

CAN RELIGION AND POLITICS BE SEPARATED IN THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY?

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Introduction

Let me begin with a one-sentence answer: it's extremely difficult, if not impossible to separate religion and politics in the Middle East today; and the future is bleak unless we can find ways of separating religion and politics and allowing religion to support an international order that is based on the rule of law.

This presentation is very much a 'big picture' exercise, an attempt to put some of the pieces of the jig-saw puzzle together. As a Christian who is interested in the role of religion and the interaction of religion with politics, I'm trying to make sense of the history that is being played out before us in the Middle East at the present time.

I probably need to explain my credentials. I'm not a historian or a political scientist. I happen to have worked with a mission agency, the Church Mission Society (CMS), in the Middle East for 18 years and have been engaged in theological education of different kinds both there and in the UK, specialising in recent years in Islamic studies.

I went to work in Egypt with the CMS in 1968, working on the staff of the Anglican Cathedral and teaching in the Coptic Evangelical Seminary. I lived with my family in Beirut from '75 to '82, living through part of the civil war. It was working with Christian students and understanding their difficult experience with Islam that drove me to the academic study of Islam. And it was trying to figure out what the Lebanese civil war was all about that forced me to study the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It was in that context that I wrote a book about this conflict, *Whose Promised Land?*, which was first published in 1983¹.

From '83 to '90 the subject I taught at Trinity College, Bristol, was called 'Mission and Religion', that is the Study of Mission and the Study of Religion. From '99 to 2003 I was teaching Islamic Studies at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, and have been back several times to teach there, at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, and at Bethlehem Bible College.

We begin by trying to spell out why it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate religion from politics in the Middle East. We then go on to make certain observations about the present situation in the region, and finally describe some signs of hope which may point to different ways in which religion can influence politics.

WHY HAS IT BEEN DIFFICULT, IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE, TO SEPARATE RELIGION AND POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

I suggest the answer to this question must include the history of Islam, the recent development of Islamism, and Zionism.

The history of Islam

According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad began to receive the revelations of the Qur'an in Mecca in 610 AD when he was 40 years old. For several years he and his small group of followers were severely persecuted. So when he received an invitation from a group of Muslim converts in Medina to come and lead their community, he probably saw it as an opportunity to establish a truly Islamic community. After the *Hijra*, the Migration from Mecca to Medina in 632, therefore, the persecuted prophet became the statesman, the political ruler, who continued to receive revelations from God about how the community was to be organised and led his followers into battle against those who wanted to defeat the growing power of the Medinan state². The *Hijra* is therefore absolutely essential for understanding Islam, and many Muslims look back to the first Islamic state in Medina as a model of the ideal Islamic polity.

By 732, a hundred years after the death of the Prophet, a vast Islamic empire stretched from Morocco and Spain in the West to the borders of China and India in the East. The Muslim world was divided into areas ruled by a number of different dynasties (the Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids and Mamlukes), and then there were three great empires: the Ottomans, which included Asia Minor, the Balkans, much of the Levant and part of North Africa (1517 - 1918); the Saffavid Empire in Persia (1503 – 1722); and the Mughals in India (1526 – 1858). For centuries, therefore, Muslims were ruling over empires, and the religion of Islam had a very clear political expression. And this is why Kenneth Cragg could sum up a very fundamental Islamic conviction in the simple sentence 'Islam must rule,'³ and Tarek Osman can say 'Islam has always been politicized.'⁴

Throughout these centuries, although there was in practice a certain separation between the head of the state and religious leaders, there was an assumption that the state must uphold Islamic law, *shari'a*. Every aspect of the life of the community and of individuals should be determined by the Qur'an and the Sunna, the traditions of the Prophet and the first Muslim communities.

The break-up and defeat of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I in 1918 led western powers, especially Britain and France, to carve up the region between them and to create a series of nation states which they would continue to control in one way or another. This new nationalism and the spread of the European concept of the nation-state have been described by Norman Anderson as 'the most significant development that was transforming the Muslim world at that time,' because the rise of the nation-state 'portended the breakdown of the supposed religion-political synthesis of classical' Islam.'⁵

In the 20th century there were four major developments which continue to have a profound effect on the world of Islam today:

(1) The creation of Saudi Arabia in 1930, through an alliance between the House of Saud and Wahhabism, the very fundamentalist version of Islam whose roots go back to the 18th century. Wahhabis have always been very critical of Shi'ism, regarding it as a heresy which must be resisted. The spread of Wahhabi Islam all over the Muslim world has been described as a kind of accident of history. If it had not been for the Wahhabi alliance with the Saud dynasty and the discovery of oil, which has financed the spread of Wahhabism, this kind of Islam might well have remained a small sect in a remote corner of Arabia.

(2) The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Shi'ism had been the state religion of Persia since the 17th C. But what was new about the Ayatollah Khomeini's rule was the introduction of the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*, the rule of the jurist, which meant that the head of state must be a qualified religious scholar. Many Shi'ites regarded this an innovation. But it created a real Islamic state, in which there was no separation between religion and state. Khomeini also set about exporting his ideas elsewhere in the region, in the hope that other Muslim-majority countries would develop a polity that was more consistently Islamic. We should also note that Shi'ites have a distinctive eschatology which influences their politics.

(3) These two developments have intensified the conflict between Sunnis and Shi'ites. Sunnis in the region have become more and more afraid of the arc of Shi'ite power which stretches from Iran to Iraq, some of the Gulf States (where there are sizable Shi'ite minorities), Syria (where the Assads have been Alawites, an offshoot of Shi'ism) and then to Lebanon (where Hizbullah has been gradually increasing its power). The antipathy between Sunnis and Shi'ites is just as strong as the antipathy there has been between Catholics and Protestants in past centuries.

(4) The growth of Muslim communities in the West, where they are a minorities living in pluralist, secularised societies. It is estimated that around a quarter of the 1.8 billion Muslims in the world live in situations of this kind – which Muslims for 13 centuries before this could hardly have imagined.

In suggesting that Islam is one major reason for the difficulty of separating religion and politics in the Middle East, we must beware of the danger of essentialism, that is claiming that we can sum up the essence, the essential nature of Islam. Lord Cromer in Egypt in the 19th C believed that Islam was incapable of change and reform. 'Islam cannot be reformed,' he said, '... reformed Islam is Islam no longer; it is something else.' But most today would say that Islam *can* change and *has* changed. For example, there are many Muslims in the world – especially in the West - who would argue for the separation of religion and the state. But all we are saying is that, because of the example of the Prophet and the history of Islam, it is very hard for Muslims in the Middle East to accept the process of secularisation which has taken place in the West and to see Islam being pushed out of the public sphere. Islam must inevitably have continuing importance in one form or another in the social and political life of every Muslim-majority country in the region for the indefinite future. Michael Luders, a German commentator on the Middle East, writes: 'No protest party or movement that is not rooted in Islam has a chance of gaining power.'⁶ It would be hard for anyone to

suggest that Christianity must inevitably have continuing importance in the social and political life of Europe or the UK today.

Islamism

We're talking here about the different expressions of political Islam which have developed during the 20th century. These are Muslims who have a clear political agenda of some kind in their different contexts and want to create a political system which is unashamedly Islamic. One of their basic convictions was summed up in these words of Sayyid Qutb: '*la budda li'lislam an yahkum*, Inevitably Islam shall rule.' For many years people spoke about 'Fundamentalist Islam.' But for a variety of reasons, most academics and journalists speak these days speak of 'Islamism', and are careful to recognise that while some Islamists (like ISIS) believe that violence is justified, others (like Erdogan in Turkey) reject the use of violence and believe that they must work through democratic means to create a more consistently Islamic state. Islamists who turn to violence are usually called 'Jihadis'. But while we distinguish between Jihadis and other Islamists, we have to recognise that they share the same ultimate goals. They simply disagree over *how* to go about creating a truly Islamic polity.

If you ask why I separate Islamism from the history of Islam, it's not because I accept the view that Islamic extremism or Jihadi Islam is a perversion of Islam. I well remember an Anglican bishop saying on the Today programme just a few days after 9/11 'This has nothing to do with Islam.' I believe we have to say, on the contrary, that 9/11 had a lot to do with Islam. Jihadi Islam is an extreme example of one particular extreme expression of Islam, Wahhabi Islam. It is very clearly based on one particular Islamic way of interpreting the Qur'an, the Sunna and the example of the first Muslim communities.

I disagree, therefore, with Christians who see no essential difference between Islam and Islamism, and who believe that ISIS is much nearer to the essential nature of Islam than the so-called moderate Islam that we see today. Patrick Sookhdeo, for example, believes that "Islamism" is "simply the essence of classical Islam, and violence and terror" are found within both of them ... the only key distinction that can be made is one between ideological Islam in all its classical and contemporary varieties, on the one hand, and ordinary Muslims who might not follow the orthodox accounts of their faith, on the other."⁷

I don't for a moment question that scripture and tradition are extremely important for understanding Islamism of all kinds. While there are verses in the Qur'an which are positive about Christians, there are others which are more confrontational and polemical (like the famous 'Sword Verse', 9:29). Many Jihadis today believe that these later verses abrogate the earlier positive verses; they claim that they are simply copying the example of Muhammad and the first Muslims, and can ignore the centuries of Islamic legal thinking⁸. Some Sunnis (like the Shi'ites) have a highly developed eschatology, and ISIS has made great use of an authoritative saying of the Prophet about a great battle which will take place between the Muslim and Byzantine (Christian) armies at a place called Dabiq, north of Aleppo.

These scriptural sources are therefore extremely important. But where I disagree with people like Sookhdeo is that they put all the emphasis on scripture and tradition and downplay the importance of history and politics. This approach has been described as ‘textualism’, because it seeks to explain almost everything in terms of texts. I would argue that we need to pay as much attention to history and politics as we do to scripture and tradition.

The three most influential Islamist ideologues of the 20th century were Hassan al-Banna in Egypt (1906 - 1949), Sayid Qutb in Egypt (1906 – 1966), and Abul A‘la Mawdudi in Pakistan (1903 – 1979). All of these writers were living in a particular political context and facing very specific challenges. Hassan al-Banna in Egypt in the 1920s was working for a spiritual revival in Islam which would transform the social and political life of Egypt and bring an end to British rule. Sayyid Qutb lived through the end of British rule in Egypt and worked for a time with Nasser after the Revolution in 1952, but ceased to support him because his vision of Arab nationalism was not grounded in Islam. Mawdudi settled in the newly created Pakistan in 1947 making his aim ‘the thorough Islamization of the government of Pakistan and its purging from all Western moral, spiritual and political values and practices.’

Like these three ideologues, the three Islamist movements that we hear most about these days, can only be understood in the particular political context in which they were created. Al-Qa‘ida came into being in Afghanistan as a response to the Russian invasion of 1979. Hamas developed out of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza in 1986 as a response to Israel’s occupation of Gaza and the West Bank in 1967. And Hizbullah was created in 1986 as a resistance movement fighting against Israel’s occupation of South Lebanon after the invasion of 1982.

Are there any common factors in all these different expressions of political Islam in the 20th century? In every one there are two main drives: a desire to see the public sphere ordered by Islamic principles and a refusal to be ruled by foreigners. In all these situations committed Muslims were not content with a privatised Islam. They wanted to find ways in which the public sphere, the life of the whole nation could be ordered in a consistently Islamic way. In all these different situations, context was all-important.

We could argue, therefore, that if the British had not controlled Egypt from 1882, there might never have been the Muslim Brotherhood. If the CIA and MI6 had not engineered the coup in 1953 which removed Mossadegh, the first democratically elected leader in Persia, there might not have been an Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. If Israel had complied with UN Security Council Resolution 242 in 1967 and withdrawn from the territories it had occupied in the Six Day War, Hamas might never have come into existence. If Israel had not invaded Lebanon in 1982 and stayed on as an occupying power in the south for 28 years, there might have been no Hizbullah. And if the US and its allies (including ourselves) had not invaded Iraq in 2003, there would probably have been no ISIS. I suggest, therefore, that political context is as important as ideology and religious belief for understanding the recent expressions of Islamism⁹.

How then does a moderate Muslim today understand the development of Islamism, and in particular the tensions between Jihadis and other Islamists which have been

described as ‘a war within the soul of the Sunni faith’¹⁰? This is how Tarek Osman describes this struggle in his 2016 book *Islamism: What It Means for the Middle East and the World*:

‘Islam has always been politicized. The notion that it is *deen wa dawla* (a faith and a state) has been challenging, and challenged, for over 150 years now, ever since the Arab and Islamic worlds’ mass exposure to Western modernity. All modern Islamization projects have been manifestations of that idea. Various Islamists, from different schools of thought, have tried to find a balance. On the one hand, they have attempted to retain their societies’ Islamic identity and their religion’s traditionally decisive role as the pillar of political legitimacy, legislation and the main social frame of reference. On the other, they have sought to not obstruct their societies’ attempts to “catch up with the West” and escape the lethargy that had undermined the Islamic civilization and extinguished its old grandeur.

‘None of these attempts have worked ... The projects of the most prominent Islamist groups in the region clashed with those of the secularists. Throughout the period from the 1950s to the 1990s, the clash of ideas became a political struggle between Islamist groups and authoritarian regimes that were slowly losing the consent of the people... The relationship between Arab Islamism and secularism has reverted to a severe, bloody and vindictive struggle. The situation is even starker than it was a few decades ago.... Arab Islamism has been drawn to the heart of the war between Sunnism and Shiism across the entire Middle East ... It will soon have to fight to save the soul of Islamism. As Salafist jihadist groups grow ... the largest Islamist groups and the serious Islamist thinkers will have to defend the idea of Islamism against the charge of being fundamentally equated with violence and terror. The largest Islamist groups and their leading thinkers will have to battle the militant jihadists over what it means to be an Islamist ...

‘Arab Islamism has always tried to design the future in the image of the past. The Islamists have repeatedly tried to impose their own interpretations of certain episodes in Islamic history upon how their societies should live in the present ... But now, this approach has been exhausted. Neither the early Islamic community in Medina, nor Islamic civilization under the Abbasids in the ninth century, nor Islamic Andalusia can offer a workable social, political, economic or cultural frame of reference for today’s half a billion Muslims under the age of thirty-five ... They will not guide political-economy systems in today’s world ... the future of Islamism will ultimately rest on how the Islamists redefine it and try to present it again to their societies ...’¹¹

Zionism

Here is a very obvious example of religion that is bound up with politics. The majority of the early Zionists at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries were secular Jews, while the majority of orthodox Jews opposed Zionism. But it didn’t take long for Zionist leaders to start appealing to the Hebrew scriptures to support their claim to the land. This is how Ilan Pappé describes this development:

‘The fusion of socialism with Zionism began in earnest after Herzl’s death in 1904, as the various socialist factions became the leading parties in the World Zionist movement and on the ground in Palestine. For socialists, as one of them said, the Bible provided “the myth for our right over the land.” It was in the Bible that they read stories about Hebrew farmers, shepherds, kings and wars, which they appropriated as describing the ancient golden era of their nation’s birth. Returning to the land meant coming back to become farmers, shepherds, and kings. Thus, they found themselves faced with a challenging paradox, for they want to secularize Jewish life and to use the Bible as a justification for colonizing Palestine. In other words, though they did not believe in God, He had nonetheless promised them Palestine.

‘For many Zionist leaders, the reference in the Bible to the land of Palestine was just a means to their ends, not the essence of Zionism ... Herzl was probably more secular than the group of leaders who replaced him ... With Herzl’s death in 1904, and the rise of his successors, Zionism homed in on Palestine and the Bible became even more of an asset than before as proof of a divine Jewish right to the land... From that moment on, the Bible became both the justification and the route map for the Zionist colonization of Palestine.’¹²

Many writers have used the word ‘messianic’ to describe the new fervour among Israeli Jews after the conquest of the West Bank and Gaza in the Six Day War of June 1967. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, for example, has written: ‘The Israeli public were overcome by the intoxication of national pride, military arrogance, and fantasies of the glory of messianic deliverance.’¹³

The Bible is still being used as the basis for Jewish claims to the land, as Ilan Pappé explains:

‘Israeli educational textbooks now carry the same message of the right to the land based on a biblical promise. According to a letter sent by the education ministry in 2014 to all schools in Israel: “the Bible provides the cultural infrastructure of the state of Israel, in it our right to the land is anchored.” Bible studies are now a crucial and expanded component of the curriculum – with a particular focus on the Bible as recording an ancient history that justifies the claim to the land. The biblical stories and the national lessons that can be learned from them are fused together with the study of the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. There is a direct line from this 2014 letter back to the evidence given by David Ben-Gurion in 1937 to the Royal Peel Commission (the British inquiry to try to find a solution to the emerging conflict). In the public discussions on the future of Palestine, Ben-Gurion waved a copy of the Bible at the members of the committee, shouting: “This is our *Qushan* [the Ottoman land registry proof], our right to Palestine does not come from the Mandate Charter, the Bible is our Mandate Charter.”’¹⁴ (39-40)

At the present time there are around 600,000 Jewish settlers on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. It is estimated that around a third of these are economic settlers taking advantage of favourable economic conditions for buying property. Around a third are described as ideological settlers who are there because they believe that the West Bank is part of *Eretz Israel* which was promised by God to Abraham and his

descendants. No doubt we have all seen on television pictures of these settlers saying ‘This land is ours because God promised it to us.’

Under this heading we need to include Christian Zionism. Support among Christians for the idea of Jews returning to the land goes back to the Puritans in the 17th Century, and became stronger during the 19th century – especially in the USA. It’s a strange irony of history, therefore, that there was such a thing as Christian Zionism long before the Zionist movement itself came into existence. And it can be argued that Christians played a very significant role in preparing the ground for the acceptance of the Zionist vision in Europe and America. The Rev William Henry Hechler, for example, who was chaplain at the British Embassy in Vienna, befriended Theodore Herzl in the year 1898, just a few weeks after the publication of Herzl’s *The Jewish State*, and played a significant role in encouraging Herzl’s Zionist vision and eventually introducing him to the Kaiser, the German Emperor.

Many Christian Zionists today have a very clear agenda and are prepared to support the state of Israel and its policies almost without question. Their biblical interpretation and theology dictate clear political stances in relation to Israel. Here, for example, is a Jewish Messianic leader, Daniel Juster, who believes that biblical teaching about justice and the land must take precedence over any human concepts of human rights and international law:

‘My contention is that although these types of reasoning [about human rights] will dominate the councils of the unredeemed institutions of the nation, such reasoning must not dominate those who embrace biblical faith ... If the Jewish people do not submit to the law of God and are instead a lawless people, or if they replace God’s law with human laws which contradict that law, they will find themselves suffering and resisted by God himself. By the same rule, if Palestinians refuse to recognize what God says about the Jewish people and their connection to the land of Israel, then suffering will result ... So if the Palestinians do not acknowledge God’s promise, they are foundationally unjust and are themselves resisted by God and lose their rights in this land.’¹⁵

At the present time it’s estimated that there are anything between 50 and 80 million evangelical Christians in the USA who enthusiastically support the state of Israel. 81% of white evangelical Christians voted for Donald Trump, and it’s thought that evangelical Christians probably make up around a quarter of Donald Trump’s power base. His Vice-President, Mike Pence, is a very committed and articulate evangelical Christian, and some months ago there were photographs circulating of a group of pastors standing round Trump at his desk in the Oval Office and praying over him. An evangelical pastor took part in the ceremony of the opening of the new American Embassy in Jerusalem, and it’s been suggested that Trump’s decision to move the American embassy to Jerusalem was in part pay-back to the evangelical community for their consistent and enthusiastic support. Can we find a clearer example of religion being bound up with politics?

So why has it been difficult to separate religion and politics in the Middle East? The combination of the example of the Prophet, the history of Islam, the development of Islamism and Zionism together makes quite a powerful cocktail.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE PRESENT SITUATION

It's political leaders who are making the significant decisions rather than religious leaders

In spite of what I've said about the profound influence of religion on politics in the past, we have to recognise that at the present time, it's politicians who are calling the tune today, and not religious leaders. In the mid 1960s Sir Norman Anderson was drawing attention to fact that the modernisation of Islamic law would be largely, if not totally, dependent on political developments in the Muslim world. This is how his views about the primacy of politics are summed up by Todd Thompson:

'As to the future, Anderson believed the political climate and the concerns of the regimes in power would remain decisive. "In the final analysis," he predicted, "almost everything" would turn "during the next few years, on considerations of political strength." He predicted that the acceptance of state-sponsored legislation by the *ulema* and the 'common people' would always depend on "their attachment to the political leaders or party currently in power.'"¹⁶

The Arab Spring has largely failed and led to, or been followed by, a new cold war between the USA and Russia

The Arab Spring began in December 2010 as a spontaneous, popular protest against poverty, corruption and one-party police states. The structures of the deep state, however, were too strong, and youthful protesters were unable to convert their calls for dignity and freedom into credible political programmes. Tunisia is the only country where Islamists and secularists have been able to work out any kind of compromise.

In Egypt the initial revolution was high-jacked by the Muslim Brotherhood, and when they were ousted by a popular revolt, the deep state took back control under a military leader. In Syria the protest movements were high-jacked by Islamists – mostly from outside – and the country became the battleground for a series of proxy wars. A Syrian Presbyterian pastor said to me in Beirut in January last year 'Syria is suffering from the game of nations.' Mark Farha, a Lebanese Christian scholar teaching at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, writes:

'While the sources of the maelstrom of sectarian violence haunting Christian communities in the Middle East are manifold, the intensification of an artificially concocted new cold war between the USA and Russia, as well as the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, has further aggravated conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and elsewhere.'¹⁷

At least six different countries have been pursuing their own agendas and fighting against each other – the USA, Russia, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Iran¹⁸. Patrick Cockburn writes that 'The most important international outcome of the war so far is that it has enabled Russia to re-establish itself as a great power.'¹⁹

Sisi in Egypt is able to justify his authoritarian rule by saying, ‘It’s a choice between me and the Jihadis; it’s either order and security under my rule or anarchy and chaos under the Islamists.’ Similarly, Assad has been consistently saying, both to his own people and the rest of the world, ‘It’s a choice between me and ISIS; the alternative to the present regime is Syria being taken over by Jihadis.’

Western powers have a large measure of responsibility for starting and prolonging many of the present conflicts

Islamism has to some extent been a response to western imperialism. And Zionism, in the words of Ilan Pappé, ‘was a settler colonial movement, similar to the movements of Europeans who had colonized the two Americas, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.’²⁰ So this is another area where I find myself disagreeing with some Christian commentators who seem to put most of the blame for recent developments – and especially for Islamic terrorism – on Muslims and Islam. Here, for example, is Peter Riddell:

‘In our view it is not the non-Muslim world that stands at the cross-roads, but the Muslim world. Islam has, throughout its history, contained within itself a channel of violence, legitimized by certain passages of the Qur’an, though put in question by other passages ... Ultimately it is only the Muslim world that can deal with the roots of the problem, which, in our view, do *not* lie in Western materialism or nineteenth-century colonialism or American imperialism, but in Islam’s own history, both distant and recent.’²¹

Patrick Sookhdeo is equally clear about where he believes the real responsibility lies:

‘The primary motivation of terrorists and suicide bombers is theological, compounded mainly of duty and reward ... If terrorism is going to be dealt with at its source, Islam has to change and undergo a transformation. In the long term it would appear that the only way to bring an end to Islamic terrorism is to reform the teaching of Islam with regard to war and violence ... Without a theology to fuel it, Islamic terrorism would eventually shrivel and die ... Unless the militant interpretation of Islamic sources is recognized as the basic cause of Islamic terrorist activities, there is little hope of a lasting solution.’²²

This approach seems to be saying ‘We in the West have done nothing wrong. The problem is with Islam; it’s Muslims who have got to change.’ I’ve already suggested that history and politics are just as important as Islamic scripture and dogma. I would go further and suggest that western imperialism and interference in the Middle East have played a major role in creating the context in which many of the conflicts have been played out in the last century. Britain, for example, had its own imperial motives in entering into the Sykes-Picot Agreement with France in 1916 and signing the Balfour Declaration in 1917. Another significant example of western interference was the coup staged by the CIA and MI6 in 1953 to remove Mossadeq in Persia. This coup led to the return of the Shah, and the Shah was ousted by Khomeini. It is estimated that the sanctions imposed on Iraq by the US and its allies after the Gulf War in 1991 led to the deaths of at least one million people, half of them children. Our invasion of Iraq in 2003 created the context in which ISIS came into being. How

then can we possibly claim that we in the West have little responsibility for the way history has unfolded in the Middle East? Michael Luders goes so far as to suggest that 'In no small measure, the West has created the terrorist threat it is fighting'²³

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been - and still is - near the heart of the problems of the region

The seeds of this conflict were sown long before the Holocaust and the Second World War. In the 1880s, when Zionist settlement in Palestine began to increase, the Jews were less than 5% of the total population. It wasn't inevitable, however, that Zionism should develop in the way that it did throughout the 19th C. History might have been very different if Britain had kept its promises to the Arabs to create an independent Arab state in Syria-Palestine after the defeat of the Ottoman Turks; or if the Zionist settlers had wanted to integrate with the Palestinian Arabs and not seek to become a self-contained majority in a Jewish state; or if the British government at different stages had taken the principles of democracy and self-determination seriously and set in place political structures which reflected the demography of the country. The state of Israel is seen by Arabs and Muslims as a transplant or a cancerous growth in the heart of the Arab and Muslim worlds. The conflict which began as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become the Israeli-Arab conflict. And if sectarianism has become more of a problem in every country in the Middle East, the very concept of Israel as 'the Jewish state' is fundamentally sectarian. A resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of international law and human rights would, I believe, begin to address this grievance which is probably at the top of the list for most Muslims and Arabs.

Islamic and Islamist convictions about Palestine and Jerusalem are no less fundamentalist than Zionist convictions

There are strong similarities between Islamic fundamentalism and Jewish fundamentalism. We might almost say that fundamentalism in the Palestinian Muslim context is a carbon copy of Jewish fundamentalism. Islamists are no more fundamentalist in their approach to their scriptures and their history than the religiously motivated Jewish settlers on the West Bank. Palestinians were aware of their distinctive identity before the arrival of the Zionists. But their experience of dispossession forced them to look to their own scriptures and history in order to articulate an Islamic theology of the land. This is how Arno J. Mayer notes the similarities between the two kinds of fundamentalism:

'Though not devout himself, Begin held that Greater Israel necessarily included the lands once controlled by King David and King Solomon. Dayan ... argued that since "we possess the Holy Book and consider ourselves to be the people of the Holy Book, we need to possess the land of the Holy Book as well." With irredentism assuming an increasingly religious edge, it risked awakening what Ben-Gurion had once called the Islamic "demon." And the unstable mix of nationalism, Zionism, and the Bible would prove just as demonic and volatile in the region as that of nationalism, Arabism, and the Koran.'²⁴

There are four distinct conflicts going on within the battle for the soul of Islam

There is firstly the conflict between Sunnis, led by Saudi Arabia, and Shi'ites, led by Iran. Secondly, there is the conflict between the Jihadis and the other Islamists who renounce violence. Thirdly, moderate Muslims are locking horns with Islamists. And fourthly, there is the struggle between Islamism and the more secular Arab nationalism.

Because the western secular mind-set has done its best to banish religion from the public sphere, it finds it hard to understand the Middle East

We can probably all remember Alistair Campbell's memorable sentence about the workings of 10 Downing Street: 'We don't do God.' Having done our utmost to keep God out of public life in this country in recent years, however, we have gradually woken up to the fact that God is still very much on the agenda for many people in our communities. The secular world has been surprised to find that Muslims really do want God to be honoured in the public sphere and want religion to play a role in discussion about the common good. In the last years before his death in 1998 Lesslie Newbiggin was challenging Christians to wake up to the fact that Muslims were trying to engage in the public sphere at a time when Christians had long since retreated into a privatised personal faith²⁵. We Christians ought to be in a position to understand - and even applaud - the desire of Muslims to recognise the sovereignty of God in every area of life and thought - even if we disagree with them about how we engage in public debate. We ought to be in a position to be bridge-builders - interpreting the secular world to Muslims and Muslims to the secular world. We should also add at this point that there is a desperate need for improved religious literacy among politicians and journalists.

It is difficult to have an international order based on the rule of law because for many countries national self-interest and expediency trump the rule of law

One might have hoped that the UN might play an important role in maintaining a rules-based international order. Both the USA and Russia, however, have used their veto to block Security Council Resolutions in recent years. Is it an over-simplification to say that American policies in the Middle East are guided by 'America first', opposition to Russia, support for Israel, a close alliance with Saudi Arabia against Iran, access to oil and markets for weapons, and suspicion of Muslims? America's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, shows little respect for international law relating to the status of occupied territory and refugees. The recent cancelation of millions of dollars of aid to UNWRA and to hospitals in East Jerusalem are seen by many as a way of humiliating the Palestinians and forcing them to come to the negotiating table and to accept American proposals for a resolution of the conflict. These measures seem to be part of a plan to change the status of Palestinian refugees so that they are no longer seen as refugees and therefore not entitled to certain rights under international law. Daniel Barenboim has written that America could solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict 'in three days by exerting pressure on the Israeli government.'²⁶

Christians in the Middle East face some difficult dilemmas

In many countries Christians are deeply divided in their responses to political developments.

- In Egypt, for example, many Christians support Sisi enthusiastically, saying that Christians have 'never had it so good.' Many others, however, feel that while the government talks about protecting the rights of Christians, animosity against Christians still remains and leads to discrimination, marginalisation and sometimes violence.

- In Syria, the majority of Christians have supported Assad, partly because they have enjoyed a protected status under the Assads, and partly because of their fear of the Islamist alternative. Others, and especially those who have been forced to leave the country, are all too aware of the sectarianism, the brutality and corruption of the regime.

- In Lebanon roughly half of the Christians have sided with a movement that is dominated by Hizbullah and supports the Assad regime in Syria, while the other half support the US and the Gulf States²⁷. When Lebanon gained its independence in 1943, the Christians felt secure because they were the majority in a proportion of 5 to 4. But now that Christians are only approximately a third of the population, should they hold onto the unique Lebanese system of proportional representation as the only way to protect their existence, or should they press for a secular state?

This powerful cri de coeur from Mark Farha, sums up how many Christians in the Middle East feel about their situation at the present time:

'Generally speaking, Christians do not figure as key considerations in the corridors of power in Paris, London, Washington or Berlin. When it comes to the Middle East, the formulation of the "core national interest" in US or European foreign policy is dictated by lobbies serving the interests of arms manufacturers, Israel and the oil industry ...

'Geopolitically, Christians ... are increasingly caught in the crossfire of the escalating showdown between the USA and Russia on the one hand, and the conflict between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran on the other hand ...

'Politically, Christians in the region have at best been footnotes and statistics, and at worst dispensable pawns on the broader chessboard of regional geopolitics ...

'Perhaps the most fundamental challenge facing Christians in the Middle East is the pervasive tendency to ignore or discount their fate ... The Middle East is currently passing through a tempest. Caught in its throes, Christians face stark choices, ranging from resignation to emigration. Perhaps the most sensible strategy for Middle Eastern Christians to pursue is to ally with moderate Muslims across the region who are equally aghast and harassed by the spectre of budding terrorism and jihadist Islam ...

‘For Christian communities to survive in the Middle East, a broader diplomatic détente would be necessary. Otherwise ... Christian communities will continue to be human debris in devastating wars of civilization and oil, fervid ideologies and cold interests...’²⁸

There has been a dramatic decline in the number and proportion of Christians in the region²⁹

At the time of the Islamic Conquests in the 7th century, a few thousand Muslim Arabs were ruling over a population in which the majority were Christians.

In 1900	Christians were 14%	of the total population of the region	(around 7 million)
In 1970	7%		(around 12 million)
In 2015	5%		(around 25 million)

In Iraq in 1970 Christians were 4% of the population
in 2015 down to .9%, around 275,000

The Chaldean Archbishop of Erbil, Bashar Warda, has said, ‘We are facing the extinction of Christianity as a religion in Iraq.’

In Syria in 2011 Christians were 1.25 million; now around 500,000

ARE THERE ANY SIGNS OF HOPE?

Mainstream Muslims are challenging the Jihadis

We often hear people say ‘Why don’t Muslims say more publicly that they distance themselves from the Jihadis?’ One answer is that Muslim leaders of all kinds have made repeated statements condemning the Jihadis, but the media simply don’t pick them up. Martin Accad at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut has counted around 30 conferences that have been convened by Muslims since June 2014, around 130 different statements put out by Muslim bodies, and many *fatwas* condemning the Jihadis and pointing out why their actions cannot be justified by Islamic scripture, tradition or law³⁰.

The development of Islam in the West could change Islam elsewhere in the world

Muslims in the West are learning to live as minorities in pluralist societies and developments in Islam could eventually affect Islam in Muslim-majority countries. This is one of the arguments of Philip Jenkins in *God’s Continent: Christianity, Islam and the Religious Crisis of Europe*³¹. The Sudanese-American Muslim scholar, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na‘im, has written a book *Islam and the Secular State: negotiating the future of shari‘a*³², in which he argues, on Islamic grounds, for the ‘religious neutrality of the state’ and the separation of Islam and the state.

Jews are questioning Zionism

Here, for example, are statements from two Jewish writers illustrating the obvious point that a significant number of Jews do not support the Zionist vision:

Elmer Berger, writing in 1989: ‘Anti-Zionism and opposition to a Zionist state has been – and is ... a legitimate position in Judaism. There were – and are – Jews who, far from incorporating political Zionism as part of their faith, have regarded it as a moral imperative to stand in opposition.’³³

Professor Dov Waxman, writing in 2016: ‘Support for Israel is no longer the great unifier of American Jewry that it was after 1967. Israel is now actually becoming a divisive, rather than a unifying force in American Jewish life.’³⁴

In his recent book *Cracks in the Wall: beyond apartheid in Israel/Palestine*, Ben White writes: ‘It is my contention that the end of Israel as a bipartisan issue of concern in US politics, along with the wider left’s alienation from and the far right’s embrace of Israel, are developments of profound long-term concern for the State of Israel, and its ability to maintain the apartheid status quo.’³⁵

Christians are questioning Christian Zionism

The biblical and theological basis of Christian Zionism has been the belief that the return of Jews to the land and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 should be seen as the fulfilment of biblical promises and prophecies concerning the nation and the land. This basic assumption is known as Restorationism. Many Christian Zionists go further and hold to some form of dispensationalism, the scheme first developed by John Nelson Darby in the 1840s. The main alternative to this interpretation is usually known as Covenant Theology, which emphasises God’s one covenant of grace and insists that OT promises and prophecies about the land the chosen people need to be interpreted in the light of the NT.

Over the years I have met many people who have been brought up with Christian Zionist ideas, but have come to accept Covenant Theology. What generally leads to this change of mind is a combination of three things: (a) learning about the history of the conflict, (b) seeing the situation on the ground in Israel-Palestine, and (c) finding an alternative biblical interpretation³⁶. Organisations like Sabeel, the movement of Palestinian liberation theology, based in Jerusalem, and conferences like ‘Christ at the Checkpoint’, organised by Bethlehem Bible College, and have been influential for many.

The younger generation are more concerned about human rights than about religion

More and more young people engage with issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict out of their concern for human rights. The BDS movement, Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, for example, which was launched in 2005 by a group of Palestinian activists, has drawn widespread support – and criticism – all over the world. ‘At the heart of the boycott campaign,’ writes Ben White, ‘is a desire to end the impunity

enjoyed by the State of Israel for human rights violations that, in other cases, have prompted international censure and sanction. “For nearly seventy years, Israel has denied Palestinians their fundamental rights and has refused to comply with international law,” the BDS Movement writes. Israel’s “regime of settler colonialism, apartheid and occupation over the Palestinian people ... is only possible because of international support,” it continues.

“Governments fail to hold Israel to account, while corporations and institutions across the world help Israel to oppress Palestinians. Because those in power refuse to act to stop this injustice, Palestinian civil society has called for a global citizens’ response of solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for freedom, justice and equality.”³⁷

Mark Farha sees evidence of more and more people in the Middle East wanting to see a separation of religion and state: ‘While there is significant and disturbing support for anti-Christian, jihadist groups, including ISIS, there are also hopeful signs of momentum towards a more civil society. War-ravaged societies such as Iraq and Lebanon demonstrate strong opposition to sectarianism. Recent polls in both countries show a significant majority of respondents calling for a separation of religion and state.’³⁸

Many Christians are determined to stay rooted where they are

If as a Christian in the Middle East you’re worried about your children’s education and their prospects of finding work, if you have relatives who have emigrated to the USA, Canada, France or Australia, and if people around you make you feel that you’re not welcome in the community, what is there to stop you trying to emigrate? It’s not in the least surprising that hundreds of thousands of Christians have left the region in the last century. But I am constantly impressed by the Christians I meet who say they are determined to stay rooted in their communities in spite of all the difficulties. I am also impressed by the number of Muslims who are pleading with Christians not to leave.

When I raised these issue at a seminar in Oxford some years ago, Munther Isaac, who is now the Academic Dean of Bethlehem Bible College, responded by saying, ‘What will keep us here is having a new sense of mission.’ In other words, if Christians can believe that they really do have something significant to contribute to their societies and their nation, they will want to stay.

Some positive models

Let me briefly point to a number of initiatives that I know of in the region which illustrate different ways in which Christians are engaging with social and political issues. You’ll notice that all of these are examples of a ‘bottom – up’ rather than a ‘top down’ approach.

- The Holy Land Trust, based in Bethlehem, has as its strapline ‘Empowering Communities for the Future’, and is working on a number of civil society and

community development projects. The director, Sami Awad, has even talked with Hamas leaders about the principles of non-violent resistance.

- Musalaha, the Arabic and Hebrew word for ‘reconciliation,’ has for more than 20 years been bringing Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians together. For example, they organise ‘Desert Encounters’, in which young people from the two communities go out into the desert for three days on camels and learn how to listen to each other’s stories.

- SAT-7 broadcasts programmes on satellite television in Arabic, Farsi and Turkish which deal with a wide variety of personal and social issues from a Christian standpoint. While they are addressed primarily to Christians in the region, the audience response shows that large numbers of Muslims are watching these programmes.

- Organisations like Embrace the Middle East and World Vision are engaged in a great deal of relief and development. Churches in Lebanon have turned themselves inside out in their response to the one and a half million Syrian refugees who have come across the border into Lebanon. This story told by Dudley Woodberry illustrates the impression that such relief work can sometimes make on Muslims:

‘A Christian organisation imported thousands of sandals for children in a very primitive Afghan refugee camp in Peshawar. However, they decided not just to hand out sandals, but first to wash the feet and dress the wounds of the children. Months later, a local grade school teacher asked her class, “Who are the best Muslims?” A girl raised her hand and said, “the Kafirs.” When the shocked teacher asked why, the girl responded, “The mujahidin killed my father, but the Kafirs washed my feet.”’³⁹

- There are a number of projects which bring Christians and Muslims together face to face on a regular basis, like the Church-Mosque Network and Khebz wa Meleh (bringing Christian and Muslim young people together on the model of the UK based ‘The Feast’), both organised by the Institute for Middle East Studies, based at the Arab Baptist Seminary in Beirut, and a regular meeting of clergy and imams organised by the Episcopal Church in Egypt.

These are all grass-roots projects which bring Christians, Muslims and Jews together and attempt to address many of the personal and social issues which the politicians can never address.

CONCLUSION

It’s hard to think of another situation in the world where politics have come to be so closely bound up with religion, and where scriptures have such a profound effect on political action. When different theologies come into conflict there’s bound to be conflict. Martin Gilbert sums up the root of the problem, when he writes that Yitzhak Rabin, reflecting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, understood that ‘if the conflict were to be theologized, there never would be peace. For, to theological conflict, there are no compromises, and therefore no solutions.’⁴⁰

Political problems require political solutions, and if Jews, Christians, Muslims and secular people cannot learn how to talk to each other and make compromises in the real world for the sake of survival, peace, and co-existence, they should be asked to retreat to their ghettos and talk only to those within their closed circles. People of faith need to learn how to – as it were - put their faith on one side as they work together to find solutions, working towards a world order which is based on the rule of law as understood by the vast majority of nations.

If religion has become so much part of the problem in this part of the world, the challenge to us is to find ways of enabling religion to become part of the solution.

¹ Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?*, Lion, 1983, 1992, 2002 and 2015

² One of the best studies of the life of the Prophet, by William Montgomery Watt, has the title, *Muhammad: prophet and statesman*, OUP, 1961

³ Kenneth Cragg, *Islam and the Muslim*, Open University, 1978, p 78

⁴ Tarek Osman, *Islamism: what it means for the Middle East and the world*, Yale University Press, 2016, p 254

⁵ Todd M. Thompson, *Norman Anderson and the Christian Mission to Modernise Islam*, Hurst, 2017, p 86

⁶ Michael Luders, *Blowback: how the West f*cked up the Middle East (and why it was a bad idea)*, Old Street Publishing, 2017, p 109

⁷ Patrick Sookdeo, *Understanding Islamic Terrorism: the Islamic doctrine of war*, Isaac Publishing, 2004, quoted in Todd M. Thompson, p 258

⁸ This Jihadi interpretation is explained and challenged by Tim Winter (Abdal Hakim Murad) in *Understanding the Four Madhhabs: the facts about ijthihad and taqlid*, The Muslim Academic Trust, 1999

⁹ Note the linking of ‘context’ and ‘ideology’ in the title of the book edited by Khaled Hroub, *Political Islam: context versus ideology*, Saqi, 2010

¹⁰ Paul Moorcroft, *The Jihadist Threat: the reconquest of the West?*, Pen and Sword, 2017, p 165

¹¹ Tarek Osman, pp 254 - 260

¹² Ilan Pappé, *Ten Myths about Israel*, Verso, 2017, pp 31-32

¹³ Avi Raz, *The Bride and the Dowry: Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians in the aftermath of the June 1967 War*, Yale University Press, 2012, p 267

¹⁴ Ilan Pappé, pp 39-40

¹⁵ Dan Juster, ‘A Messianic Jew Looks at the Land Promises’, in *The Land Cries Out: theology of the land in the Israeli-Palestinian context*, Cascade, 2012, pp 68,79

¹⁶ Todd M. Thompson, p 234

¹⁷ Mark Farha, ‘Social and Political Context,’ in Kenneth R. Ross, Mariz Tadros and Todd M. Johnson, *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p 343

¹⁸ See Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: international rivalry in the new Middle East*, Yale University Press, 2016

¹⁹ The *i*, 22 September, 2018

²⁰ Ilan Pappé, p 41

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- ²¹ Peter G. Riddell and Peter Cotterell, *Islam in Conflict: past present and future*, IVP, 2003, pp 7-8
- ²² Patrick Sookhdeo, pp 143, 214, 217 and 221
- ²³ Michael Luders, p 68
- ²⁴ Arno J. Mayer, *Plowshares into Swords: from Zionism to Israel*, Verso, 2008, p 289
- ²⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *Faith and Power: Christianity and Islam in 'Secular' Britain*, SPCK, 1998
- ²⁶ Michael Luders, p 145
- ²⁷ Mark Farha, p 340
- ²⁸ Mark Farha, pp 338, 340, 344-5
- ²⁹ See Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: the thousand-year golden age of the church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia*, Lion, 2008
- ³⁰ Martin Accad in an unpublished report of the Institute of Middle East Studies, Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, Beirut
- ³¹ Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam and Europe's Religious Crisis*, OUP, 2007
- ³² Abdluualn Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: negotiating the future of Shari'a*, Harvard University Press, 2008
- ³³ Ben White, *Cracks in the Wall: beyond apartheid in Palestine/Israel*, Pluto, 2018, p 50
- ³⁴ Ben White, p 50
- ³⁵ Ben White, p 90
- ³⁶ My *Whose Promised Land?* attempts to cover both the history and the biblical interpretation
- ³⁷ Ben White, pp 93-93
- ³⁸ Mark Farha, p 343
- ³⁹ J. DudleyWoodberry, 'Fruitfulness from the Perspective of the Fruit and the Farmer', in David Greenlee, ed., *Longing for Community: church. ummah, or somewhere in between?*, William Carey, 2013, p 144
- ⁴⁰ Quoted in Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?*, p 415