice dialogue. She believes that when we achieve this, it will motivate political leaders to establish peaceful relations among themselves. She said: “Nowadays, it is not easy to make dialogue with each other, but this will be a new challenge for us all. This provides the religious leaders with a special challenge to continue planning or establishing strong relations among themselves in practice in their lives. This might encourage the political leaders to establish peaceful relations with each other, because we hope that we have peaceful relations among us.”

- Dr. Abdullah Neazam, director of the Ruqayyah Shiih Institute in Damascus, clarified the general concept of Islam in an understandable and straightforward way, explaining it gradually from the creation of man until now. He aimed to prove that religions have many things in common. This results from the fact that for all human beings religion is one, and this religion is surrendering to the will of God. He said: “There is one religion that has accompanied human existence, so when God mentions His prophets in the Qur’an, He names some of them: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad peace be upon them. The purpose of mentioning them is to show us that there is a responsibility on man, and this responsibility is imposed by religion. Therefore, since this responsibility is imposed by religion and the origin of

this religion is God, there should be a unity in the legislator who has legitimized all religions, and of course there must be many things in common. This means that the “backbone” of religion is one in all messages. God expresses this in the Qur’an: “The only true religion accepted by Allah is Islam.”(Qur’an 3: 19). Islam (in the verse) means submission to God, and does not mean saying the Islamic testament (shahada) and accepting all the pillars of Islam. This means that for God, true religion is to surrender to God’s will and rule. That part came through all the prophets – peace be upon them all -- since they all submit to Allah, accept God's rule, and inform people of this message. Therefore, it is normal for the one who researches about religions to see this commonality in some beliefs and rules. There might be some differences in understanding or perception, or there might be differences in some matters of faith and law. Those differences are caused by either the evolution of human life and pursuing religions over the human life the pursuit of religion over the course of our human lives in this universe, or by intertwining the understanding of humans with God’s will and words, so we hear now a combination of this and that.”

- Bishop Ghattas Hazim, Patriarchal Vicar of the Roman Orthodox Patriarchate in Damascus, esteemed the value of dialogue and warned against using force to solve disputes. He said: “Dialogue means life. It is a gift from God, thus we cannot deny it. The problem is not in the religion but it is rather within us. The apostle Paul says that the fruits of the Spirit are joy and peace. Therefore, to spread peace, we should have the inner peace which is the goal of all asceticism. We should also transform the vital energy used by the destructive whims for murder into a power of love which abounds in life. No one can confront a terrorist except a saint who holds love. The history of humanity teaches us that war does not help to resolve the contradictions between

states. On the contrary, war inevitably generates new problems. We have to educate ourselves on respecting others.”

Other clergy from various Christian denominations: Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Syriac and Armenian also presented the attitude of the Christian message towards life's problems. They spoke about the key values contained in this message, for guiding human beings toward the people's benefits and for achieving peace on the earth.

- Professor Mohammad Abdel-Sattar al-Sayyed, assistant to the Islamic Endowment and Religious Affairs Minister at that time, clarified how Muslims and Christians have lived side by side and shared the good and bad in Syria for a long time. It is possible to consider Syria as the model of coexistence among religions. He said that this fact is known to everyone in Syria, and he quoted the following statements by the previous president Hafez al-Assad, may God have mercy on him: “Islam is a reformation, love, and brotherhood. A true Muslim is a person who loves others, and loves the true Christianity which means love, goodness, fraternity, and tolerance. Christianity and Islam emerged from our land. Therefore, it is neither a burden nor a problem for us. It is an honor for all the people in our country. We are faithful to Christianity as much as to Islam.” He ended by saying that the divine messages in their peacefulness, purity and essence are one, because they have same source, origin, and objectives, which aim for nothing but human happiness, guidance, freedom and dignity.

There were many other speakers at this conference, but it is not possible to speak about them in this limited space. However, I can say that the speeches showed the importance of cooperation among universities and institutes within and outside the Islamic world. This cooperation can help to explain the divine messages to the whole world, and attain cooperation and mutual understanding among scholars of different divine messages. This will be a driver for politicians, intellectual leaders and ordinary people, to work in the light of the teachings of these divine messages and to reject whatever is contrary to them. They can all work to alleviate the problems facing the world, and show the importance of resolving these problems in accordance with the rules and principles derived from all divine religions.

After extensive discussions of their research, studies and working papers, the participants made the following recommendations:

- Belief in one God is the essence of all divine messages. This belief requires believing that all creation has one origin, as stated in the hadith: “All of you belong to Adam, and Adam was created from the dust.” It also requires belief in the unity of the universe, as stated in the Quran: *. Have not those who disbelieve known that the heavens and the earth were joined together as one united piece, then We parted them. And We have made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe?”* (Qur’an :2130)

- The one origin of all human beings is the first scientific fact associated with the one Creator; there is no contradiction in this with the multiplicity of human beings in peoples and color varieties, which ensures the survival and diversity of the universe. No doubt that unity requires that love, tolerance, justice, peace and cooperation prevail among human beings, to benefit all humanity.

- Muslim, Christian and Jewish scholars should cooperate to clarify and simplify the values, concepts and principles of the divine messages. They should also disseminate them among people to address their spirits and minds, using various means such as books, pamphlets, broadcasts and on the Internet. Their goal should be to eliminate the differences and confusing images which have existed in the past and present, on some concepts of the divine messages. These differences and confusions have affected the understanding of the common values among them. An example would be the widely-circulating allegations about the spread of Islam by the sword.
- Thinkers specializing in religious studies should focus on the common values which aim at achieving peace and security on the earth.
- The participants in the forum agreed on the need to coordinate efforts to confront anything contrary to divine messages, such as atheism and discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, gender, color, or for any other reason. There is also a need to deal with diseases that have spread recently because of neglecting religion, such as AIDS, addiction and homosexuality, and the diseases that result from sexual permissiveness.
- Religious abuse or contempt for the prophets and religious symbols in any way must be rejected. These actions do harm to Prophet Muhammad, Jesus and the Virgin Mary.
- The conference has announced its support for dialogue and acceptance of the other, and it welcomed the letter of Muslim scholars' elite to Pope Benedict XVI.

One of the most important outcomes of this conference was to send seven female students from The FatihInstitute, for the first time, to Hartford Seminary in the United States for two years, to attain Master of Arts degrees in Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations. I was one of them. I can say that it was a good

experience, and enriching, for students from both sides, The FatihInstitute and Hartford Seminary.

The third conference, “Islam and the West, Recognition and Interfaith Dialogue for Global Peace” was held on March 16-17, 2008 AH, at the Post-Graduate studies Department at Dirar Bin Al-Azwar Mosque. The participants were honorable guests from the Hartford Seminary in Connecticut in the USA, the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, along with the Islamic Universities League and the Al-Azhar University, Cairo University and The FatihInstitute graduates, and researchers in the English Unit.

The conference held four intellectual meetings that included lectures, speeches and interventions. The speakers asserted how Islam enriched the Arab culture which in turn contributed to human civilization, referring to the fact that the world needs to understand Islam as a religion with a divine message that calls for a universal peace based on truth and justice and that rejects any compulsion in belief or aggression by any party on another.

During these lectures, a number of researchers, intellectuals and scholars from both sides talked about the changes that took place after the events of 9/11 . Among the speakers were:

-Reverend Dr. Stephen J. Siderak, Jr. , the Executive Director of the Christian Conference of Connecticut and the State Council of Churches, including the Roman, Catholic, Greek, Orthodox and Protestant churches. He addressed the theory of religion, politics and evil, thinking that politics in the name of God is evil in itself. He gave the example of America as a country that creates its enemies and then asks to destroy them. He said: “Muslims and Christians have to answer serious questions,

theological and ethical, raised by the national security of their respective countries." Religious leaders of both traditions have to perform sacred duties in response to the manipulation of religion as the deployment of this serves certain politics.

He went on explaining how using the term "The Divine Right" today in politics usually generates evil. When a state considers itself fulfilling a holy mission, it sees God standing by its side. Holding such belief paves the way for an illusory intertwine between politics and God's purposes, political hegemony and God's sovereignty. Religion itself becomes evil if it allies with such politics.

Siderak asserted that the events of 9/11 , and the response which President Bush called for provide evidence for the danger which stems out of the misuse of religion in the course of both terrorism and counter- terrorism retaliation. "Religion and politics can become an evil combination when these forces interact in an ever escalating action and reaction cycle of violence."

He concluded by saying that we should work together to find more avenues for our religious traditions to contribute to global peace -making. We, as religious people, should shoulder our weighty responsibility.

-Professor Fatima Wahdan, Professor of Economics at the University of Connecticut, addressed the importance of dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims. She explained the perspective of how Muslims in America realized the importance of interfaith dialogue among religions after 9/11 through activities that aimed at clearing and eliminating the negative image of Muslims from the minds of the American people. She said: "Muslims in the U.S.A before September 11 did not recognize the importance of dialogue with non-Muslims. After September 11, there was a big change in Muslim communities as they began to realize the importance of dialogue, especially that of interfaith dialogue and participation that

was not only theoretical but took place in reality. Now, a 'House of Abraham' is being built that is sponsored financially by Jews, Christians and Muslims. Another activity is serving meals and providing health care for the poor. Muslims in America have to be positive and focus on the positive because living in the United States of America nowadays can be more difficult if the focus is only on the negative. What helped the community in U.S.A after September 11 was having positive interactions with non-Muslims who understood Muslims to be nonviolent in nature. She emphasized that it was very important to take responsibility for both good and bad actions. Wadhan stated, "I think within our religion, that the best thing you can do for you brother or sister is to tell them the truth if they do the right thing or the wrong thing."

Professor Colleen Keyes, Dean of Academic Affairs -Tunxis Community College, also spoke about the role that Muslims play in American society focusing on the role of Muslim women and the challenges they encounter. She suggested that the best way to be effective in society is to be a good Muslim and to represent Islam through its teachings that call for ethical conduct. She questioned the premise of whether only men could represent Islam, or should women also be involved in building that image. She mentioned that there are a large number of female doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses and computer scientists who participate in social life. A Muslim woman, Keyes believes, must participate in any field as far as it is possible and she finds it comfortable for herself and her family. Keyes focused on the necessity of American Muslim women to participate in the political process, as a leader, governor or member of Congress. She believes that unless Muslim women are involved in politics, there would be no change in the American attitude towards Islam. Keyes discussed that in order to achieve peace, violence cannot be a successful

alternative for tolerance, suggesting that women can change American policy through involving herself and not through violence.

- Professor Edris Tawfiq, a former English priest who had converted to Islam and is a professor of English at The Fatih Institute, talked about real Islam. Islam as he has seen is the message of peace to all people in the world, and not the religion of violence, terror and fanaticism. We, he stated, can see that throughout the story of Prophet Muhammad with his wives joking, running together, and sprinkling each other with water. Islam could give back values to America and all countries around the world. Every Muslim should start on himself because on the Day of Judgment he will be asked about the message which he gave about Islam.

Dr. Ahmad Ugiur, Dean of Islamic studies at the Open European University in Istanbul made a comparison between the Islamic and Western civilizations and how they contributed to human civilization as a whole. He stated that Muslim civilization is firmly established on the divine revelation represented by the Holy Qur'an and prophetic sunnah. He referred to the fact that beside their knowledge of Islamic studies, Muslims excelled in different sciences: medicine, architecture, astronomy, chemistry, algebra and mathematics. Ugiur drew attention to the numbers of books written by Muslims during the Abbasid era and through these translations, these writings opened the gate to the European renaissance. He contrasted the Muslim civilization with the western one that was based on materialism that has grown with technology but destroyed our ethics and values. He said, "We, Muslims, did not learn about terrorism except from them; I mean Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany. Bush accused us of being terrorists. As Muslims, we are mostly raised up on divine principles. Killing human beings is forbidden in our religion. We belong to a prophet who calls on nations to have peace and mercy. We are calling on the West., Europe

and the United States of America for peace and the end to conflicts and wars with pure intention. I think, this is the duty of religious leaders in the West.”

-Dr. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi, Chairman of the McDonald Center for Islamic studies at the Hartford Seminary in the USA talked about Islamic studies in the context of globalization. Throughout his speech about Islamic studies, he distinguished between the Islamic studies taught and practiced in the Muslim world and Islamic studies taught in the West and known as ‘Western Oriented.’ Abu Rabi stated that Orientalism began over five hundred years ago and discussed from major professors such as Edward Said who linked between knowledge and power by saying, “Orientalism has been created to serve politics in the West.”

Dr. Abu Rabi illustrated Said’s view by discussing our present reality and explaining how the West after 9/11 has increased its interest in learning about Islam and the Muslim World due to a need to understand Muslim societies. This can be seen in the remarkable interest of Western universities who teach about Islam. However, Abu Rabi pointed out an important point which is the lack of Muslim scholars or writers who hold PHD's in the academic fields to teach, write or criticize what is taught or written. Most Islamic studies in the west are taught by Christian or Jewish professors. Dr. Rabi exemplified his idea with Professor Nortan Men who wrote ‘The Struggle against Islamic Fascism.’ Upon reading the book, the Muslim reader will discover that the writer has no idea about Islam; its theology or philosophy. Abu Rabi believed that Nortan’s main aim was to link Fascism with Islam as a religion referring to the need for equivalent Muslim scholars in the West to represent and defend Islam as one of the monotheistic religions, away from any prejudice. He pointed to the importance of creating centers for strategic studies in the Muslim world similar to the

six major centers run by Jewish orientalists who have a sound basis of knowledge about Islam and the Arabic language.

Abu Rabi went on to discuss that globalization was a very wide and complex term that cannot be defined by a simple word. He stated that globalization is an economic phenomenon that started many decades ago but had political and social consequences. There is no doubt that globalization has been controlled by great powers in the world led by America then Europe and Japan and so forth, while the Muslim world played no role in running the wheels of globalization, impacting not only Muslims countries but also the Muslim minorities who live in the West.

As a Muslim living in the West, Abu Rabi spoke about the Muslims who live in the West and how they can represent Islamic ethic such as justice and tolerance to their communities. Without the help of major Islamic centers for globalization, it is still hard for Muslims in general, and intelligentsia in particular to represent their Islamic faith.

Abu Rabi concluded with a major point which he presented as a solution for the Muslim crisis. Faced with tremendous challenges, Muslims have to understand the importance of globalization and its consequences on their societies. Globalization is an inevitable reality that no one can deny, reject or escape from. Abu Rabi raised some questions of how Muslims can deal with this reality from an Islamic view without losing their Islamic identity and being aware of the global impact of globalization on the Islamic field.

After several discussions, presentations, extensive dialogue and changing multiple views, the participants in the conference arrived at these recommendations:

- 1 – The need to increase recognition and dialogue between East and the West to represent the real image and bridge the gap created by anti-peace powers.
- 2 – Ignorance of the other leads to increase in hatred and hostility and fosters violence and terrorism.
- 3 – The need to alert the influence of the media which is controlled by the Zionist lobby and through which the basic religious teachings are distorted before new generations.
- 4 – Presenting Islam by putting its teachings and ethics into practice by Muslims in a way that shows justice and tolerance towards others and through the role that Arabs and Muslims have played in human civilization.
- 5- The need to extend a hand to help the oppressed all over the world who suffer from any kind of discrimination and injustice; racial, social or religious.
- 6 - Exposing the motives that have led some Christian denominations to ally with Zionism and this in turn produced Zionist-Christianity.
- 7 – Intensify the efforts to depict the apartheid and inhumane activities practiced by Israel through the frequent attacks on Jerusalem, Al Aqsa Mosque and the birthplace of Jesus Christ in order to ethnically cleanse the Palestinians.
- 8 – Finding effective solutions to the problems of sectarianism and adopt an approach of dialogue and mutual understanding in order to promote love and cooperation among peoples to achieve human freedom and human dignity.
- 9- The need to introduce Syria to the world as an example of social cohesion, co-existence, peace and security that is shared by all members of Syria regardless of their different faiths and denominations through human history and wishing love and peace for peoples all over the world.

Finally, I can say nothing but what Dr. Hossam El-Din Farfour said: “The problem is neither in the divine messages; nor in the civilizations ... the problem is among the self-interested who exceed the messages, principles and values and neglect humanity, human rights and international law. Those who make the international law are the same people who trade in human rights. They pretend to defend human rights, but in reality they commit genocides. Who is responsible for such barbarism and genocide? Not only those who commit genocide are responsible, rather we all are responsible. O men of science and thought, Christian clergy, scientists, ladies, dear professors and students, we are able to do it. So let's start.”

From my experience in attending these conferences, I think they have something in common which anyone attending them could notice. Most of the Arab speakers whether Muslims or Christians, did not miss the chance to speak about the suffering of the Palestinian and Iraqi peoples. They reflected on the injustice and aggression which are being inflicted on the civilians and supported by the American administration and the world's silence. In contrast, the Western speakers were trying hard to focus on the difference between the attitudes of peoples and the attitudes of their administrations. They said that most people in the West are not happy with the political attitudes adopted by their governments, and that there are many who try to clarify the truth, but this is always blocked out by their media.

There is another observation I would like to offer, from my own experience as a person who lived in the West for two years. The two sides, whether the Eastern or Western lecturers, missed something important which they should keep in their minds before they prepare their speeches. They should remember that each of them comes from a different social, cultural, and educational background. Even though the world

has become a small village today, there is still a gap between the East and the West due to many cultural, social, educational and historical differences. I can say that each group spoke from its own experience. For example, Eastern Christians and Muslims who live under same circumstances have the same way of speaking and position on the issues of the East, and the same holds true for Christians and Muslims who live in the West. The best solution to this dilemma, in my opinion, is that specialists in interfaith dialogue should deepen their knowledge about the other, through living with them for a while, examining their situation, and trying to understand their problems as if they were in their shoes.

Chapter 21

Across the Way from Bab Kisan:

Reflections on the Fatih Islamic Institute

The R. v'd Joseph L. Pace

The Fatih Islamic Institute and the small Melkite chapel at Bab Kisan, which commemorates St. Paul's escape from Damascus in a basket let down over the city walls, stand diagonally across the highway from one another. These two buildings are separated by at least six lanes of an ever-busy, sooty, congested highway that serves as a major connection between Damascus and its international airport twenty kilometers to the southeast. Traffic moves rapidly and with determination on this highway making it almost impossible to cross on foot, although I once foolishly did so. These two buildings, one Christian and the other Muslim, even though within sight of one another, are fairly well isolated from each other. They stand as a vivid witness to me of the difficulty of interfaith dialogue: there is almost always something significant, distracting, even dangerous, in the way. Sometimes it is not easy to cross the street.

Even though crossing the street from Bab Kisan to the Fatih is hazardous, the Fatih has been an important stopping place in my journey to learn more of Islam, and consequently grow in my own faith. Curiosity tweaked by travel in the Balkans more than fifteen years ago started me on a continuing journey to study Islam. Along the way I took a degree in Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary, a pioneer in the field of Muslim-Christian relations, and met a number of equally curious students and faculty who remain companions on this journey. In October 2005 I joined an unofficial delegation from Hartford Seminary traveling through Turkey, Syria,

Azerbaijan and Georgia visiting Muslim communities. On this charmed trip of remarkable encounters I met religious and political figures who opened to me new perspectives on Islam and gave me insights into fruitful encounters between Muslims and Christians in their communities. In Damascus an introduction was made to Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour and the Fatih Islamic Institute came into my life.

Shaykh Farfour's late father Muhammad Salih Farfour, Grand Shaykh of Greater Syria, founded the Fatih in 1956 as a charitable and reformist society dedicated to Islamic thinking and the promotion of a moderate *da'wah*. Today Shaykh Farfour, who has been called "the official face of Islam in Syria," serves as Vice-Rector, as well as the charismatic heart of the Fatih. It is impossible to separate Shaykh Farfour and the Fatih: the Institute is clearly a joy in his life and for many, both in and outside the Fatih, he personifies the Fatih. During that October visit the shaykh invited us to an *iftar* on the roof of his house just outside the walls of the old city of Damascus. It was a soft evening and a crescent moon hung slightly above the minarets of the Umayyad Mosque in the middle distance. Over an enormous meal we chatted with faculty and friends of the Fatih. After the meal formal introductions and speeches were made and Shaykh Farfour entertained us with his repertoire of Sufi mystical songs. (The shaykh is a great singer and will burst into song at the slightest lapse in conversation.) We heard more about the Fatih and were humbled by our host's longing for closer relations with the US through people of faith. Since that evening I have come to know Shaykh Farfour much better and have enjoyed his hospitality in Damascus a number of times. I've also had the pleasure of welcoming him to my church in West Hartford, Connecticut twice to meet with parishioners and local religious leaders. On both occasions, true to the Fatih's goal of promoting a moderate *da'wah*, he presented a

deeply personal and welcoming picture of Islam free of the extremism that is so often associated with that faith in the American press and popular culture. Since that Ramadan evening in Damascus I have had several thought-provoking exchanges (almost always in the presence of Shaykh Farfour) with faculty and students of the Fatih which have expanded and challenged my perceptions of Islam.

Since 2005 the Fatih under Shaykh Farfour's guidance has hosted conferences bringing together Syrian religious leaders (a few Christian, but mostly Muslim), faculty and students of the Fatih, as well as visitors from the West. It has been my pleasure to attend and participate in two of these conferences, in 2008 and 2009. Each conference had a broad general theme. In 2008 to welcome Hartford Seminary as a conference partner the theme was "The Mutual Knowledge of Civilizations and Messages under the Shadow of One Human Family" taken from *Surah al-Hujurat, ayah 13*;¹ in 2009, with the University of Alberta as a partner, the theme was "Islam and the West: Mutual Knowledge and Dialogue for a Just and Universal Peace and a Secure Human Future." Each conference, which extended over at least two full days, in addition to guests from the US and Canada, welcomed a number of speakers, some faculty or lecturers, but many coming from other parts of Syria and representing other institutions such as the University of Damascus or the Ministry of Awqaf. Topics covered a wide range of Islamic sciences and life from women's issues to Islamic finance to political issues.

¹ "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored among you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well-acquainted (with all things)."

The 2008 conference took part in the dark days of the Bush administration when relations between Syria and the US were at an historic low. Bush's infamous speech of 2002, labeling Syria a part of "the axis of evil" was still fresh in many Syrian minds. The war in Iraq raged, flooding Syria with refugees. Tensions between Syria and Israel over the Golan Heights and Syria's perceived nuclear ambitions put Syria in a precarious position in American foreign policy: clearly a major player but one to whom Washington refused to speak. I don't think it was necessary to do so, but several of us who spoke at the 2008 conference did our best to distance ourselves from American foreign policy toward the region. I doubt that any conference participants considered us enthusiastic supporters of the Bush administration's policies, but almost everyone believed we had some influence we could use to change American policy toward Syria. Frequently a conference participant earnestly said to me, "Please tell President Bush we don't hate the US." Behind that statement was the unspoken plea that Syria be respected and not become the next country on the list to be invaded by US forces bringing democracy to the region. This comment was also a surprising insight into Syrian perceptions of American government: if only it were that easy for public opinion to change foreign policy in the US.

In 2009 the politeness that surrounded political conversation the year before vanished. Earlier in the year Israel invaded Gaza, bombing indiscriminately, killing thousands of Palestinians, destroying homes, schools, churches and mosques, and most unforgettably hospitals. The pain caused by the invasion of Gaza was intensified by the near death-grip blockade of medicine, food and other supplies destined for Gaza. The US and other influential Western countries were disturbingly silent in what was quickly taken to be approval of the Israeli

invasion. Damascus alone hosts two refugee “camps” housing almost half a million displaced Palestinians; thousands more live elsewhere in the country. Coming on the heels of the Iraqi war, with the Kuwaiti invasion a generation earlier not yet forgotten, and along with increasingly bellicose talk of bombing Iran, it was all too much. Politeness was set aside and conference participants as well as others we met in our travels (including Vice-President Najah al-Attar, and the Ministers of Information, Education and Culture) could not hide their outrage. Each of the government officials we met chastised the US, some more delicately than others, but the message was always clear: US policy toward the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the Middle East in general was not acceptable. Conference participants were also furious and made little effort to conceal their rage. American foreign policy threatened Syria. Even though George Bush was no longer in the White House, damage was done and Syrians lived daily with the uncertainty of what US foreign policy meant for Syria. What Syrians had seen in Iraq, Gaza and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as well the uncertainty of US action against Iran, raised the level of tension throughout the country -- even people on the street spoke of the fear of Syria being invaded or bombed. The enthusiasm and hope many in the US felt over the election of Barack Obama had yet to become known in Syria.

I was convinced that the Obama hopefulness I felt would work its way soon into American foreign policy in the Middle East. That hopefulness colored my presentation at the 2009 conference. I offered a brief reflection on I John 3:17: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” I spoke of the sense of duty people of faith in the US feel toward the rest of the world and the conviction advanced by the UN’s Millennium Development Goals that if the richest share the

tinest portion of their wealth there will be more than enough. Implicit in the humanitarian and economic goals of the MDGs is a political change in the way countries deal with one another. It was my argument that the time for change was now clearly felt among people of faith in the US and that Barack Obama appeared more likely than anyone else in recent American history to do the things necessary to make change possible. Later during that 2009 visit I heard two cabinet ministers say that for the first time in a decade they felt the possibility of change in diplomatic relations for the better. It was a slight possibility, but it was something new in what had been a bleak time in Syrian-US relations. The US has yet to send an ambassador to Damascus.

The conferences organized by the Fatih, as comprehensive as they were, provided little opportunity for students and speakers to mix in conversation. Part of this was due to the format of the conferences which typically included seventy presenters arranged in panels of five or six with a moderator introducing and summing up each participant's presentation. The logistics of dealing with so many speakers made questions and discussion impracticable. At the time, and especially now, I felt that fewer presenters speaking more in depth along with time for discussion would have improved the conferences. In order to do this, however, the conferences would have had to be greatly limited in scope, even though the breadth of the conferences is also one of their strengths. (The broad, comprehensive nature of the conferences also provided participants such as myself an opportunity to speak.)

Instead, students and audiences had to assume the veracity and wisdom of the speakers without question. This reflects, in part, a dominant educational model in the Arab world set by Egypt's al-Azhar Univeristy, which has been the premier educational center of the Arab world

for more than a thousand years. Al-Azhar puts considerable emphasis upon memorization of texts and education by rote at the expense of critical thinking. I remember watching in stunned surprise as students on the primary Cairo campus of al-Azhar walked back and forth across the playing fields memorizing texts in order to do well in their courses. In my limited experience in Syria it appears as if this fortunately is not a model followed in public universities such as the Universities of Aleppo and Damascus. The influence of al-Azhar is, nevertheless, considerable as many of the Fatih's faculty were educated at al-Azhar. A degree from al-Azhar carries enormous weight and confers great prestige throughout the Muslim world.

A minor factor which contributed to the lack of open exchange between visiting speakers and students is the Western speakers' often poor Arabic and the student's hesitation to try out his English. This was a hurdle I encountered more than once at the Fatih when a student did attempt to engage me in discussion. Conversation can only go so far with limited vocabularies.

There are, however, two encounters with students that remain vivid in my mind. On my first visit to the Fatih, a student took me aside during a break and wanted to know why we in the US said "Hi" or "Hello" or "Good morning," or "Hey, how's it going?" when we meet one another. "Why," he asked, "such a secular greeting; why not something more like *Assalaam Alaykum* to acknowledge God's presence in our relationships with one another?" At the time I was flabbergasted and had to agree that our everyday greetings in the US generally are fairly bland and certainly not as gracious as greetings often heard on the Arab street.

I tried to explain that many Americans have no formal religious affiliation and do not attend regular worship. Even though our nation places a high value on religion, at times idealizing it, for the most part faith is a neatly compartmentalized unit of American society. My attempts to explain that the US values the separation of church and state only made conversation more difficult and the student left me shaking his head, convinced that Americans are practically infidels. It was a frustrating exchange on the part of the student, but a fruitful exchange on my part. Since that day I've tried to bring the language of my faith more into daily conversation with others. Looking back on the exchange, I realize it would have been fruitless to suggest to the the Fatih student that the Arab greeting "*Assalaam Alaykum*" is perhaps also as culturally conditioned as "Good morning" and may not have a religious significance for everyone in Syria or the Muslim world. Nevertheless, it was an important exchange for me, one of those small but valuable lessons in the importance of vocabulary in interfaith dialogue...as well as in most other areas of life.

Another exchange with a student (which I have also had in other Muslim countries) had to do with the Christian Scriptures, the Bible. The student was perplexed that Christians considered various translations of the Bible to be equally valid. "How," I was asked, "can an English Bible be the same as a Syriac Bible, or a Greek Bible? and which Bible is the real Bible, the real word of God?" This is another common, and considerable, stumbling block in interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Explaining that the Christian Scriptures are the Word of God, divinely inspired, but not the literal word of God as is the Qur'an is a difficult notion for the Muslim to comprehend; for he may well have made the assumption that Christians value and interpret the Bible the same way Muslims regard the Qur'an. Passages in the Qur'an which speak

of *tawrah* (Torah) and *injl* (the Christian Gospel) do lead one to believe that the three Scriptures have a common authority and weight, although the Qur'an is clearly understood to be the more complete, the ultimate Word of God, God's final revelation.²

If the Christian were to speak of Jesus as the Word of God, which is orthodox Christian belief, an entirely new theater of interfaith dialogue opens involving Christology and *shirk*, as understanding of Jesus' prophethood moves well beyond what is acceptable to the Muslim. Such conversations, as complex as they may be, are important and need to be encouraged if interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians is to be substantial, going beyond the level of polite respect and toleration. I'm grateful to the Fatih for being one of the settings in which I had these and similar conversations.

These are only two issues to have come up in my conversation with the Fatih students at the coffee table or standing in the street for a breath of fresh air. Similar conversations may happen anywhere people of faith come together; an environment which fosters such conversation needs to be encouraged. On one occasion at the Fatih such a conversation was worked into the conference schedule. In 2008 a group from Hartford Seminary was invited to sit around a table with the Fatih students between presentations. The conversation was informal with no faculty present other than a translator. Remarkably, during that brief hour only one student attempted to monopolize the discussion and he was silenced by other students who sought an opportunity to speak and ask questions of their American visitors. This brief session stands out among the most

² *Surah al-Ma'ida, ayat 44-48*, of the Qur'an speaks of the relationship between the Qur'an and *tawrah* and *injl*.

valuable I experienced at the Fatih. I believe it was also a fruitful session for many of the students, who clearly enjoyed the free exchange of ideas as much as I did.

In the end, students are always the best measure of an institution. After our 2005 visit to Damascus and meeting Shaykh Farfour an agreement was made between Hartford Seminary and the Fatih for an exchange of students. The Fatih sent seven students, all women, to Hartford Seminary for two years to enroll in the MA program, ultimately taking degrees in “Islamic Studies: Muslim-Christian Relations.” These women lived on the Hartford campus, maintaining a strong presence marked by more than *hijab*. They became active in community as well as seminary life and frequently livened class discussions by bringing their perspective into the conversation. The seminary has for many years hosted exchange students, primarily from Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa; this was the first time in recent memory more than two or three exchange students had come at one time from one country or one school. They became known affectionately as “the Syrians” on campus and other students watched with interest and sometimes amusement as the Syrians encountered and engaged American life. They also became goodwill ambassadors for not just the Fatih, but for Syria and Islam in general as they willingly spoke to community groups, churches and synagogues. The power of their presence at a time of poor diplomatic relations between the US and Syria should not be under-estimated. Almost all of these students have since returned to Damascus where they are teaching at the Fatih.

The moderate *da'wah* espoused by the Fatih is most likely a factor that made it possible for the Syrian students to enter as easily as they did into American life. With relatively little struggle and inconvenience they were able to integrate the practice of their faith into the rhythm

of American academic life -- at least that is how it appeared to their fellow students. The Syrians' Islam did not appear to suffer and they met the obligations of their faith without dramatic accommodation. The words of *ayah* 13 of *Sura al-Hujarat* (the theme of the Fatih's 2008 conference) bear witness to a world where differences among peoples are accepted and respected as God-given; these differences even become a basis for unity as nations and peoples vie to excel in righteousness. Those things that separate one another most in interfaith dialogue are inevitably the issues which can work to bring peoples of different faiths together. As attention is focused on the elements that make us distinctive -- so very unlike one another -- the unique gifts and blessings of our respective faith traditions may truly shine. Our strengths, rather than our weaknesses, may be the stronger foundation for fruitful and enduring interfaith dialogue that continues to respect the distinctive qualities of each faith.

Syria has played a remarkable role in the development of Christianity and should be better known in the Western Christian world. It was in Syria (Antioch) that the followers of Jesus were first known as Christians³. In Damascus St. Paul came to know Christianity and was prepared for his extraordinary missionary work. Antioch was one of the first two great philosophical centers of the Christian world. Aramaic, the language of Jesus, continues as the liturgical language of Syrian Christians in Seidnayya and Maalula. The Syrian countryside is dotted with ruins of ancient churches (especially in the area around Aleppo) as well as monasteries and churches that have continued to invite and shelter worshippers for centuries. In a few places, such as Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi, Christians and Muslims to this day worship side by side as they once did in the great basilica of John the Baptist, now the Umayyad Mosque, in

³ Acts of the Apostles 11:26

Damascus. Syria has a rich Christian history that I consider myself privileged to have glimpsed; it has helped inform and enrich my faith.

Making the journey across the highway from Bab Kisan to the Fatih is an important chapter in my spiritual journey. I count it a blessing to have had the opportunity to study Islam under the guidance of an exceptional faculty. Opportunities to bring those academic studies to life by travel to Muslim countries and being welcomed into various Muslim communities are, however, far greater blessings. Texts and lectures take on a vibrancy the classroom cannot provide when one is welcomed into another's community. Sharing in an *iftar* overlooking the Umayyad mosque or drinking tea with a Palestinian family in a refugee camp -- so much in the Muslim world revolves around food -- one sees more deeply and learns so much more. The classroom comes to life in a particularly rich way. I have known this fullness in a handful of places around the world, as well as in my own neighborhood in Hartford, Connecticut.

The Fatih has been one of those places where my studies of Islam have been broadened and taken on a satisfying new depth. I am particularly grateful to Shaykh Farfour and the Fatih for the graciousness of their welcome and breadth of their *da'wah*, which has gone beyond the courtesies of hospitality to give me a glimpse of another faith tradition which no longer seems impossibly exotic, but rather deeply welcoming.

Chapter 22

STORY OF OVERSEAS STUDENT IN AN ATTEMPT TO KNOW THE OTHER

Sabrina Aloukla

I was still doing my diploma exams at al-Fatih Islamic Institute when I had to make a decision of going to the U.S. to do my M.A. in Islamic studies and Christian-Muslim relations there. It was not easy to take such a decision, because I had poor English, and all I knew about that country, at that time, was . in addition to what I used to see in American movies- its crazy policy in many places around the world, like Afghanistan and Iraq, and its blind support to what is so called “the state of Israel.” Moreover, I had heard about the bad treatments of Muslims in the U.S. after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Therefore, things were not so much encouraging.

It might be proper here- before I talk about my experience in America- to give a glimpse of my previous educational and professional background. I graduated from a two-year institute for training teachers in 1994. After I worked as a teacher of arts for a few years in secondary and high schools in Damascus, I thought that the best place to continue my Islamic studies was the Fatih Islamic Institute since it had a good reputation in Damascus for teaching the genuine and moderate Islamic scholarship. Nevertheless, because this institute was not accredited in Syria, I had to go- after three-year study at al-Fatih- to Egypt to do the fourth year exams and get my B.A. degree in Islamic studies from al-Azhar University in Cairo in 2004. After that, I did a two-year diploma at the Fatih in Islamic studies, but, this time, my study was in English. The English

postgraduate department at the Fatih was a novelty, thus, the view of my future studies was not quite clear to me. Before I even finished my final exams, however, I was told that my institute had made a contract of exchanging students with Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, U.S. This pioneering initiative was a fruit of a meeting between the Vice President of the Fatih Islamic Institute, Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour, and Dr. Ibrahim Abu Rabi', now former professor of Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary, in which they agreed on the importance of sending students from the Islamic world- especially from the Middle East- to study abroad and get acquainted with the Western style of education. As a result, seven female students were in the vanguard, and I was one of them. A couple of months later, a committee from the Seminary came to Damascus to interview all seven of us, and the president of the Seminary, Heidi Hadsell, said something about the necessity of being open minded because we were going to hear and learn things at the Seminary that we had not been used to previously. With very little knowledge about the missionary history of the Seminary in my mind, her words increased my worries and fears.

Another problem we had to face at that time was that many Muslim scholars of Damascus were against our travel to the U.S. as women without a male chaperon (*mahram*) to travel with us. Some expressed their disapproval by taking every chance to speak publicly about the crime that the Fatih Institute was committing, while others preferred to give a kind advice directly to us, reminding us that it was a sin in Islam for a woman to travel with no male close relative or husband with her, in addition to the potential danger that we were going to face in America, the country of crimes as seen by many. We were actually aware of this juridical opinion of most Muslim scholars throughout Islamic history, but Shaykh Farfour gave us a *fatwa* to travel as a group of

women for seeking knowledge. In his *fatwa*, he depended on another opinion of a Muslim scholar who allows the woman to travel to pilgrimage with a group of trustworthy women. Through this process, we experienced the meaning of a saying attributed to Prophet Muhammad: “disagreement among my *ummah* (nation) is a mercy.”

After a long process of papers and applications, the lucky day came, and we traveled to the United States. We were received at the airport by Professor Abu Rabi’ and the admissions and student support manager at the Seminary. The second day, we were invited to have lunch with the president of the Seminary and some professors at Abu-Rabi’s house. The first surprising thing to me was the informality between students and their professors there. It was very normal to call them by first name, visit their houses, and even go with them for grocery shopping, the thing that we had not been used to in our country where the relations between students and professors are formal in general. However, I was told later by some American friends that it was not also the case in all American universities. Hartford Seminary was special in this matter, so to speak. The reason might be that the Seminary was a small institute which had relatively a small number of students, especially the international students in campus. This matter made it more likely as a family.

Just three days after we arrived, we had to attend classes. Our first day started in the Seminary’s chapel. Although I had seen a Christian service of worship several times on TV, it was my first-hand experience. Professors, staff and students from the three Abrahamic faiths; Christianity, Judaism and Islam, used to attend this service on Monday mornings. I was a little worried and careful not to recite the parts of the service that

referred to Jesus as God or son of God which contradicted completely my own faith and belief. Some leaders of the service, however, tried to avoid mentioning this matter in respect to others from other faiths. After the service, we were welcomed by most of the attendees. A bearded man in his fifties came close to us, welcomed us nicely, asked about our names and tried to memorize them at once, that is to say, he was over nice with us. At the beginning, I thought, because of his appearance, he was a Muslim, but when he turned around, we saw him wearing a skullcap (yarmulke/kipah), and we knew he was a Jew. He was the first Jew I had ever met in my life.¹ Many thoughts came to my mind. Although I knew that Judaism is something different from Zionism, and we, Muslims, had no problem with Judaism as a religion, I could not resist thinking about the Palestinian people who were being killed every day in Palestine under the name of religion.

Later we had an orientation session in which the history of both Hartford and the Seminary was explained to us. We were told that the Seminary started as a place for training ministerial leadership for the churches. In 1889 the Seminary's Board of Trustees voted unanimously to admit female students, and this made it the first Seminary in America to open its doors to women. In 1911 the Seminary organized the Hartford School of Missions, incorporating in it the missionary training that had long been growing within its own program. Responding to changing needs, by 1972 the Seminary included Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim relations in its program. In 1990, the Seminary “became the first nondenominational theological institution in North America

¹ Actually, he was the second one. The admissions manager who received us at the airport was Jewish too, but I did not know that at the time.

to name a female president. The next year marked another ‘first’; Hartford Seminary named a Muslim to its core faculty.”²

A meeting with our academic advisors followed. They had to explain to us the credits system about which we had almost known nothing. At the same meeting, we had to choose three courses that we were going to study at our first semester. The previous plan with the Seminary was to take just one course for credits and audit two other courses until we become familiar with the new way of education, but we discovered that our student visa required that we take three courses for credits per semester. I did not know if the Seminary had been aware of this fact, but three courses at the first semester were really a heavy load on us. The language barrier played its role in slowing my work at the beginning, and the incomplete work of the first semester affected the speed of my work in the following semesters.

However, if I am to describe the Western style of education in general as I experienced it, I will say that it is quite different from the way I used to in my country. At the Seminary, the education procedure was based mainly on developing the students skills of reading, writing and discussion as each student had to read specific amount of readings (about 100 pages a week for each course), write papers about them, and discuss them with the professor and the other students in the class, while the student in Syria is almost a recipient of information from the professors, and his/her knowledge is tested at the end of the year through exams with some writings required during the course term. Each of the two ways has its positives and negatives. For example, concentration on

² <http://www.hartsem.edu/about/history.htm>

having students do presentations in the Western style of education has its important role in building up the student's character and self-confidence. Students would be able - because they start doing presentations in their early stages- to present themselves and their ideas and thoughts confidently after graduation, while this aspect is almost missed in the Syrian education in general unless students work on themselves individually. Nevertheless, authenticity is the basic characteristic of Islamic study in Syria; there is no religious text, saying, or juridical opinion accepted in the academic studies unless its source is well-known and authentic and all people participated in transmitting it are authentic and trustworthy. On the other hand, personal opinions and experiences are effective factors in the West in defining some crucial religious issues and figures. For example, all Muslims agree on the basics of the Islamic faith while Jesus, the foundation of the Christian faith, is being interpreted in the West according to people's experiences; feminists would describe him as a female figure, and blacks would portray him as a black and oppressed man. Again I will say that I am writing according to my own limited experience. However, the two years that I spent at the Seminary were a real shift in my academic life as well as my years at the Fatih Islamic Institute.

Many people, Muslims and non-Muslims, were surprised to know that we were going to do our M.A. in Islamic studies in a Christian school and in a country with a Christian majority population like the United States, and we were often asked about the reason for not choosing an Islamic country to do our studies in. Actually those people would have been right in their wonder if our aim was to study **Islam** in the States, but we just came for an otherwise purpose. While doing our diploma at the Fatih Islamic

Institute we were studying Islamic courses in English, and our aim at that time was to be able to introduce the true Islam to others and correct the misunderstandings and misconceptions they had in their minds about it in an international language. Therefore, we had to improve our English and, at the same time, learn about the mentality, culture and way of education of the others in order to find the best way to address them. Thus, the plan of our future studies was to go to an English speaking country to do our studies there. We thought about several choices such as Malaysia, which was an Islamic country, or England, where the male students of the Fatih Islamic Institute had been sent to do their M.A. degree. However, after the contract of my institute with Hartford Seminary, the U.S. became the predominant choice and most serious one.

Throughout our study at the Seminary, we, as well as our faith and tradition were respected. Professors used to do the breaks at the time of our prayers, we were given time to break our fast during the month of Ramadan, *halal* food was served in meetings and international lunches, we got the president's permission to do Friday prayer in the Chapel, and the day of 'Eid al-Fitr, a major Islamic day, was a holiday for all at the Seminary. We appreciated so much this religious freedom that we were given in campus because we knew that many Muslims were not able to have the same freedom in many Muslim countries or in countries with Muslim majority population. Ironically, one Turkish friend told me that she had come to study at the Seminary "in the States" because she had not been allowed to wear her headscarf at school in Turkey which was supposedly a Muslim country. Moreover, we felt that we always were the focus of attention. Whenever we attended classes, professors and students wanted to hear

specifically from us. Some people around us had assumptions and ideas about Muslim women in their minds, and they wanted to confirm or make sure of these ideas by directing questions to us. Sometimes we found these questions funny; why do you wear white scarves and dark coats? Do you take off your scarf when you take a shower? Do you have dating? To me, the funniest question came from a Pakistani student who asked me about my feeling when I talk to men. I wanted to laugh. He thought it was my first time to interact with men. I explained to him that I had worked with men for most of my life, I had taught teenager boys for six years, I had had male classmates and colleagues at school and I had shared my office with my male assistant for five years. So it was normal for me to interact with men according to Islamic norms, that is, modesty in dress and way of talking.

We were invited many times to talk in Churches, colleges and high schools. The topics of our presentations would be mostly either about our country or about Muslim women. We received many political questions including questions about Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This disturbed me at the beginning because I had not ever been interested in politics, but I got used to these questions later. We were always seen and treated as a group. We were sometimes called by friends as “the Syrian gang” or “the Syrian mafia.” Being women was a good advantage for engaging in events and conversations since many people were curious to know about Muslim women. Nevertheless, we felt ourselves, most of the time, in a defensive position. We would always have to answer questions and allusions about Islam and terrorism, the oppression of women in Islam, the backwardness of Islamic world, and other misunderstood topics. These questions made

me aware of how much Westerners were affected by their media. Many times, however, I preferred to keep silent. It was better in my opinion to keep silent than to say something, out of ignorance or halting language, that may cause harm or misunderstanding to Islam. I wanted to make sure of any information about Islam before I say it. This was the same way I thought in before doing anything because of the feeling of a heavy burden of responsibility placed on me. I was completely convinced that we, the Muslim students at the Seminary, were the representatives of Islam to many around us, to whom we might be the only Muslims they had ever met. Therefore, these people would judge Islam according to our behavior and words, and this made me feel this great responsibility.

As mentioned previously, the major of my study at the Seminary was the relations between the followers of different religions, that is to say, interfaith dialogue, particularly the Christian-Muslim dialogue. I always wondered, however, if this dialogue was applicable outside the walls of the Seminary, in the world of reality, and the answer would come to me sometimes- through few incidents- that it was not. One incident, as an example, would be our visit to a synagogue as a part of an interfaith course that four of our Syrian group were taking. This visit ended up by us crying while leaving the synagogue. Our course was titled “BAP” or “Building Abrahamic Partnership,” and it was meant to prepare a kind of religious leadership grounded in a particular tradition and, at the same time, able to interact effectively with other faith communities. It was an intensive eight-day program with similar number of students from each of the three Abrahamic faiths. We had to visit a mosque, synagogue and church as part of the program, and the visit to the synagogue was the last one. We had two choices to go to; a

reform synagogue or an orthodox synagogue. We preferred to go to the reform one since the worship was in English there, while it was in Hebrew in the other synagogue. However, we had to go after the service to the orthodox synagogue to attend the discussion meeting with the rabbi and his congregation. While answering a question from a Jewish student about the indigenous people of Palestine and their right in the land, the rabbi went angry, his face went red, declared that he was a Zionist, and said that the Jews had the right in that land even if it was not gained but with bloodshed. Here was the first shock to us. We had never expected to hear such statements from a clergy man in a previously prepared interfaith meeting. The rabbi's wife also got angry and shouted at our Jewish professor who tried to raise a point that the rabbi had ascribed a tincture of violence on the Torah. One of us stood up and started explaining that she as a Muslim woman, regardless the political issues, was dreaming to pray at al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem at least once in her lifetime, but she was not allowed to. Here, another person from the congregation stood up and started screaming: "Shalom... Shalom... Shalom..." He continued to say that the Palestinians had their full human rights in Israel, and they had being protected by Jews to do their prayers in al-Aqsa mosque, and, because of that, they did not like to leave Israel and go to any Muslim country where they would not have such privileges. He added that Muslims had about 52 countries, so it was not a big deal if they lost one of them. Our friend raised her hand again to speak, but they would not let her. We could do nothing at that time but leaving the synagogue trying uselessly to fight back tears of frustration and disappointment. This was our worst experience during our stay in the U.S. and it shook my belief in a constructive and productive dialogue. Although we received consolations and apologies from our Jewish professor and the

Christian and Jewish students of the course, we expected an official action from the Seminary, at least a letter or statement in which they explain their attitude about what had happened. Unfortunately, nothing of that happened, and, as far as I know, students of BAP still go- after two years now - to the same synagogue and meet the same rabbi and congregation.

Such incidents would probably have had a negative impact on my attitude towards Jews and enforced the notion of the “evil nature” of Jews [which I have not believed in] in my mind if I had not met members of a group of people called “We Refuse to be Enemies” which includes Jews, Christians, and Muslims work together to achieve just peace. Jewish members of the group were against policies of the Israeli government that undermine the cause of peace and contradict Jewish principles of justice. They would organize- with the other members of the group- lectures, meetings, and demonstrations in order to condemn the Israeli occupation of Palestine and its inhumane practices against Palestinian.

What I liked the most at the Seminary was the international flavor in it. I attended some classes with students from thirteen nationalities or more; American, Indonesian, Singaporean, Bulgarian, Nigerian, Burkinabe, Turkish, Ghanaian, Lebanese, Egyptian, Pakistani, Burmese, Iranian, Bosnian, and Syrian. We also used to have international lunches and meetings organized by McDonald center for the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations at least once a month. Therefore, being at the Seminary did not open to me just the door to know about the American culture and education only;

rather, it did also open me the door to learn about different cultures, religions and people from all over the world, that is, cultural dialogue.

Throughout our stay in the United States, we tried to adapt ourselves to the American environment and culture as long as it did not contradict the Islamic instructions, but unfortunately few people around us expressed, either in words or acts, that changes in our characters or even in the colors of our dress were great achievements for them (the West) to liberate us from our backward background. This might be a result of that some people in the West still have in mind this picture of Middle Eastern people in some Hollywood movies as uncivilized people who live in tents and ride camels. However, I see that some changes are natural, if not necessary sometimes, to eliminate or at least decrease the feeling of strangeness of a foreign person, but such changes would never be at the expense of my faith and dignity. I would never, for instance, drink wine, eat pork, or take off my scarf to be more accepted by people around me.

We spent almost two years doing our Master at the Seminary. At the beginning- because the missionary history of the Seminary- we suspected the intentions of people around us, and we interpreted their kind actions and words as attempts to make us have doubts about our faith, or to convert us to Christianity. However, with the passage of time, these suspicions gradually disappeared, and we could make real friendships with others from other faiths. Nevertheless, there was something happened at the end of our stay in America that made us a bit confused. About one month before we left the United States, we were having dinner in a restaurant when the waiter approached us and asked if we were the Syrian group that everybody had been talking about (he knew that from our

Islamic way of dress). He introduced himself to us as a newly converted Muslim from Christianity. Then he asked if there were contradictions in the Qura'n. Our answer was negative. After that, he told us that two professors from the Seminary had talked to him the other day, and tried to convince him that his conversion was a wrong thing to do. They told him that the Qura'n was full of contradictions, and told him that these had been our words. It disturbed us very much to know that they had put words in our mouth, and these words were never ours. Although the waiter gave us a full description for the two professors, we were not sure if his story was true or not. We did not have time to verify the story, but I will not deny that it had a negative trace in my mind.

Throughout reading this article, one might think that I have something in my mind against Christian missionaries. This is not true. I believe that if some people are totally convinced that their faith is the truth and the only way of salvation, they would be selfish and egocentric if they keep it just for themselves and do not invite others to believe in it. I might, however, have problem with some ways used to convert people. The same thing would work for the Islamic missionary (*da'wah*). Allah says in the Qur'an: "Invite (all) to the way of Thy Lord with wisdom and preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and Most gracious: for Thy knoweth best, who have strayed from His path, and who receive guidance" (16:125). So inviting people to God should be in the best way and with wisdom, and any other ways for *da'wah* would be wrong.

One of the best experiences I had during my stay in the U.S. was my voluntary work at Yale Divinity School. The "Common Word" conference and workshop held at Yale was a great chance to see in practice what I had learned at the Seminary about

interfaith dialogue. This conference came as a response to an open letter titled “*A Common Word between Us and You*” sent on October 13th, 2007, by 138 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals from every denomination and school of thought in Islam to the leaders of all the world’s churches and to all Christians everywhere. In this letter, the Muslim leaders expressed the love of God and the love of neighbor as the common ground between the two faiths, Islam and Christianity. Many Christian leaders welcomed this Muslim initiative, and Yale conference was one of several interfaith conferences and seminars between scholars from the two faiths that followed later.

Since there were many Arab Muslim and Christian scholars invited to the conference, our work was mostly to do all the translations into Arabic that facilitate their participation and accommodation during the conference time. These translations would include the biographies of the participants, schedules, food menus, and signs. We would also receive guests at the hotel, and welcome those who did not speak English. To do all this work at time, we had to be at Yale ten days before the conference started, and we worked closely with Christian staff and volunteers. Working together to make the conference successful and to fulfill its noble goal which was to bridge the gaps between the followers of different faiths was an important practical experience to me and the rest of my group since we were leaving the States only few months later.

After two years of exploring a completely new world to me, I came back home to Syria carrying with me new knowledge and vision to the world around me. I have learned from all my experiences at the U.S. whether they were good or bad. I feel myself sort of different from people around me who have not experienced the same things that I

experienced. I work now for the Fatih Islamic Institute as an academic researcher and a lecturer, and I have returned back to my work as a teacher of arts. I still look with a great ambition to my future. I am thinking seriously to pursue a Ph.D. degree, but I am looking forward to doing it in a special place where I can get- in addition to the degree and knowledge- great experiences from which I can learn. I hope that I can put my knowledge and these experiences in the service of my faith and all people whatever their faith might be.

Chapter 23

The Journey that Changed My Life

Omama Diab

This chapter will reflect on my story with the Fatih Islamic Institute and Hartford Seminary. There might be a kind of contradiction between the two places, but I can say that both of them are religious institutions established to where people can get their knowledge. Covering the whole experience over roughly eight years in the following few pages will be impossible. However, my utmost concern is to share with the reader some remarkable incidents of my lifetime during that period, hoping this piece of information would be interesting and helpful.

Studying at the Fatih institute was like achieving a dream of my life. Among the rigid family and social beliefs that I suffer from is to evaluate people according to their careers concerning certain jobs in scientific fields as the best while others are useless. I wished to prove that to be successful in life does not mean to be what people want you to be. A person should prove him/herself in any field that he/she will serve humanity through.

When I thought to join institute, I was thinking about getting a B. A. in Islamic Shari'ah. Coincidentally, my uncle told me that the Fatih Islamic Institute had opened a branch for Post-Graduate Islamic studies in English for males the year before, and they would do the same for females the recent year. Upon knowing that, I decided to continue in post-graduate studies rather than taking another B. A. beside the one that I had in English literature. After having an interview, oral and written tests, I was accepted as one of the only three premier female students in the Islamic studies in English. I still remember how I was excited when the students. coordinator

called me saying that I am accepted. With the beginning of the first year, one student left, while three others joined the group. After that we studied two preparatory years and then we got the diploma. Some courses were in Arabic and others in English. We were supposed to pursue our study abroad in England or Spain, but unfortunately, no single decision was made about our future. Therefore, my colleagues and I had to spend a whole year waiting for a certain resolution.

Unexpectedly, it was decided that we had to attend an intensive course for one more year practicing English. However, it added a lot to our knowledge and it was a privilege of having converted Muslim teachers who were native English speakers, and who helped us improve our English skills. They introduced us to the western societies and the prevailing theories there. We could discuss contemporary issues about Islam and the difficulties which Muslims face in the West. At the same time, we could learn from them how to deal with some issues concerning interfaith dialogue and Christian-Muslim Relations. They also originated us to the modern methods of objective teaching and developing the students' skills through promoting hot topics for discussion, going on field trips, giving speeches and writing reflections. Even though my colleagues were upset at the beginning, but they all agreed on that it year was the best and most interesting one.

Studying at the Fatih Islamic Institute was not a piece of cake. I had to overcome many impediments. First, attending classes for six hours a day after teaching was very stressful. I was occupying a full time job as an English teacher at a middle school in Damascus. Therefore, I had to teach everyday for certain hours, I had to compromise between my work and my study. This in turn forced me to quit my social life and dedicate my entire time for teaching and attending classes.

Secondly, at the beginning of the first preliminary year, and after ten years of his struggle with cancer my dad health got worse and he passed away. His death caused a tragic shock to the entire family. My mother, sister and brother got sick one after another and I had to take care of them along with members of the family. I could not attend my courses regularly or concentrate on my study. Therefore, I was not nominated for taking the final exam even though I applied a petition to Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour, the vice rector of the Fatih Islamic Institute, to look into my conditions, but my efforts were in vain. Unluckily, I had to wait to take the second intensive exam and submit fourteen tests during two weeks, but fortunately I passed that trial with success.

Thirdly, being the first female students in this field we had to be so patient and tolerate the ambiguity. We were supposed to travel abroad after two years of study, but the period was extended to three and then another four years while everything was just words and promises. At the end of these years nothing was decided yet and they forced us to take exams though we were told that we do not have to at the beginning of that year. The ambiguity and ill-planning that we had to go through made most of my friends give up and refuse to continue with the institute. I submit the exam along with half of my friends but still the decision to go to United States was made so late.

Fulfilling the dream of study abroad seemed unachievable goal. But after five years of study and waiting, the long aspired day came. In 2006, we learned that some students would be sent to obtain their master degree from Hartford Seminary. The news was assured by some procedures and by the visit that the president of the Seminary made to Syria with a professor, a board-member and a student from the Seminary. Along with other six women, one of them only was from my premier colleagues, we started the application process but the image was not completely clear.

The application process was another challenge. When we applied to the visa at the American embassy in Damascus, we did not expect to get it easily. The previous Administration under the reign of George W. Bush, registered our country on the black list as one of the axis of evil. The consulate made fun of my friend when she said that she was going to do her master in Islamic studies in the USA. This indicated nothing but the ignorance that people have and that we have to wipe out of their minds.

Like any person who travels to a foreign country, when I first came to USA I had to experience a culture shock, relating to the environmental social, educational and financial differences. It was the first time for me to travel far away from home. Once I stepped out of JFK airport, I felt that there was no way back and it sounded the coldest and loneliest night in my life. The Syrian nationality was the reason behind keeping me and my friends for hours in the investigation room at the airport. I felt as if I was suspected with crimes concerning my nationality and my religious identity. From the first time I realized that I decided to prove myself to the American society as a human being who has the right to be treated equally to any other nationality in the world.

Everything at JFK was weird. The only face I could recognize was that of Professor Ibrahim Abu Rabi, who was the mediator between The Fatih Islamic Institute and the Seminary and visited Damascus with the Seminary delegation. He and the admission manager at the Seminary drove me and my friends in their cars to 90 Sherman Street in Hartford, Connecticut where we spent the period of our study. When we arrived at the campus after Friday midnight, January 26, 2007, we were so exhausted after two days of travel. Each one of us took her room-key and went to bed directly. The next day we had lunch with the president and some other faculties and

students from the Seminary at Dr. Abu Rabi's house and then we went grocery shopping. We spent Sunday at home putting things in order and relaxing. On Monday we started our first day by a service at the chapel in the Seminary then we had two meetings. The first one was with our advisor and the second was with the students' admission about living on the campus. We returned home and discussed what courses to take and how to fill in the core courses and free choices form. I had no idea about the system of study there or what a Seminary means, but little by little things started to be clearer and easier for me. The next day I had to attend my first class which was about Islam and modernity. We bought our books and started to be busy in our study through readings and writing reflections, book reviews and final papers for each class. We also have to give presentations and participate in class discussions. All these activities were accounted as parts of the final grade of the courses, the thing which we did not have in our country before.

Usually, the Seminary initiates the new academic year with orientation sessions through which the new students are introduced to each other and learn about the staff, faculty, professor and the policy of the school. In our case, we had the orientation after we had spent two semesters in the Seminary. They offered us with all the information needed for our safety and security. They told us how to live on campus, where to go shopping, what to do in emergencies and even how to throw the garbage.

I have to admit that we were so excited for the idea of studying in America, but the reality was something different from the expectations. In fact, we suffered a lot during the first six month, though travelling as a group was much easier. The housing system there was completely different from that in Syria. Houses there are made of wood or stones while in Syria there are building made of cement and iron

which made it very hot in summer and so cold in winter. This in turn affects the clothing habits of people. Dressing up with heavy clothes outdoors and light clothes indoors in winter was one of the difficulties that took me some time to adapt with.

Taking classes in English was not hard for me since my Bachelor degree was in English literature, but the system of study in the States is completely different from Syria. We used to memorize, study what professors give in lectures and do exams. Though students in Syria have seminar papers and write analysis, but they are evaluated by tests and marks not by grades.

My previous study made me familiar with some theological, social, historical, religious and other facts about the West. For instance, through my study for Hawthorn's novel, "Walden" and his call for resorting back to nature, I learned about the American background. There is an urgent demand now in the American societies to turn back to natural food represented by the markets that sell organic stuff. I also read "the Scarlet Letter" that introduced me to Catholic beliefs about the patriarchal societies which was opposed by the Protestantism and the feminism in both their rebellion against the religious and social authorities.

In addition, it was not the first time for me to deal with Christians or Jews. I was born and raised up in Syria, the cradle of most heavenly religions. I also met many friends, neighbors or coworkers who happened to be Christians. My mother used to buy wool for knitting from a Jewish shopkeeper, but that guy left to Palestine in the eighties with most of the Syrian Jews as a response to the Israeli invitation for the Jews all over the world to inhabit the settlements in the Occupied territories.

However, things were different in Hartford. I had thought that Islamic Studies will focus on Islam only, but what I found was completely different from my expectations. By taking courses about Christianity and Judaism, I knew that the

Seminary is not specified for the study of Islam as much as of the religious studies and interfaith dialogue. It is a good place for building healthy relationships among people of different faiths with regard to a very important condition; any fruitful relationship must be built on justice and mutual respect, cooperation, understanding and love.

Living in the States in general for two years and a half enriched my life experiences. It developed my English skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing. It also, helped me to witness the daily life of the American culture. I had heard that oil is very important for American people, but when I went there I realized why their life entirely affected by oil which is the reason behind most of the wars launched by different American administrations. I believe that the design of the cities there made them spend most of their life driving long distances everyday to go to work or school, attend a social occasion, religious service or go shopping. Now I consider myself tremendously, improved in my understanding for the American mentality and their attitude toward the problems of the world and especially the Middle East.

It was the first time for me to live overseas, in a society where Muslims compose a minority. I was curious to watch a documentary series entitled, “A Journey with Shaykh Hamza Yusyf” which took place in the United States. While watching that program, it never came to my mind that I would meet that guy after two years in New Jersey. I had heard about Muslims communities and organizations in the West but to live in these communities was unexpected and a long aspired dream. It was so hard to spend the fasting month of Ramadan and the celebration of the Eid al-Fitr and al-Adha away from our families. We tried to imitate the same atmosphere of our Islamic culture in order to create the Islamic spirit that we used to have at home. We

made some traditional desserts and Arabic coffee that we usually serve at our Eid and gathered with people to our or their houses.

Muslims in the West usually establish organizations that hold annual or periodical conventions, conferences and activities. In these conventions lectures, speeches, banquets, panels of discussions are opened and bazaars are open to public who come from different parts of the countries. For example, in the United States the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) is the largest organization in the States and lead by a very famous converted woman to Islam She was one of my professors at the Seminary and she was chosen to attend the convocation that was held when Obama became a president.

ISNA Annual Convention and Regional conferences are tools for bringing together people of different backgrounds so that they can share ideas, create alliances, and network with others. These conferences and events are held throughout the year on various topics.¹

The second largest organization in the states is the Islamic Coalition of North America (ICNA). I was fortunate to attend three annual conferences for ICNA where I met most of the people I knew in Hartford or watched on TV satellite channels. I also met an American math professor, who is converted to Islam, Jeffrey Lang. I had known him through his writings which my sister used to read the Arabic translations of them.

There are smaller groups that are constructed by Muslims according to regional communities in each state, like MCC (Muslim Coalition of Connecticut) and CAIR. These groups most concern is how Muslims should live in the West and deal with the problems that face them as a minority.

¹<http://www.isna.net/conferences.aspx>, (10/12/09).

The Muslim Coalition of Connecticut, (MCCT), is a nonprofit organization that brings together Muslims in Connecticut to provide an understanding of Islam and Muslims through education and outreach. MCCT was formed to seek unity within the Muslim community in Connecticut and through unified efforts provide much needed social support services in the community, foster youth leadership and provide an accurate portrayal of Islam through our works.² I personally participated in most of the activities of MCC through knowing its president, who was careful to invite me and my friends for interfaith banquets and dialogues in mosques and churches.

"We Refuse to Be Enemies" is an example of a small group that was established by Christians and Muslims and then joined by Jews who are seeking to build good relations among people of faiths. I consider myself honored to know these people and have a sincere friend who helped me and my Syrian friends a lot whenever we needed help. "We Refuse to Be Enemies" Coalition came about as a response to the escalating violence in Israel and Palestine. They describe themselves as a "group of people who is working to bridge the perceived gap between Jews and Muslims and to help create a peaceful world, with a focus on Palestine/Israel"³.

Elizabeth Arohson is another member of "We Refuse to Be Enemies" and an anti-Zionist Jewish. The first time I saw her, she was wearing the Palestinian scarf (kofieh) during an invitation we had at Central Connecticut State University. Elizabeth, the professor of Social studies at the University, asked me and my friends to meet with her students and talk about our experience in the States. We had to answer the students' questions about Islamic and the Middle Eastern issues. For my surprise, she encouraged them not to trust their government and Media. I remembered

² <http://www.muslimcoalitionct.org>,(10/12/09).

³ As mentioned in one of the emails I receive from them.

her words when she addressed her students by saying, "Here are Muslim women, wearing hijab from Syria. Look at them! Are they putting any bombing belt on? Do you believe that they are terrorists? Bush is our president but he works for us."

Coincidentally, our visit to CCSU was a day after the house speaker, Nancy Pelosi's visit to Damascus, which was against Bush's attitude toward Syria, and we had read that in the local news paper while we were rounding in the hall of the university. Another exciting thing during that lunch was our meeting with Norton Mezvinsky, a Jewish professor of history in CCSU.⁴ We sat at the table, listening to his interesting conversation about his visit that he recently had made to Damascus and his meeting with the Syrian president, Bashar al-Asad. It was obvious through his speech how he admired the charisma of our president and the Syrian attitudes toward peace in the Middle East and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

I admired Elizabeth's attitude in the "Tree of Life" annual Conference which was held in a church in New England. She attacked the state of Israel after an argument she had with a rabbi who was trying to twist the truth. Suddenly, her face blushed into red and shouted, "I am a Jewish and I am a daughter of a rabbi. I do not believe that God has ordered my people to kill the Palestinians, demolishing their houses and kicking them out of their lands to build the Kingdom of God." This woman along with others like her, have changed my view toward people and life. I met her in many occasions and she came to my graduation. Every time I met her she gave me a big hug and proved to be a role model of a wise and fair human being who sides with the truth even if it was against her people.

⁴ For more information see the Wikipedia.

In this regard, I would like to mention a group of Orthodox Jews who are called "Natori Karta." These people are united against Zionism and dedicate themselves to the Torah teachings. I saw rabbis of this group through a demonstration in Washington D.C. to stop the war and end violence in Palestine. I did not expect that the man, Stanly Hiller, who organized and led the bus trip from Connecticut, was Jewish. He has worked for peace in the Middle East for over 25 years. I met him in many events and he invited me to attend several activities in Connecticut and other states as well. A person cannot tell that Stanly might is a Jewish and an activist in "Middle East Crisis Committee," when s/he sees his zeal and persistence on raising the Palestinian issue into every panel of discussion he attends. He has an intimate friend who is a Palestinian activist and professor, and they work together as one team. Once, they organized a trip from Connecticut to Ohio, in the Mid-West, where I went with my Syrian friends and students of other university, to attend a conference to end the War in Iraq and Afghanistan. There were people from many parts of the States and this man insisted on adding the Palestinian issue into the table of discussion, demanding the delegation to raise this issue into voting.

Being involved in interfaith dialogue and going to Hartford Seminary enabled us to go to different places in the States. We went with the Seminary to the United Nations building in New York. We visited the Amish county in Pennsylvania. What surprised me was that how people can keep their traditions and customs in one of the most civilized countries and still ride horses and carriages in the street before cars. We, Muslims, are criticized of being anti-modernity if we want to keep our traditions. Lots of Americans thought that Arabs still live in tents and ride camels while they cannot say any negative word about the Amish, who do not use electricity, cars,

machines or any other feature of modern age. When I saw them I imagined myself living in the 18th century.

We talked with a young woman whose father is an Amish while she and her mother, who escaped to Michigan and married to another man, are not anymore. She has a laptop and she uses the internet but when she goes to her father's house she feels herself out of the world because she loses contact with the world. She talked how she went to Japan, which considered by her people as something wrong. She explained the Amish belief by not going away home so they lose the way back home.” When she said that, it made sense to me and I felt a little bit of sorrow. Losing the way back home means the struggle that people live in when they travel abroad. First they have to suffer a culture shock when they travel abroad. Then when they want to go back home they need enough time to readjust themselves to their life back in their homelands, which is called by some "cultural re-entry." As one woman told me when you travel you became citizen of the world and you cannot find yourself in one place anymore.

I also had the chance to live with American people and share them their private life, religious services, culture and habits. I would like to talk about the friendship that grew between me and a minister from Long Island and a student at the Seminary, which I consider a successful example of Christian-Muslim relations. In January 2009, two American women, Ann and Claudia, came and stayed with me in the house before my friends left home. My friends were busy packing, so we did not have much time to socialize with the two ladies except for some conversation with tea and herbs in some evenings. On the day my friends left, Ann came back home and found me crying. She could not go up to her room without showing her sympathy.

Before Ann and Claudia went back home, we exchanged souvenirs and email addresses.

Two weeks later, I received an email from Ann telling that her husband wanted to thank me for my hospitality and inviting me and my Syrian friend for lunch and they left it for me to choose the place. Ann and her husband, Bob came on the time we agreed on before and we went. I told them about a Middle Eastern restaurant owned by a Syrian and I know some people who work there. I can't forget how her husband was looking at me and my friend with high estimation. It was the first time for both of them to taste Syrian food. They were so excited and she asked her husband, Bob who was in his seventies, if he had met or think to meet a Muslim woman in his life and his answer was no.

Later on, Ann emailed me inviting me to celebrate Easter at her house. One Saturday morning, she came, picked me up and drove me to the port in New England then we got onto a ferry to Orient, her town, in Long Island in New York State where her husband, Bob was waiting for us. She showed me my room upstairs and then we all had a simple lunch. Later we went shopping and she bought some fish and halal⁵ food for dinner. The next morning, we woke up at dawn and I performed my prayer and we went for the sunrise service by the sea. It was the first Easter I had ever attended in my life and it reminded me with the Islamic tradition, when Muslims wake up early and go to pray on the first day of Celebration/ Eid. To be mentioned here, there are two celebrations/Eids that Muslims have in a year: one at the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting and the other at the end of pilgrimage/hajj, the journey that every Muslim wish to perform to the Holy Lands in the Saudi Arabia.

⁵ Halal: food that Muslims should eat according to the Islamic Shari'ah. e.g. non alcoholic, no ham.

Honestly, first the place sounded gloomy to me and I felt lonely, but that feeling vanished when the guests came at noon for Easter lunch and we began chatting around the table. I found that I was a focus of attention as the only new face there. I felt that God sent me to that place on purpose; to introduce myself, my country and my religion to these people. On that afternoon, we had a phone call from one of the friends inviting my hosts and me for dessert, so Ann accepted that invitation and we went on the next evening. I was surrounded with the people who belong to that place and I listened to more stories about the history of that place and the way we should engage ourselves in world peace.

The next two days I was invited for breakfast at the Rotary club where I had to speak about my experience during their meeting. I introduced myself and talked about the reason for being in the States then I opened the panel to answer their questions. For my pleasure, I could answer all the questions in a warm atmosphere. I never felt that I had to defend myself as being a Muslim woman and wearing a hijab. At the end of the meeting they began to donate money and many donations were on my honor.

There was a very nice couple, the wife was a nurse and her husband was a mechanic who works on the ship they went on to Africa. They are part of a group called "Mercy ship." Ann invited them for dinner so we had to go back home and prepare the food. I helped Ann and her husband in cooking and made two Syrian dishes which they all liked and asked about the recipe. They do surgeries for children who suffer from rabbit lip. It happened also that their daughter was a linguistic, and she participated in the new edition of Miriam Webster dictionary. They had travelled to parts of the Muslim world and known a lot about the culture and habits of different peoples to a sense that I felt them look and behave like Arabs.

In the schedule that Ann made was a visit to an elementary school where she used to teach some classes. She had told her six grade students as she had done to everyone she knew about her Syrian friend. I went there and met the principal who was a moderate Jewish and welcomed me very kindly. I respected him when he did not shake hands with me as part of his knowledge about Muslim women not shaking hands with men and to allow me to talk to his students, who asked smart questions comparing to other students I had met in other schools. It was a very interesting visit and I wished it not to end that soon.

Ann took me on trips to an aquarium and to New York and we visited the Statue of Liberty which was her first time to see so close while she paid everything. I felt myself very distinguished guest by this lady and her husband who treated me as a spoiled daughter. This visit really changed my previous view I built about Americans. Orient is very small town and very quiet, so people know each other as one family. They were so friendly and open to foreigners. It reminded me with the old people in my country who have intimate relation to their homeland. This indicates that human values and global ethics are the same everywhere regardless of religion, race or color.

At the end of my visit I had breakfast with Ann and before we start, we did our prayers and we cried together to say goodbye. Now, I keep emailing Ann as she usually does, and we wish to meet again one day. Creating good friends all over the world is not an easy task, but when we do it we understand the importance of building human relations among all peoples.

Along with my friends, we could communicate with the American society including different types of people, ages and classes. We had the chance to talk to people at schools, collages, clubs and churches in addition to the informal meetings and parties. This in itself was so important in building good relations in order to

bridge the gap that was created by the political conflicts and negative relations between our countries.

Once I had a lunch with the Seminary's board. I sat with an old lady, who was a member of the Seabury Club for retired people. After finishing our interesting conversation, she invited me for lunch at her club and we agreed on a time. She came and picked me up with my friend and we drove to the club, where she introduced us to her friends. We had an informal lunch during which we discussed many issues concerning the relations between our two countries and how to bridge the gap between our two peoples. They were so kind and open minded and admired how we left our families and travel overseas. They showed their respect to Islam as a religion and sympathized with the Iraqi and Palestinian peoples. After lunch, they wanted to hear some Arabic music, so I chanted for them tapping on the table as playing on tambourine. One of the ladies remembered a movie, so she invited me to attend a movie about a Syrian illegal immigrant in the States who met an American math professor accidentally. They have good relation but one day the Syrian guy was arrested and sent back home. The professor was faithful and tried to help him. At the end, he quitted teaching and started to play music for passengers in the subway as his Syrian friend used to do.

Sometimes we had to answer different types of questions, sometimes funny, others silly and others serious. Most of the questions whether asked in schools, colleges, clubs and informal meetings were precisely about the head-scarf/hijab, marriage, dating, polygamy, and issues about women and the conflict in the Middle East. Some people thought we live in desert and ride on camels. Others think that all women in Syria are forced to wear hijab as part of patriarchal authority. A lot of people we met think that Christians are persecuted minority in Syria, and they do not

enjoy the basic rights of life. Some also were astonished to know that we have Christians or churches even though they know about Pole's trip to Rome through Damascus which is mentioned in the Bible.

One of the reasons that I could not leave with my friends earlier is that I was attached to my students as they were so to me. I taught Arabic and Qur'an at an Islamic school and this added a lot to my experience. Sometimes I had to answer for students' questions about how to treat their non-Muslim friends or relatives. I had to give the right answers for the children in a simple way. At the same time, I felt that I had to provide the students with a ground for their future. Sometimes I had also to talk to parents who might be Non- Muslims and they were sending their kids to Islamic school. I could involve in the problems that Arabs and Muslims face in the West, like the problem of Arabic language. Children have difficulty in learning Arabic because they do not speak it at home. They find it easier to communicate with people around in English. I also taught Qur'an for converted Americans who were eager to learn the correct way of recitation.

Being the last one to stay in the States from my group gave me more experience and strengthened my personality. When my housemates left to Syria in January 2009, it was the most terrible time for me. Saying goodbye to dear people always breaks me down and it was more terrible while I was away from home. I could not bear living alone in the same house that I shared my dearest memories with my friends in good and bad for two years. I went to school after three days crying and told the principal that I no longer can stay in the States. She supported me and asked me not to take any crucial decision while experiencing emotional destruction. I wanted to move from the house but later on I prefer to stay. Running out of time to submit my thesis, I had to concentrate on my writing. This time, I asked Seminary to allow me to

stay in the house. After many arguments back and forth, I emailed the president of the Seminary asking her to look into my situation and she helped me and I stayed in the same house.

Getting the fruit of two years and half was one of the most gratifying moments of my life. Though I was the only Syrian from my group to attend the graduation ceremony, I wished my friends to share those precious moments of crowning our efforts over almost two years. However, by the time I was receiving my certificate, I felt as if there was a great burden on me. Going a step forward always makes me take a deep breath when thinking about what is coming. As a teacher and a scholar, I find my responsibilities have increased and my path has become longer.

In the world of differences we live in today, we need wise and faithful thinkers who hold responsibilities toward their communities. Most of the conflicts we are suffering from today are caused by ignorance and misunderstanding of the religious Scriptures. I am interested in doing something to bring people together and empower them to face their problems through the light of their faith. It is very important to know how to live with people, understand them well and stretch a hand to them.

With consideration to their influence on the mass, I believe that religious leaders should not be limited to give a speech in a mosque, a church or a synagogue only. If the religious intelligentsias seek the good and prosperity of their societies, I am pretty sure that we will find solutions for all the problems that we have and all the conflicts will come to an end one day. But to achieve that goal every person should consider him/herself a leader in the field they are in order to get up with their communities to the good and virtue that God created us to fulfill in this world.

I consider myself blessed to study at the Fatih Islamic Institute and represent it in the United States. I encourage people to travel and live with others because

travelling enriches our experience and widens our knowledge. It also brings people together and bridges gaps between different societies. Most of people we met ask silly questions out of ignorance, and as a result of the negative image they had built through the Media and wrong information they got through the Media and their politicians. We could make people aspire to visit Syria and come to the Middle East.

As life is too short, my whole purpose is to add something to humanity in a way that keeps me remembered by people not by name but by the efforts I pay for their good. And of course, God is the only One who will help and guide us to the right path and reward us for our efforts in this life and in the Hereafter.

Chapter 24
The Road to Damascus
Bashar Bakkour

The year 1990 left an unmistakable imprint on my thought, behaviour, learning, and course of life; indeed, on almost every aspect of my life. In this year, fortune smiled on me, and became a student at The Fatih Islamic Institute, for a six-year-study (preparatory and secondary stage). Basically, my later academic and every day life owes considerably to this formative period.

Students, at this stage, are traditionally taught overall branches of religious knowledge (Inter. retation of the Qur'an, the Science of Hadith, Theology, Islamic Jurisprudence, Mysticism, the Law of Inheritance, and of Personal Status, etc), and Arabic language(Morphology, Syntax, and Rhetoric), as well as secular learning (English, Geography, Mathematics, as well as Physics). It is commonly recognised that students who successfully passed this stage are locally, and to some extent internationally, acclaimed Muslim scholars. The reason has a direct relation to the Institute that has undertaken an arduous task of providing students with the necessary equipment for acquiring excellent learning and distinguished scholarship.

Having graduated with distinction in 1996, I pursued learning at al-Azhar University, to obtain an MA degree in Shari'ah. Simultaneously, I followed a four-year undergraduate Arabic course leading to a master's degree from al-Azhar University too.¹ Both comprehension and digestion of the wide-ranging textbooks of these two concurrent MAs proceeded quickly and smoothly. Hence, the attainment of both degrees in 2001 was easily reachable, thanks to that in-depth and exhaustive six-year period of learning and scholarship.

It is worth remarking that Syria, for decades, has gained an unrivalled reputation for being a religious destination to thousands of overseas students seeking to learn and study Islamic knowledge thereby leading a peaceful and a virtuous life. Such students are particularly welcomed and well received by local populace. It is stressed here that emphasis on moderate Islamic thought² by avoiding schismatic topics besides carefully

chosen syllabuses are of major incentives for massive influx of foreign students to study at Syrian religious institutions. Consequently, with a few exceptions, graduates of these institutions are held a people of moderate way of thinking, and behaviour.

In this context, I would like to cite two examples. One of my students at the Fatih Institute who is Algerian told me that in Algeria, of things for which a sheikh or imam is to be credited was his learning at some religious institute in Syria, notably, the Fatih Institute, since the spirit of moderation, open-mindedness and balanced thought are top priority therein.

In November, 2008, David Miliband, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, came to Syria, and had a meeting with the Minister of Endowment, Dr Muhammad Abd As-Sattar Assayyid. Miliband moaned and groaned about the turbulent and hard time UK has been experiencing because of some extremist, young, British-born, Muslims. Then he added that the British government is desperate for peace and security at home. Prior to this dream, however, those poor, brainwashed young Muslims must be lectured and taught different Muslim learning by qualified, enlightened, as well as moderate scholars who need to be Syrian. "The British government, said Miliband, is aware that most religious leaders and scholars who have studied in Syria are free from a variety of charges of extremist ideas and of dubious ties with terrorist organizations."

Global Outreach

For 50 years of obviously distinctive learning, coupled with educational excellence, the Fatih Institute graduated a considerable number of home and overseas students (males and females). Equipped with solid Islamic foundation, and a broadened horizon, those religious scholars remarkably remolded the souls of many, shattering deep-seated superstitions, and planting instead the seeds of virtues and morality. Nevertheless, the Fatih's illuminating message remained fairly limited to the Arab world, with a little penetration to the other world.

Therefore, in 2001 a far-reaching step was made by which the Fatih message would probably go international. The academic board opened a Faculty of Islamic Studies in International Languages: of the following departments (males & females):

Department	Duration	Inception
English	Two academic years	2001
Spanish	Two academic years	2002
French	Two academic years	2003

The motive behind this unprecedented move by the Fatih Institute was basically based on the following facts.

Firstly, it is common knowledge that Islam in its essence is a world religion, an international message. Being a religious and spiritual belief, a coherent system of life, a social order, a philosophy of life, a system of economic principles, and a rule of government, Islam appeals to the hearts, souls and consciences of hundreds of millions, setting them a standard by which the individual and society lead an honest, sober and God-fearing life. Like other world religions, Islam has a lot to offer for the well being, happiness and salvation of humanity, putting forward radical solutions for religious and mundane problems.

Secondly, Contrary to popular belief, Islam is not a new religion. It rather came to represent the 'original' as well as the final revelation of the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. The Message Muhammad (pbuh) received has a dual mission: to recapitulate the teachings of those prophets who had preceded him, and, on the other hand, to reform erroneous thoughts and incorrect beliefs that infiltrated the scriptural texts, and thus altered and distorted the original, pure revelation. In this context, the Prophet says, “The parable of me and of previous Prophets is that of a man who built a house excellently and completely, apart from the space of one brick which he did not place. The people started to walk around the building, admiring it and saying, ‘If only that brick were put in its place.’ I have come to complete that brick, and I am the seal of the Prophets.”³ Also he says, “All the Prophets are paternal brothers, even though their mothers are different.”⁴

Thirdly, although being the religion of 1.5 billion adherents, no one denies the fact that Islam has been the most misunderstood religion, notably in the Western world. Fourthly, and more importantly, we, as Muslims, are commanded by God and His Messenger to take care of our neighbours. As fellow inhabitants of 'this global world,' we all have become neighbours who should love and take care of each other. Taking into account the above mentioned, the Fatih Institute, with vigour and determination, decided to move from locality to nationality.

Back again to my experience. In 2001, after some initial hesitation, I decided to enroll at the Faculty of Islamic Studies (English dept.) So exciting and so thrilling was this experience to me. For three years, I studied a wide variety of subjects (Qur'anic and Hadith translation, Islamic terms, intellectual contemporary issues, comparative religion, Sufism, Islamic contemporary thought, Islamic law, methodology of da'wah, research methodology, international law, Islam and the West, Orientalism, and Western society). A particular importance was given this nascent department, for being the first of its kind in Syria, and accordingly, being a bridge-builder between the two worlds. Deep in our hearts, we, as students, were realizing the magnitude of the mission. Faithfully we wanted to live up to hopes pinned on us. No doubt that for making this pioneering work come to fruition, several important prerequisite ought to be obtained:

- Proficiency in English.
- Competence in academic language (speaking and writing).
- The study of the Western mentality, society, and culture.
- Approaching Western mind in a desirable and acceptable fashion.
- Possessing sound Islamic knowledge, in addition to one's ability to utilize this knowledge in a sensible and a correct way, away from radicalization and extremism.
- Last but not least, sincerity, love, respect and civility are first and foremost.

One must acknowledge that the above requirements, especially the first three ones, could not be possibly and wholly met by each student, even in post-graduation period. In other words, some, although completed the course successfully, still lacked efficiency in English, be speaking or writing. While others, due to lack of a proper approach, were yet to be able to have a fruitful discussion with a non-Muslim.

This recognized situation accounted for a next necessary step which was the board's decision, 2005 to send graduates of English department to continue study in UK so as to gain Western academic experience and get actively engaged in public life therein.⁵ Fortunately, my colleagues and I applied for an admission as postgraduate students at Markfield Institute of Higher Education (MIHE)⁶. This institute, which started in September 2000, is the first academic institution of its kind in the West. It has a positive approach to dialogue between faiths and cultures and has been recognized for its interfaith endeavours. MIHE offers a unique faculty for Islamic Studies with immense potential. "I believe that this whole complex here at Markfield, including the excellent library, has the potential to develop into one of Europe's leading centres for postgraduate study of Islam and Muslim world."⁷

Furthermore, courses delivered by MIHE are validated by Loughborough University, a leading British University. After following admission procedures and time-consuming entry requirements, we set foot, for the first time, on UK, 2006. We were seven students with determination to succeed, and more importantly, to enhance academic English, as well as forming a long-lasting, symbiotic relationship with a people of a different faith, custom and culture.

As MIHE offers a variety of MAs, we selected more relevant courses: five of us took MA Islamic Studies, whereas two preferred MA Islamic Banking, Finance, and Management. The MA Islamic Studies programme includes: Islamic Sources: Qur'an and Sunnah, Life of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), Research Methodology, Dissertation, plus a choice of additional taught modules (Sufism, Islamic History, Islamic Theology and Philosophy, Islam in Europe, Islam and Pluralism, Gender Issues and Family in Islam.) As for MA Islamic Banking, Finance, and Management programme, it includes: Islamic Economics, Islamic Banking and Finance, Financial System, Markets and Institutions, Research Methodology, Cross-Cultural Management, Dissertation, plus a choice of additional taught modules (Trusts and Endowments, International Development and Finance.)

Because I feel more attached to the Islamic Studies area, I was of those who decided to take it. As a matter of fact, programme taught modules did not add much to my knowledge, again thanks to the Fatih Institute's excellent and in-depth courses.

Accordingly, right from the start, I diverted my attention to what I badly need, and what I believe is distinctive of MIHE, i.e. the Research Methodology Module, and the excellent library, which contains over 30,000 books and periodicals and 250 journals. The library also contains an extensive collection of press cuttings and a computer resource centre which has word processing and Internet facilities. Comparatively speaking, the Fatih Institute's Library is absolutely extensive in Arabic books, yet very poor in its English section.⁸

As for Research Methodology, the contents of the syllabus were clearly insufficient for writing an academically-accepted research paper. Admittedly, unlike its Eastern counterparts, Western universities, colleges, and other academic institutions have made great strides in the study of Research Methodology in terms of scope and depth, as well as application of its various methods to wide-ranging areas, like science, history, society, philosophy, along with religious studies.

Concerning daily life, my colleagues and I did enjoy every minute of it; this is an honest admission. Our neighbours showed a friendly manner, coupled with respect, and deference, so too did we. By way of our firsthand experience, it can be safely claimed that people belonging to different beliefs, ideas, customs, and ways of life, are likely to live peacefully and blissfully as long as their relationship is constantly governed by mutual understanding, respect, and fairness.

Stressing on the phenomenon of difference and setting piety as a criterion, God says, "O people, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know each other. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most godfearing of you" [the Qur'ān, 49:13] .

In this context, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) says, 'O people! Verily, your Lord is One, and your father (Adam) is one. There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab, neither a black over a white, or a white over a black except in piety and righteousness.'

In the words of Jonathon Sacks, a Chief Rabbi: "God makes every human being in the same mint, in the same image, His own, and yet we all come out differently. The religious challenge is to find God's image in someone who is not in our image, in someone whose colour is different, whose culture is different, who speaks a different

language, tells a different story, and worships God in a different way.⁹ Arguably, the much-sought global peace and security can be only achieved if the above-mentioned instructions are strictly observed and faithfully followed. This is precisely what the Fatih Islamic Institute, along with other local and international institutions have been longing for.

Having had an MA in Islamic Studies from Loughborough University, I went back to The Fatih Institute, with a new compelling experience. Presently, I work as a lecturer at the Institute where I teach a number of topics: Islam and the West, Orientalism, Islamic Terms, in addition to Quranic Translation. Also, I am a researcher at the affiliated Research Unit; I have published 'Islam and the West between the Myth of Confrontation and the Reality of Cooperation' (Arabic), and 'A Dictionary of Islamic Terms' (A-E). And two unpublished booklets 'The Prophet Muhammad: The Perfect Example' and 'Pearls of Wisdom: 100 Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.' These works represent the fruit of a long-term, demanding project, launched by the Fatih Institute. Finally, I am immensely and deeply grateful to the Fatih Islamic Institute, which informed every aspect of my life, as well as of thousands of others'.

Endnotes

¹ According to the 1994 academic agreement between the Fatih Institute and al-Azhar University, students of undergraduate stage may study the first three academic years at the former, and the fourth year at the latter, graduating with an MA degree from al-Azhar. So my MA Arabic degree operated under this agreement, in contrast to my Shari'ah degree where the all four years modules were delivered at al-Azhar.

² Muslims are summoned to always adopt a middle way in all affairs. In the Qur'an, Muslims are depicted as 'A Community of the middle way' [2:143] The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), instructing Muslims to follow a similar pattern, practiced moderation in all matters, religious and mundane ones. It is reported that the Prophet approached a companion, called Sa'id while he was performing his ablution, and said to him, 'What is this wastefulness?' Sa'id answered, 'Is there wastefulness in water?' 'Yes,' said the Prophet. 'Even if you are beside a flowing river. (Ibn Hanbal, *Al-Musnad*, no. 7065.) Excessiveness in worship is not recommended. Rather, striking a balance is to be sought. Once the Prophet said to a companion, named 'Abdullah ibn 'Amr Ibn al-'Ās, 'I heard that you fast all day and stay up all night in prayer. Is that true?' He answered, 'Yes, it is.' Then the Prophet told him, 'Do not do that. Fast and break your fast. Sleep and get up

(for worship), for your body has a right over you, your eyes have a right over you, your wife has a right over you, and your visitors have a right over you.' (Ibn al-Atheer, *Jāmi' al-Usoul*, no. 87). Moderation is required even in food and drink. Advising his followers in this respect, the Prophet said, 'There is no worse vessel for the son of Adam to fill than his own stomach. But if he must fill it, then let him allow one third for food, on third for drink, and one third for air.' (Ibid: no. 5480.) It is more likely that adaptation, of such instructions will have a huge impact on one's way of life. And this is the thing that Syrian religious institutions have been trying to instill in the students' minds.

³ Sahih Al-Bukhari, no. 3535.

⁴ Ibn al-Altheer, no. 6321.

⁵ Al-Fatih Institute kindly was responsible for all relevant expenses, including tuition fees, and accommodation.

⁶ MIHE is the latest academic project of the Islamic Foundation, Markfield, Leicestershire. Since its inception in 1973, the Islamic Foundation has been actively engaged in developing and promoting a better understanding of Islam in the West. As a leading academic and research institution, it has published over 400 books in English and other European languages on the whole range of Islamic topics.

⁷ Extract from the speech delivered by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales on the occasion of the opening of the new building of MIHE on Friday 24 January 2003.

⁸ Now efforts are being made to enlarge the English section as much as possible.

⁹ "The Dignity of Difference: Avoiding the Clash of Civilizations" p 134, in Roger Boase, ed, *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*. (England& USA: Ashgate, 2005).

Chapter 25

A Canadian Perspective on the Fatih Islamic Institute

Zahra Kasamali

My experiences and interactions at Sha. kh Farfour's Fatih Islamic Institute during the spring of 2009 have resulted in much personal reflection and growth on numerous levels. Prior to my visit to Syria, I had never visited the Middle East before. Although I have travelled to Pakistan many times and witnessed the dynamic of being a Western born Muslim visiting a Muslim country, my experiences in Syria were unique. My Canadian South Asian background and adherence to a minority interpretation of Islam enabled me to analyze daily events from various angles. Consequently, the interactions that took place during my stay in Syria were influenced by three important factors. Firstly, the fact that I am a woman produced unique interactions between Syrian men and women. One must note that the Fatih institute adheres to interpretations of Shari'ah that aim to produce and maintain respectful relations between men and women. As a result, interactions between men and women were rather restrained in comparison to similar interactions that take place in the Canadian context. Secondly, I experienced certain privileges being a Canadian Muslim woman. Such privileges were apparent during the course of informal and formal Islamic conferences that took place at the Fatih Institute. Thirdly, because I was coded as a "Canadian Muslim" by local Syrians, I was exposed to particular preconceived notions about how Islam in the 'West' is practiced and how Muslim values are apparently difficult to uphold in non-Islamic countries. Although I found such perceptions rather biased and condescending, I was thankful that I was able to challenge these preconceived notions during my conversations with various individuals at the Institute. As a result, my experiences at the Fatih Islamic Institute were largely shaped by the three factors elucidated above.

During my first visit to the Fatih Institute, I immediately noticed and was touched by the great warmth and hospitality that Shaykh Farfour and the Grand Mufti presented all study tour participants with. Although Shaykh Farfour primarily spoke in Arabic, his kindness and generosity transcended language barriers. During my interactions with other local Syrians, I became cognizant of the fact that Arab hospitality is an integral facet of the local culture. For example, Shaykh Farfour provided study tour participants with many extravagant lunches and

dinners. As well, he helped fund accommodations for students, including myself, during our stay in Damascus. Such hospitality enabled other study tour participants and I to feel at ease in an unfamiliar cultural context. For example, during our first visit to the Fatih Institute, women were encouraged to dress in a manner that abided by the tenets of the Shari'ah. Consequently, many women wore Abayas or long skirts and shirts with full sleeves and also had their heads covered with a shawl out of respect for Shaykh Farfour and the Islamic principles he adheres to. I was also impressed by Shaykh Farfour's commitment and tireless efforts to improve Islam's image within the post 9/11 context. Shaykh Farfour's organization of the "Islam and the West (Mutual Knowledge and Dialogue for Just and Universal Peace") Conference underscores his commitment to the promotion, practice and importance of interfaith dialogue. Such hospitality reflects the desire for Syria to foster respectful and equitable relations with Western nations. Thus, although many participants were exposed to a completely unfamiliar cultural context and religious practices, they were easily able to overcome cultural shock through Shaykh Farfour's kindness and generous hospitality.

The Fatih Institute was a unique environment in which one could easily witness and grasp the intersection between Sunni Islam and Syrian culture. It is within this context that I was allotted greater agency as a Canadian Muslim woman in comparison to many local Syrian Muslim women. During the series of informal interfaith dialogue conferences that were held at Shaykh Farfour's Institute, many Syrian women attended who were either current or former Fatih Islamic students. To my surprise, the majority of these women did not participate during the informal conferences although many were extremely educated in matters of Shari'ah, for example. I was rather disappointed with this occurrence. Following the first informal conference, I asked some Syrian women whether or not infrequent female participation under

such circumstances is common. The women kindly responded saying that such occurrences were standard. Although the women did not explain the reasons for this apparent dynamic between men and women, I gathered that such experiences were the product of Shari'ah interpretation. All women who participated in the study tour were given the opportunity to speak about their first impressions of Damascus and Syrian culture and also to speak about their careers or subjects of study. I enjoyed the opportunity to speak of my interest in anti-racist theory and its ability to explain the strained relations between Islam, Arab nations and the West. Moreover, I was pleased to share my knowledge in a forum where my ideas were appreciated and reflected upon.

Besides gaining comfort in a new cultural context, was the challenge of correcting preconceived notions regarding Western nations and the connotations that surround practicing Islam in a non-Islamic country. During the second day of the Fatih Institute's formal conference, I was approached by a local Syrian woman asking me how it is possible for one to practice Islam in a Western nation such as Canada. Initially, I was slightly offended by the question, but soon realized that the question was appropriate given the dichotomies that have been produced between the 'West' and the 'East' as a result of Orientalist discourse and ideologies. I responded to this question by emphasizing that residing in an environment where un-Islamic activities such as alcohol consumption are a regular component of that particular society's culture, one's faith becomes stronger. Moreover, I emphasized in such situations one's Islamic ethics and faith is often challenged. I also offered an alternate perspective by suggesting that it is possible for those residing in Islamic countries to take their faith for granted because it is constantly surrounding them in various forms. As well, I suggested that perhaps individuals are better able to reflect on the degree of faith that they possess when exposed to an environment where their religion is a minority. The woman listened to my thoughts in a respectful manner and told me that she

appreciated what I had to say and that she had never before entertained such an insight. Consequently, interactions at The Fatih Islamic Institute were marked by a balancing of contrasting political and religious perspectives.

One of the striking features of witnessing dialogue at the Fatih Institute was the constant commentary and reflection on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Due to the close proximity of Israel to Syria and former political tensions between the two nations, Syria naturally approaches the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a manner that is critical of Zionism. The political philosophy of Zionism is rather underemphasized or completely ignored within the context of the North American media. Many Study Tour participants possessed limited knowledge regarding Zionism and were largely unexposed to perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that showcased the narratives of Palestinians. Following the first two sessions that elucidated Israeli bloodshed and blatantly racist policies enforced by the Israeli government as a means to subordinate Palestinians, the majority of study tour participants were angered, and offended by the invalidating comments spoken against Israel. I was not surprised by these reactions as much of the Western education system is a product of quasi theology that continues to favour Israel due to feelings of post Holocaust guilt. Many individuals felt that Syrians presented a rather biased interpretation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Interestingly, these individuals did not acknowledge that the Western media frequently favours Israeli political interests over Palestinian interests. Such individuals also ignored the undeniable Islamophobia that continues to infest Western media. As the conference progressed, however, many of these individuals were able to acquire a new perspective which exposed Palestinian hardship and terror at the hands of the Israeli government. These individuals privately admitted that they did not initially sympathize with Palestine, but were thankful that they were exposed to alternate viewpoints. Further, these

individuals during a video presentation depicting child victims of Zionist violence and propaganda openly displayed strong emotions and sadness for impacted children. Thus, The Fatih Islamic Institute exposed many individuals to previously unheard Palestinian narratives regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In addition to the newfound insights produced through the Fatih Islamic Institute's critiques of the Zionist campaign, was Shaykh Farfour's arrangements with all participants to meet various government officials. Meeting with the Minister of Education, for example, exposed participants to Syria's nature as a centre of knowledge. The Minister of Education encouraged our group to return to Damascus to study Arabic and learn more about Syrian culture. The invitation was accompanied by the potential to receive grants if one desired to pursue such studies. The most memorable experience was having the opportunity to meet the Vice President of Syria, Najah Al-Attar. Study Tour participants were given the opportunity to ask Al-Attar questions within a twenty minute time period. Her answers revealed a desire for Western nations to view Syria as a moderate and progressive state. Therefore, through Shaykh Farfour's contacts, individuals were exposed to a variety of perspectives reflecting not only the values of Syrians and Islam, but also revealing important political issues that undeniably impact international relations.

Another pleasure associated with conferencing at the Fatih Islamic Institute, was having the pleasure of listening to Shaykh Farfour's melodious chanting. Shaykh Farfour was classically trained in the art of Sufi devotional chanting. His chanting exposed numerous individuals to the beauty of Qur'anic recitation and the great attributes associated with God. This experience was extremely unique and unforgettable. Through his singing, Shaykh Fafur exposed individuals to an artistic aspect of Islam that often is underemphasized and ignored. Further, the songs that

were sung underscore the Islam's peaceful nature and God's boundless love for His creation. Therefore, Shaykh Farfour's devotional chanting exposed study tour participants to the love, generosity and respect that Islam teaches and upholds.

As evidenced through the elucidation of my experiences, the Fatih Islamic Institute provides a space where contrasting worldviews and perceptions are welcome. Although divergent perspectives were showcased during both informal and formal conferences, these ideas did not come together in a unified manner. I, however, do not believe it was Shaykh Farfour's goal to produce a monolithic vision from these conferences, but instead, was an endeavour to encourage reflection and respect for perspectives that differ from one's worldviews. Shaykh Farfour's efforts to correct false images of Islam within a post 9/11 context is not only admirable, but an inspiration to many. In order to disprove the notion that a 'clash of civilizations' exists between Islam and the West, similar initiatives such as Shaykh Farfour's interfaith conferences need to take place more often. Further, positive change occurs in atmospheres where respectful dialogue and understanding is promoted and valued. Thus, I hope to revisit the Fatih Islamic Institute in the near future and participate in endeavours that aim to foster self-reflection, peace, understanding and respect for ethno-cultural and religious plurality.

Chapter 26

An American-Jewish Perspective on the Fatih Islamic Institute and Syria

Norton Mezvinsky

In 2007, I first met Shaykh Hussam al-Din Farfour, Vice-President of the Fatih Islamic Society in Damascus, Syria and his two colleagues, Shaykh Abdul Fattah al-Bizm, Mufti of Damascus, and Professor Abdul Nabi Isstaif of the University of Damascus. They had come to Hartford, Connecticut to meet and discuss with Professor Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi and his colleagues at the Hartford Seminary [Since 2008, Abu-Rabi has been teaching at the University of Alberta in Canada]. The three visitors from Damascus also wanted to see the seven female students from the Institute of the Fatih Islamic Institute, who were studying for one year at the Hartford Seminary.

Professor Abu-Rabi additionally arranged for his visitors to meet with church leaders and academics of other institutions. They, for example, came to Central Connecticut State University, where I was a professor, and met again with me and many of my colleagues.

During the following three years, I traveled to Syria four times and during three of my visits, I met with Shaykh Farfour and his colleagues at the Fatih Islamic Institute, which Shaykh Farfour headed. Shaykh Farfour and his colleagues extended utmost hospitality to me, an American Jew. Shaykh Farfour himself arranged numerous meetings with Syrian religious leaders, academics, government officials and others. He hosted me and colleagues of mine from the United States for dinners and lunches and he provided transportation and sight-seeing. Most importantly, Shaykh Farfour planned and arranged sessions at which I delivered lectures and at which my colleagues and I had opportunities to discuss openly and frankly serious religious, political and social issues with faculty and students at the Institute in Damascus and with invited guests, e.g. religious leaders, academics, members of the Syrian Peoples Assembly and government officials.

The specific issues, about which I lectured and which we all discussed, included the relationship between Judaism and Islam, Jewish fundamentalism in Israel, some differing interpretations of Islam, Jewish-Muslim relations, aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict and United States Middle East policies, most especially those related to the Palestinian-Israeli problem and to Syria. At times we disagreed with one another cordially and constructively in back and forth dialogue. We always ended and came out of these discussions even more friendly and closer to one another. Indeed, all of this represented, and will, in all likelihood, continue in future discussions to represent, the true and positive essence of inter-faith and inter-political discussion. It is in this spirit and in this context that I offer my below comment on the relationship between Jews and Muslims.

A Portuguese Jew in the seventeenth century related his visit to the Ottoman Empire by writing: “Among the human consolations, the most signal is great Turkey, a broad and spacious sea which God opened with the nod of His mercy as he opened the Red Sea at the time of Exodus...here the gates of liberty are always open for the observance of Judaism.” The same can be said about the life of Jews in Muslim lands throughout most of their history. Social intercourse between Jews and Muslims was incomparably more common than between Jews and Christians. Jews felt less defensive with Muslims, because Christians, however well disposed, were often genuinely concerned about the salvation of Jews, which meant conversion to Christianity. Friendships and familiarity with Muslims, in contra-distinction to social intercourse with Christians, was not inhibited by suspicions of ulterior motives.

Islamic law does stipulate: “The dhimmis [protected Jews and Christians] must be distinguished from the Muslims by their dress, their mounts, their saddles and their headgear.”¹ The Halacha [Judaic religious law], however, also obliges the Jew to remain identifiably different.² This injunction is still followed by many Ashkenazi Jews (i.e. those from eastern southern and central Europe), some of whom continue to dress in distinctive clothing (usually black and white) and headgear (black fedoras or tall fur hats) rarely worn anywhere else in the world nowadays. Jews in Islamic countries would

commonly use Arab names, such as Abdullah, Ibrahim, Ismael or Salim; this did not imply an attempt to assimilate, which was an incongruous idea in the more pluralistic context of Islamic lands. The prominent Iraqi Rabbi Somekh had the first name Abdullah, which he inherited from a long line of ancestors, many of them Judaic luminaries.

Judaism under Islam experienced a remarkable period of creativity, often in intellectual discourse with the dominant culture. Arabic was commonly used in scholarly Jewish writing, whereas it would have been unfathomable for European rabbis to use Latin in their work. Islam influenced the writing of poetry, the uses of grammar and legal codification by Jews. Islam also influenced Jewish liturgy and certain matters of personal status, such as polygamy. Jews practiced polygamy in Islamic countries but not in Christian countries where a rabbinical decree banned it for 999 years. At the same time, Jews in Islamic lands were not touched by major movements and transformations that affected Ashkenazi Jewry, e.g. Hasidism, secularization, Haskalah and Zionism.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire and the intensification of European imperialism opened Jews to European influences and protection and thereby heightened their social status. The amelioration of social status did sometimes segregate Jews from Muslims and lead to serious estrangement. A telling case is that of Algeria, whereas in an overtly colonial context, Jews were granted French citizenship in 1870. Several decades later, during the struggle for national independence however, Jews were considered part of the colonial establishment and, in spite of their ancient roots in that country, were so uprooted that their communities were virtually brought to an end. Some

Islamic prohibitions with respect to Jews were at other times hardly enforced. There, for example, were cases of Jews, who possessed slaves, including Muslim slaves.³

European Jewish agencies, such as Alliance Israelite Universelle, began to intervene on behalf of Jews in several Islamic lands from the middle of the 19th century. They were also used as conduits for colonial influence. At the same time, this opened the way to the transfer of Christian anti-Jewish sentiment, accusations (e.g., blood libel) and materials (e.g., Protocols of the elders of Zion) to Islamic lands. Starting in the 19th century, Christian dhimmis often turned against Jews in several Islamic countries. Practically all modern anti-Jewish rhetoric currently available in Arabic and Farsi is of European origin. Commonalities between Islam and Judaism continued in later years. A book commissioned by the World Jewish Congress for mass distribution in 1961 affirmed:

There was never more similarity between a tolerated Judaism and its adherents, and a civilized, masterful overlord until the post-emancipation period. ...It is only fair to say that under Islam, Judaism and its adherents had not to endure anything like the sustained, officially sponsored and relentlessly conducted attack of the Christian Church on Jews in Christian lands.⁴

Jews from Muslim countries were at times treated far more negatively in the State of Israel than they had been treated in countries from which they came. For many Yemenite Jews in Israel, for example, the contrast with their native land was stark:

The Arabs among whom we lived did not bother us, not even in the most insignificant of our religious observances. Quite the contrary, the government recognized our religion, our rights and our faith. If an official or a police officer were to come among us during the Sabbath, he would not dare to smoke, or to profane the Sabbath in any way. And here, they treat us with contempt, and force our people to profane the Sabbath. They mock us; laugh at our Traditional beliefs, our prayers and the religious observances of our Holy Torah.⁵

Motivated by a seeming need to reinforce the conviction that anti-Jewish acts and sentiments have been endemic throughout the world, Zionist theoreticians and propagandists have attempted for some time to revise accounts of the fate of Jews under Islam. The issue of the maltreatment of Jews in Arab countries has therefore become a major controversy: Zionist historians have emphasized the chronic nature of persecutions against the Jews, while their opponents have asserted that Zionism is the main cause of deteriorating relations with the Muslims. From the Zionist perspective, Jews living in the Arab countries had no alternative but to save their lives through precipitous emigration to Israel. This allegedly made them refugees just like the Palestinians who fled their homes in 1948 and thus meant that an exchange of populations had taken place, a kind of rough retroactive justice. Arab Jews, brought to Israel in order to ensure the newly formed state a Jewish majority, were promptly stripped of their Arabic language, food habits, and musical preferences since all this came to be seen as “belonging to the enemy” in the context of nation-building, undertaken largely by East European Zionists. This led to long-term traumas and disruptions among Arab Jews in Israel, including an interesting phenomenon of induced self-hatred: hatred of things Arab on the part of ...these Arabs of Jewish faith.

At the same time, there exists a growing body of published eyewitness accounts of the neighborly relations between Jews and Muslims in all the countries of the Middle East, including what is currently Israel. These accounts suggest that Zionists did indeed provide anti-Jewish riots, both by their overt aggressiveness in Palestine and by their covert activities in several Arab countries.

The memoirs of a German general attached to the Ottoman troops in Palestine during World War I, although reflecting a time period significantly prior to establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and also being distant from intra-Jewish polemics, illustrate the above point:

How curious that the war has brought about an upsurge in the struggle between the Zionists and the non-Zionists, a battle that has turned ugly and has done little to further the interests of the Jews in general. The non-Zionists, that is to say, those Jews who had no political objectives and who belonged to the Orthodox current, at the time formed the preponderant majority in Palestine. The Zionists residing there represented no more than 5 percent of the population, but were very active and fanatical, and terrorized the non-Zionists. During the war, the non-Zionists attempted to free themselves from Zionist terror with the aid of the Turks. They rightly feared that the activities of the Zionists would destroy their good relations that prevailed among long-time Jewish residents in Palestine and the Arabs.⁶

In fact, the fear of such disruption concerned many Jews from the beginning of Zionists settlement. Numerous Jews, both Ashkenazi and Sephardic, for example, had protested against the idea of the partition of Palestine, proposed by the Peel Commission. Only a few weeks after the publication of the commissions` report, some prominent Moroccan Jews, together with their Muslim compatriots, signed and sent a strongly worded letter, dated August 9, 1937 to the Foreign Office. The letter warned “of disastrous consequences that would result in undesirable troubles between Arab and Jewish elements.” The letter ended with a call for “an independent Palestinian state to be governed by democratic parliamentary institutions, the only regime that can ensure both groups in Palestine equal rights in the country so dear to them.”⁷ Well-known German Jews such as Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber and Albert Einstein expressed similar sentiment with respect to the prospect of a segregated state for Jews.⁸

Hatred of Jews among the Muslims in its current proportions in 2010 is a recent development. More than a few Jewish historians, both inside and outside Israel, basing themselves on neutral sources, document that relations between Arabs and Jews in Palestine were generally peaceful prior to the arrival of the Zionists. The unilateral declaration of the State of Israel by the Zionist minority against the will of local inhabitants-Muslims, Christians and some Jews in 1948 led to the gradual deterioration of the Jews' status in some Arab countries, including the largest one – Egypt.

The eminent Egyptian writer Nabuib Mahfouz (1911-2006) once commented to a Jewish acquaintance:

Our two peoples knew extraordinary partnership for many years-in ancient days, in the Middle Ages, and in the modern era, with time of quarrels and disputes few and far between. Unfortunately, we have documented the disputes one hundred times more than the periods of friendship and cooperation. I dream of the day when, thanks to the cooperation between us, this region will become a home over flowering with the light of science, blessed by the highest principles of heaven.⁹

In fact, many Jews took active part in the political awakening of Turkey, Persia and Arab lands. This participation was particularly intensive in Iraq but also existed in Arab nationalist movements from Damasus to Casablanca. This shows an open attitude towards the Gentile in the context of Jewish modernity in Muslim countries. A people, particularly a minority considered inferior by the majority ruling population, does not accept or adapt the culture of its surroundings so heartedly unless it feels relatively secure living in its midst.

The Israel/Palestine conflict should be seen neither as a conflict between Jews and Muslims, nor as one between Islam and Judaism. Moreover, in recent years a “modern

common faith” has united the two communities: they defend “the comprehensiveness of religion” at a time when religion is viewed as either outdated or elective. Halakha and Sharia entail an a priori “willingness to conform to...law, even in the face of doubt, spiritual aridity, and dark nights of the soul,” this being the sign of a serious and true believer. This persistence in the face of obstacles and temptations remains a hallmark of both traditions, and it is inculcated in both groups’ educational institutions, often by statements and moral lessons that teach students absolute obedience the shared aims of Islam and Judaism grow ever stronger in the context of globalization and instant communication that both threaten and offer new opportunities to maintain and strengthen religious tradition.¹⁰ Focusing on these commonalities can be a springboard for promoting interfaith tolerance.

Even in the midst of the conflict in Israel/Palestine, attempts are made by religious individuals to build bridges and find agreement with the other. It has been reported that Rabbi Froman of the Tekoa settlement not only met Hamas leaders but also reached compromises on ceasefire and other issues. The Israeli authorities reportedly scuttled all these attempts.¹¹

Judaism and Islam have outlived many political regimes, and their future is guaranteed by the commitment of the faithful, not by helicopter gunships or nuclear weapons. According to the Israeli intellectual Boaz Evron:

The State of Israel, and all the states of the world, appear and disappear. The State of Israel clearly will disappear in one hundred, five hundred years. But I suppose that the Jewish people will exist as long as the Jewish religion exists, perhaps for thousands more years. The existence of this state is of no importance for that of the Jewish people....Jews throughout the world can live quite well without it.¹²

The divisive fallout from the Israel/Palestine conflict has largely spared millions of Jews and Muslims living in the United States and other countries. A comparative manual of Islamic and Jewish ritual practices appeared in the United States in the beginning of the 21st century.¹³ More recently, an article jointly authored by specialists in kosher and halal requirements, addressed the issue of permissibility of genetically modified foods in both traditions. Areas of cooperation are likely to broaden as the more punctilious and stringent observers of these two people for many centuries in both Jewish and Muslim communities experience significant demographic growth.

Jewish views of Muslims and Islam have historically to date been inconsistent. To be correctly understood, these views need to be seen within the broader context of how Jews (religious and non-religious) and of how Judaism in its different formulations have seen the “other,” i.e. the non-Jew or Gentile. This consideration is complex; it deserves further in-depth analysis in another article. This consideration is clearly connected to the topic of how Jews have been treated by Muslims and how they have faced as a minority in countries with large majority Muslim populations, especially in the Arab Middle East. It is nevertheless vitally important that effects of the relatively recent Arab-Israeli conflict on the mutual perceptions of one another by Jews and Muslims should not obscure the long-term view of, for the most part, a harmonious co-existence.

Endnotes

- 1) Bernard Lewis, The Jews of Islam (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p.35.
- 2) Mishne Torah, Hilkot Avoda Zara 11:1.
- 3) Yaron Ben-Naeh, “Blond, tall, with hone-colored eyes: Jewish ownership of slaves in the Ottoman Empire”, Jewish History, vol. 20, 2006, p.315-332.
- 4) Erzin Isak Jakob Rosenthal, Judaism and Islam (London: Yoseloff, 1961), pp.xiii and 140.
- 5) Ella Shohat, “Sephardism in Israel: Zionism from the Viewpoint of its Jewish Victims”, in Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat, eds., Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Post-colonial Perspectives (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); see also the film “Forget Baghdad,” which is devoted to Iraqi Jews.
- 6) Frederich Kress Von Kressenstein, Im ha-Taalat-Suez (with the Turks toward the Suez Canal) (Tel-Aviv, Maarakhot, 2001), cited in Dromi, Uri, “Turks and Germans in Sinai,” Haaretz,” September 27, 2002
- 7) Mohammed Kenbib, *Juifs et Musulmans an Maroc, 1859-1948* (Rabat: Universite Mohammed V, 1994), p. 557.
- 8) See Fred Jerome, Einstein on Zionism and Israel: His Provocative Ideas About the Middle East (London : St. Martin’s Press, 2009).

- 9) Letter of Naguib Mahfouz to Professor Sasson Somekh, cited in Baghdad Yesterday, The Making of an Arab Jew (Jerusalem: Ibis, 2007), p.121.
- 10) see: Samuel C. Heilman, “The Vision from the Madrasa and Bes Mednash: Some Parallels between Islam and Judaism”, Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, volume 49, number 4 (January, 1996), p. 6-37, quoted on p.8.
- 11) Larry Derfine, ”Oh Brother, Where art Thou?” Jerusalem Post, December 28, 2006, p.6.
- 12) Yeshayahu Leibowitz, People, Time, Etat (Paris: Plon, 1995), p.154.
- 13) Joe M. Regenstein, Muhammad M. Chaudry and Carrie E. Regenstein, “Kosher and Halal in the Biotechnology Era”, Applied Biotechnology Food Science and Policy, volume 1 (2003), p.95-107.

Trip to Syria

Tom Verde

. Syria? Why do you want to go to Syria? Can Americans even go to Syria?”

These are the typical first reactions from people when you inform them that you are taking a trip to a country that the U.S. government has labeled a “rogue state” and which sits squarely in the middle of mayhem on practically all sides, with Israel and the Palestinian Territories to the south, Iraq to the east, and Lebanon to the west.

But, like any place, there is more—much more—to Syria than its politics. There are its people (generally warm and friendly), its history (rich and ancient) and, perhaps most pronouncedly, its faiths, including Muslims of various sects, Christians, and even (a handful of) Jews, who collectively compose a more complex tapestry than the one most often represented by Western media.

Appreciating this complexity was the aim of a Spring 2009 trip to Syria which I took in the company of a delegation of educators, students and religious leaders from Edmonton, Canada, at the invitation of the Al-Fatih Islamic Institute, a school of higher education in Damascus.

It was the first visit to Syria and the Middle East for many of the members of the group, which included Dr. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi, University of Alberta's chair of Islamic Studies; Soraya Hafiz, a former University of Alberta Arabic teacher and board member of the Edmonton Council of Muslim Communities; David Goa, director of the U of A's Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life, retired U of A professors, Nicholas Wickenden and Anna Altmann, plus Edmonton clergy, and a handful of U of A students.

On hand to welcome the group with perennially open arms and characteristic warmth was Al-Fatih's vice-rector and de-facto head, Sheikh Dr. Hassam-Eddin Farfour, personal religious advisor to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. A tireless advocate of inter-faith and East-West dialogue, Sheikh Farfour organized an academic conference in Damascus for the Canadian delegation entitled "Islam and the West." The three-day conference featured personal meetings with Dr. Abdul-Fattah Al-Bizen, the Mufti (foremost Islamic religious authority) of Damascus, and panels of participants that included scholars from the University of Damascus in addition to government officials (both Syrian and Canadian, from the embassy) as well as other Syrian Christian and Muslim religious leaders.

While perhaps more ambitious than the group anticipated, the schedule of intense, day-long sessions afforded participants the chance to make new friends and exchange ideas with their Middle Eastern counterparts.

“Coming to Syria has been an opportunity to see, for the first time, what we share that is challenging to us,” said Goa in his opening remarks at the conference.

Abu-Rabi, echoing Goa’s sentiments in his address to the conference, stated that “the history of Syria is a human history that belongs to all of us,” Christian, Jew and Muslim alike. He went on to observe that the Middle East is, and always has been, a land of many cultures and religions.

“Interfaith dialogue and co-existence are not novel here, they are ancient,” Abu-Rabi noted, “It is a [religious] tradition in Syria to always welcome the stranger. We need to elevate this tradition and these relationships among nations.”

Acknowledging this longstanding tradition, Sheikh Farfour observed that after the Muslim conquest of Damascus in the 8th century, Christians and Muslims worshipped side-by-side in what is now known as the Great (or Ummayyad) Mosque and was once a church.

“We have prayed at the same shrines,” said the Sheikh, “Our history is part of their history.”

The 1300 year-old Great Mosque—revered as one of the most sacred sites in Islam—was one of many sites of religious and historical importance the group was able to visit during the trip. One such site stood across the street from Al Fatih—the Chapel of St. Paul, scene of the Christian missionary’s dramatic midnight escape from Jewish persecutors in the 2nd century. True to Sheikh Farfour’s word, the Romanesque chapel, which stands on the edge of the old city’s Christian Quarter, was once the site of a church which the Muslim caliph Omar preserved for Christian worship. It later became a mosque, but was returned to Christians during the 19th century, under the care of the Melkites, a branch of Eastern Orthodoxy.

The ambitious itinerary also included sites of political significance—such as the remote villages of the Golan Heights—and ancient history, such as Palmyra, a vast and empty Roman ruin in a remote desert oasis, 240 kilometres east of Damascus. Other sidetrips included Petra in Jordan and Mt. Nebo, where Moses first gazed upon the promised land.

“The Muslim world is a big place. There is much to see and do here, and much to learn,” said the dynamic and well-traveled Abu-Rabi.

These opportunities included deeper explorations of Islam’s diversity. Inside Damascus’ riotously decorated Zeinab mosque—encrusted from floor to ceiling in mirrored glass mosaics, hand-painted tiles and crystal

chandeliers—Abu-Rabi offered a brief, but inspired lecture on Shia Islam to the group. Moments later, he spontaneously engaged a pair of Pakistani pilgrims in a political discussion, translated a prayer plaque on the wall for the non-Arabic speakers in the group, and paid his solemn respects at Zeinab's tomb.

The issue of politics and the Arab-Israeli conflict, though difficult, was in the forefront of many discussions, both formal and informal. While some at the conference saw the occasion as a forum for condemnation of the Israeli state, others were more tempered in their remarks, though no less passionate. Such forthrightness was refreshing for some in the Canadian delegation.

“In Canada, public discussion of religion is at an all-time low,” said Goa. “Coming to the Middle East has been a new experience for almost all of us, and has given us a chance to engage in dialogue on new levels.”

A visit with Abu-Rabi's fiesty, 80 year-old uncle, Subhi abu Mohammad, now living in Jordan brought such dialogue front and center.

“It would be nice to say that this is better than my homeland, but it is not. Nazareth is my home and always will be,” said abu Mohammad, sitting, like a tribal *sheikh*, before an enormous platter of *mensaf*, a Bedouin specialty made with lamb, rice and yoghurt, which his wife prepared for the group at

his home in the village of Bayt Ras, 15 km north of Irbid, Jordan's second largest city.

For his own part, Abu-Rabi is philosophical about the Arab-Israeli conflict, emphasizing that he harbors no ill will against Israeli Jews, but does object to the principles of Zionism which seek to oppress Palestinians, or anyone else for that matter. He is equally critical of Muslim extremists who resort to violence to impose their political will on others. In a swift and summary condemnation, he said simply: "That is not Islam."

Understanding what is Islam is, and what it is not, can be difficult to sort, even for one born into the religion. The complexities of the faith, like the land of its birth, will not be sorted out in the course of a week, or even a lifetime. But spending a week or more in Syria and the region, interacting with its people, goes a very long way towards understanding one another. As one who has traveled to the region many times, and lived there for a spell, I can say that it is a challenge—culturally, ideologically, and politically. Yet I have often thought that experiencing the Middle East is like getting into a hot bath: difficult at first, but more and more rewarding the longer you linger, until you reach a point where you don't want to get out.

This is an introductory book on a major theological institution in contemporary Syria: the Fatih Islamic Institute. Established in 1956 in Damascus by the late Shaykh Muhammad Salih Farfour, the Fatih Islamic Institute.. objective is to spread Islamic education and empower the students of the Institute to think about contemporary Islamic issues from a theological perspective.

Syrian society, with its multi-religious and multi-ethnic component, is complex. In spite of Syria's unusual record of Christian-Muslim coexistence over more than fourteen centuries, and its current ethnic and religious composition, Syria's image in the Western world has been, on the whole, negative. There are various reasons that account for this fact, one of which, no doubt, has been the Arab-Israeli conflict and general Western attitudes vis-à-vis Arabs and Israelis. The leaders of the Fatih Islamic Institute have understood this fact and acted upon it by engaging the Christian communities abroad, especially in the United States and Canada.

This is a unique book about the Muslim religious intelligentsia of contemporary Syria and their discussion of various religious and political issues.

Hassan Hanafi, Professor of Islamic Philosophy, the University of Cairo.

In my many years of research about Syria, I have not encountered a book in any language that deals with the Muslim religious scholars. Highly recommended.

Ghada Hashem Talhami, D. K. Pearsons Professor of Politics at Lake Forest College.

This book brings out the religious dynamics of contemporary Syrian society. It is a must-read for those who are interested in the role of religion in Syria today.

Abdul-Nabi Isstaif, Professor of Comparative Literature, University of Damascus.

Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' is the Edmonton Council of Muslim Communities Chair at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He has authored and edited 19 books in Islamic Studies and modern Islamic thought. He is writing a new book on the Islamic movement in the Arab world after 9/11.

David J. Goa is Director of The Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life, University of Alberta. He has published widely on religious tradition and modernity and on Orthodox Christian thought and is a regular contributor to the media in Canada on religious issues.

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