Confronting Religious Extremism[*]

George Sabra

It is indeed a great honor for me and for the institution I represent, the Near East School of Theology, to be invited twice to address the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada within the span of three years. And it is even a greater honor to stand before you today as the recipient of the E. H. Johnson Award. I would like to express my sincerest thanks to the E. H. Johnson Memorial Fund Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Canada for having distinguished our small and humble institution of theological education with this prestigious award. Next year, 2019, will mark the 150th anniversary of the founding of our Theological Seminary - the first Presbyterian seminary in the Levant, which today is the Near East School of Theology. This award is a welcome recognition of the mission and efforts of that small seminary, which has remained a small seminary but has always played an ecumenical and inter-religious role much bigger than its actual size and numbers, both in the Near East in general and the country of Lebanon in particular.

There is no doubt that we live in a world in which both religious and political extremism are on the rise. I am no expert on political extremism, and I also do not address you as a researcher into religious extremism, but it is clear to anyone who lives in this world of ours and follows developments that, in many cases, the two phenomena – religious extremism and political extremism – are related. It is mostly either a case of religious extremism spilling over into politics, as we have it mostly in the West, or it is religious extremism which is by nature political and thus inseparable from politics, as we have it in the Middle East and other places. For some years now there has been talk in the western academic and intellectual world about the "return of religion." Modernity thought that religion would simply go away: "from Voltaire to Marx every Enlightenment thinker thought that religion would disappear in the 20th century because

---

[*] Address delivered at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada on the occasion of receiving the E. H. Johnson Award, on June 4, 2018 in Waterloo, Canada.

religion was fetishism, animistic superstition, irrationalism…"[1] It was thought that religion could be privatized and individualized so that the public sphere could be managed without it. Well, it turns out they were all wrong.   Religion did not disappear, and it could not be privatized forever. Atheistic ideologies have crumbled, nationalistic ideologies, which were supposed to replace or privatize religion are waning, (or if they are thriving, it is because of their cooption of religion), empires have fallen, economic systems have disintegrated, but the great historical religions have survived.[2] In fact, they have not only survived, they have revived. There is such a thing today as "the return of the religious in the public sphere". Many intellectuals in the West thought that religion and the religious were put behind it and that secularization was irreversible.   Forty or fifty years ago "secularization" was the key general concept that described the times, and by that was meant the loss of the influence of religion in the public sphere. With the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979 the situation changed radically, even for the West. According to one western scholar, economic, social and political categories alone failed to interpret the phenomenon of the Iranian Revolution; it had to be understood primarily as a religious phenomenon, so that the other dimensions could be understood.[3] Today, it is increasingly being recognized that "without the alphabet of religions, one cannot read the map of the political struggles on this earth."[4]

In the Middle East, we do not speak of the "return of religion", for it never went away in the first place, and I will say more about this presently, but this is precisely what links the West to the Middle East again. The "religious" has returned to the West, not only through religious resurgence in other countries but also through immigrants and migrants who bring their religious identity with them to secularized societies – migrant workers, refugees, asylum seekers.   The "religious" has also returned in the resurgence of post-secular religious movements, new forms of religiosity and spirituality that are attracting people everywhere –

---

[1]J. Kitagawa, "Introduction" in *Religious Studies, Theological Studies and the University Divinity School*. Ed. Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), p. 35.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Christoph Schwöbel, *Christliche Glaube in Pluralismus. Studien zu einer Theologie der Kultur.* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), p. 281.
[4] Ibid., p. 3.

the esoteric, New Age, etc. The world is full of religious conflicts; religion is the cause or at least a central component of major conflicts today.

Now I speak mainly from a Middle Eastern perspective on this topic of religious extremism. Religion is a dominant, if not the most dominant component of Middle Eastern societies. As I said a bit earlier, we cannot speak of a return of religion in the Middle East, because it never went away in the first place, but we can speak of a revival of religious fervor and passions in new political and ideological forms, especially since the last quarter of the 20th century. The basic nature of Middle Eastern societies - that region of the world that gave humanity the three great Abrahamic traditions Judaism, Christianity and Islam - is religious, and so, if every now and then there is a revival of religious fervor and outlooks, and if there is wave of extremism, it should not come as a surprise, but as the most natural thing. And if religion has "returned" to the west, it is partly due to the fact that the Middle Eastern religious volcano has been erupting again.

What is religious extremism? Very simply put, extremism can be defined as a movement whose adherents are absolutely convinced and sure of the truth they hold and in their right to force it on others violently; and extremism is religious when a divine sanction is added to that absolute certainty and use of violence.[5] Obviously, religious extremism is not a feature of one religion only. In our world today, however, it is mostly linked to Islam, which is understandable but not entirely fair.

What gives rise to religious extremism? There are here two diverging schools of thought, and so two different explanations that try to account for the origin, causes and the whole phenomenon of religious extremism.

1. In the first school of thought, the causes and origin are all sought in socio-economic-political and educational explanations. Here, what gives rise to fundamentalism and

---

[5] This definition is based on Peter Welby's "Why religious Extremism is on the Rise?" *Prospect.* British Academy for the Humanities and the Social Sciences. https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/britishacademy. accessed 02-3-2018. p. 3

extremism are poverty, ignorance, injustice, etc. Very simply put: improve the social, economic, and educational conditions of life for people, and extremism will be weakened and eventually uprooted. There is no doubt much truth in this viewpoint. Religious extremism feeds on, and is bred in, social contexts of poverty, deprivation, marginalization, injustice, and ignorance. The reservoir that supplies religious extremists, the breeding ground in many cases, are people, especially young people, living under such circumstances. But is this a fully adequate explanation or account for the causes and rise of religious extremism? If the social and economic factors account for everything, then we are actually saying that the religious or the spiritual dimension of human existence is not primary, that it is a derivative aspect of what it means to be human. The religious or spiritual factors are then an epiphenomenon - always the result of more fundamental underlying causes which themselves are socio-economic, i.e., material and physical. Of course, that would be to subscribe totally to a purely materialist anthropology. I don't see how the church or theology can subscribe to that without giving up the essence of what Christian anthropology is all about. Isn't the human being a religious being by nature? If so, then the religious and the spiritual are a primary given of what it is to be human? If not, then it is a derivative of other categories, and thus is not original and fundamental. The Christian answer cannot simply be the latter. The human being is fundamentally both social-economic-political <u>and</u> religious. Thus, a purely socio-politico-economic explanation of the causes and rise of religious extremism would not explain it; it would explain it and all religion away.

2. The second school of thought holds that the causes and nature of religious extremism are to be sought in religion. Here it is possible to distinguish two positions: one says that the origin and causes of religious extremism are in religion as such, i.e., in the nature of religion, regardless which one; the second says: the causes and the whole phenomenon of religious extremism are to be sought in this or that specific religion, but not necessarily in all religion. The first position is represented by some modern day atheists, e.g., Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion*, who says the following about religious extremism:

> The take-home message is that we should blame religion itself, not religious extremism – as though that were some kind of terrible perversion of real, decent religion. Voltaire got it right long ago: 'Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.'[6]

In this viewpoint religion as such is bad, evil; religious extremism is not a perversion of something good or even neutral. Now, this is a position that is not really tenable. Other than the fact that it is itself based on an irrational bias against religion as such, even if we admit that religion is all about absurdities and irrational beliefs, nowhere does it logically follow that adherents of religion can be led to do anything because of their beliefs. Furthermore, such a position totally ignores all the good that has been done by religions and religious people because of their religion. Such atheistic positions have never been able to prove that religion, and not its abuse, is the source of all evil. After all, three of the greatest perpetrators of evil in the 20th century, Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot were not religious at all and had nothing to do with religion!

The second position says that some religions are somehow inherently extremist. In today's world this is often ascribed to Islam. Sir William Muir, a Scottish Orientalist (1819- 1905) is known for the famous quote: "The sword of Mohammad and the Koran are the most dogged enemies of civilizations, freedom and truth that the world has even known".[7] In other words, there is something in the very nature of Islam itself which makes it violent and extremist; Islamic extremism is not a perversion; it is the natural self-expression of Islam. As one critical writer put it, it is as though extremism and violence were encoded in the DNA of Islam itself.[8] This is a tempting position for many in today's world, even many among Christians – among far-right and fundamentalist and very conservative Christians of all traditions, but it is an unfortunate and basically unfair and wrong judgment. Is it really possible to essentialize Islam like this and condemn it as extremist by nature? But that is precisely what this position, and the former one, does: it essentializes religion as a whole, or it essentializes Islam as a whole, and utters

---

[6] R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), p. 345.

[7] W. Muir, *Life of Mahomet*, Vol. IV (1861), p. 322.

[8] V. Schnubel, "Religious Extremism: Not an Excess of Religion, but a Lack of Humanity". *The Huffington Post*. 2/11/2017.

judgment on a very complex historical phenomenon because of the behavior and self-understanding of some Muslims at some periods of history. Apart from the philosophical problem of the legitimacy of essentializing a historical phenomenon, there is also the danger in such a position of preventing the isolation of extremists in that particular religion and limiting the efforts of the majority of Muslims to combat extremism. If any and every Muslim is actually or potentially an extremist, then the so-called "war on terror" or "war on Islamic terrorism" becomes actually a war on Islam itself. Is this really the solution to the problem of religious extremism – in any religion: to combat the whole religion as the enemy?

We must avoid both these extreme explanations, namely, that all extremism is due to socio-economic-political causes or that religion or a particular religion is extremist by nature, if we are to grasp the truth about religious extremism, and more importantly, if we are to search for ways to confront it. To be sure, both explanations contribute something valuable to the truth about extremism: social, economic, political causes and factors are central, but equally central and vital are spiritual and intellectual (or doctrinal) factors and causes. Religious extremism is not reducible to one set of causes; reductionism is not applicable here, and essentialism ought to be avoided. Reality, especially human reality, is much more complex than that. But if I am to warn about an imbalance in the perception of western media and even western scholarship on the topic, I would say that they err more on the side of belittling or explaining away the spiritual and doctrinal aspect than on that of ignoring the social and economic constituents and causes. This is due of course to what I mentioned earlier, that in late modernity, especially since the 19th century, the category of the religious or the spiritual aspect of the human being began to be regarded as not a primary component of what it means to be human, but as a derivative one – derivative entirely from allegedly much more basic social, economic, and psychological categories. Religious extremism is not just a by-product of harsh and unjust social and economic conditions; it is also an expression and manifestation of the original religious passion of the human being. It is something that arises in the hearts and minds of human beings, and that's why it is found in many religions, not just in one, and that is why it can arise in a variety of

contexts, and not just in that of poverty, marginalization and poor education. The infamous Ussama Bin Laden was a well-educated man who came from a wealthy family; the planners and executors of 9/11 were university-educated students who could fly planes; the thousands of European volunteers who joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq were not all poor and uneducated, just to mention a few examples.

Discussion of the causes and nature of religious extremism is very interesting and intriguing, and we could spend much more time on it, had we had time, but in this short address I would like to end by saying something about how to confront it. Our task as Christians, as church, is not to combat religious extremism; that is the task and responsibility of the political state, if and when religious extremism manifests itself in acts of violence and terrorism. Our call as Christians is not to wage war on it, not to combat it, but to participate in dismantling it.

In the Middle Eastern context where we live and work, dismantling religious extremism is best effected, so some of us think and believe, through at least three things: promoting women's place and role in all aspects of life, developing a culture of critical and self-critical thinking, and cultivating an atmosphere of acceptance of pluralism. Each one of these requires a whole lecture by itself, and so there is no time to develop them, but I would like to say a couple of words about each.

 It was a Muslim woman – a Moroccan native and the president of the Moroccan communities in Italy who issued the call a few years ago, saying: "Educate women to defeat fundamentalism!"[9] And it was a Muslim Iraqi poet who wrote: "How can a people rise up to civilization when half of it is veiled from the other half?"[10] This is not simply a criticism of the actual physical veil or *hijab*, but of the absence of women from active public life in all its aspects. A transformation of society cannot be had without the emancipation of half of society: of mothers, wives, sisters, and all women.

Only critical thinking can dismantle ideologies, extremist and otherwise, for critical minds do not take anything for granted and do not absolutize anything just because it is given. And only

---

[9] From an Interview with Souad Sbai. Sept. 29, 2006 Zenit News Agency
[10] The poet is Jamil Sudqi al-Zahawi.

self-critical thinking enables one to see one's own limitations, curtails absolute certainty and questions the infallibility of one's own ideas and positions.

And only acceptance of pluralism, i.e., the full recognition of the otherness of the other, and the right of the other to be other and equal, puts an end to extremism which rejects the other or considers him/her a problem to be removed, rather than a partner with whom to share a common life.

The most effective dismantling, however, is the one done from inside, from within. Thus, where there is Christian religious extremism, it is the responsibility, the duty and the task of Christians to address and dismantle it. Similarly, where there is Islamic extremism, it is primarily the task of Muslims and Islamic institutions to dismantle it from within. As someone who lives in the Middle East, where the main manifestation of religious extremism is Islamic extremism, it is clear to me that it is primarily the task of Muslims in the Middle East to ask themselves: why are movements of religious extremism rampant in Islam today? Simply to disavow these movements and condemn them as having nothing to do with Islam will not do, for these movements base themselves on the central tenets of Islam and on a whole Islamic tradition of jurisprudence and interpretation; their founders and leaders are graduates of Islamic institutions of religious education; they identify themselves as Muslims and do what they do in the name of Islam. What is it in Islam that enables such movements to arise? What has gone wrong? There must be serious self-questioning and self-examination. Only Muslims can successfully confront such religious extremism among themselves and only they can dismantle it. For our part, as Christians in the larger Islamic Middle East, we can hope and aspire to cooperate with Muslims in this task.

The challenge facing Christians in the Middle East is how to take part in the future of Islam, how to have a role in the whither of Islam, without antagonizing Muslims and Islam – how to be partners in the change and transformation of Arab and Islamic societies, from within, not as subversive or mistrusted elements, but as genuine partners working together with Muslims for a better quality of human life on all levels and thus for the elimination of religious extremism.

At the Near East School of Theology, we are trying to do just that. Through our cooperation and dialogue with Muslims – institutions and scholars and intellectuals – we promote the role of women in church and society; we engage in dialogue with Muslims on all kinds of issues, but especially on theological, spiritual and religious issues, and we bring together Muslims who are at odds with each other – Sunnis and Shi'is - to dialogue critically among themselves and with us on matters that ultimately relate to our common life together. In this we continue a long tradition of our small institution – the first theological institution of higher learning in the Middle East to incorporate the study of Islam as a requirement for its candidates for divinity and theology, the institution which witnessed the first discussions among Christians and Muslims at the beginning of the Lebanese war in 1975, the institution that housed and sheltered Muslim and Christian families during the 15-year Lebanese war, the only Christian institution that remained in the Muslim western part of Beirut when all others moved to more predominantly Christian parts of the city or left the country, and the institution that continues to host and promote dialogue and reconciliation among the two religions, not only because exigencies of survival and coexistence require it, but primarily because the gospel is a message of love and reconciliation.

In the name of that institution, the Near East School of Theology, which is humbly doing its part in the turbulent Middle East, I thank you for the honor of receiving this prestigious award.