

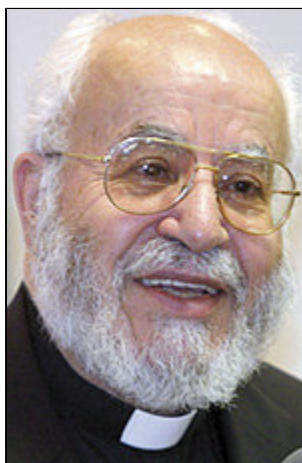
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War of the worlds?

Melkite archbishop says clash between Islam, West is inevitable unless both sides change.

By Ana Rodriguez-Soto, Miami Gardens



Archbishop Cyril Salim Bustros

Jihad and suicide bombers, Osama bin Laden and terrorism: That image of Islam, prevalent in the West, may not be representative of the majority of Muslims in the world.

But neither is it a false image, says Archbishop Cyril Salim Bustros, an expert on Christian-Islamic relations who currently serves as eparch of the Melkite Diocese of Newton, Mass., and spiritual leader of all the Melkite Catholics in the United States.

While visiting the Melkite communities in Miami and Delray Beach at the beginning of March, he spoke at St. Thomas University on the "clash of civilizations" between Islam and Christianity.

Archbishop Bustros was born in Lebanon, studied in Jerusalem and served as bishop of his native diocese of Baalbeck from 1988 to 2004. Speaking from a Middle Eastern perspective, he emphasized that the current conflict is not about religion but about "the different forms of structuring society and the relationship of religion to the state."

He explained that while Islam has many different interpretations and no central arbiter of doctrine, such as the pope, most Muslims are taught to interpret the Quran literally. Following its precepts, they divide the world into *Dar al Islam* and *Dar al Harb* — the land of peace and the land of war, the land conquered by Muslims and the land yet to be conquered by Muslims.

Like Christians, Muslims are obligated to "convert nonbelievers." Unlike Christianity, however, "the doctrines of Islam dictate war against unbelievers." Jihad, or holy war, is justified as self-defense whenever Islam is threatened — be it by a conquering power or an offensive cartoon.

Most Muslims do not take those interpretations of the Hadith, or Islamic teaching, as far as Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, Archbishop Bustras said. But the fact is that "the concept of nonviolence is absent from Muslim doctrine and practice."

Although Islam calls itself a religion of peace, the peace it preaches is the literal interpretation of Islam, which means "surrender to the will of God."

"The peace in Islam is based on the surrender of all people to Islam and to God's power based on Islamic law," Archbishop Bustras said. "They have to defend this peace of God even by force."

Islam also is an "absolutist faith" that merges religion and politics — quite a different understanding from the Western concept of separation of church and state.

"In the Islamic conception, there is no separation between God and Caesar. Caesar is governing in the name of God," Archbishop Bustras said. Consequently, "they don't differentiate between the West and Christianity."

Complicating matters is their view of the West not so much as a Christian society, but as materialistic, corrupt and immoral.

"Muslims see their opponents as the godless West. They are convinced of the superiority of their culture and obsessed with the inferiority of their power," Archbishop Bustras said. "Muslims fear and resent Western power and the threat which this poses to their society and beliefs."

Much of that fear is justified by the history of colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries and by the Western powers' arbitrary redrawing of boundaries in the Middle East after the two World Wars, especially the establishment of the state of Israel in predominantly Muslim Palestine.

Today, many Muslims see themselves "as victims of a widespread anti-Muslim prejudice comparable to anti-Semitism," Archbishop Bustras said.

That worldview, combined with the large number of young people ages 15 to 30 who are unemployed in the Muslim world, and the ease with which religious and political leaders can exploit their religious zeal, explains the existence of suicide bombers.

"He has no future. He has no work. He is convinced that is the only way to win the war against the infidel," Archbishop Bustras said.

Not that it is impossible for Christians, Muslims and Jews to live together, the archbishop explained. Although all three faiths have engaged "in deadly combat for power, land and souls" for most of the past 1,400 years, Islam does not view Christians and Jews as infidels.

The Quran calls them "people of the holy book," followers of a revealed religion and believers in the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Muslims regard Christ as a great prophet and revere his mother, Mary.

The Quran also teaches that Christians and Jews are to be allowed to practice their faith freely, so long as they follow Shariah, or Islamic law, and do not plot against the government.

"So we see through centuries Jews living in peace with Muslims in all the Arab countries: Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt and North Africa," the archbishop said.

Also encouraging, he said, is the emergence of a small minority of "new thinkers in Islam who want to read the Quran in a contextual way."

Although the situation appears grim, Archbishop Bustros noted, "Nothing is inevitable. The clash of civilizations can be avoided" by heeding the words of the Second Vatican Council's document on non-Christian religions, "*Nostra Aetate*" ("In Our Time"), which called on Christians and Muslims to "forget the past and strive sincerely for human understanding and make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom."

That means "the West has to respect all other religions and all other civilizations" and not impose its values on them, the archbishop said. It also means "Islam has to change its mentality" and arrive at a new, less literal interpretation of its teachings.

"With the Islam of bin Laden, it's impossible," said Archbishop Bustros.

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