

The Indispensability of Christians in Lebanon and the Levant in the School of Imam Moussa Sadr

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"I long for the day and time when we see the heart of Lebanon's future transformed into a single community – the community of God, the community of Man."¹

Imam Moussa Sadr

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I. Introduction

The world is in crisis... a crisis of perhaps unprecedented severity. Unemployment, recession, financial shocks, displacement and environmental degradation are only some of its manifestations. At the heart of the crisis lie a disintegrating sense of security and a loss of trust in others. In some urban and rural parts of the Middle East, fear is bursting forth, wreaking murder and destruction. At all crossings between East and West, fear is manifest in waiting queues and drowning rafts. The cities of the West are rampant with xenophobia, the cities of the East are emptied of Westerners.

At one point, the conflict in the region seemed isolated, confined to no more than localized factions and communities (the Lebanese Civil War). Then, inter-state wars broke out (the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Iraq-Iran war, the invasion of Kuwait and the occupation of Iraq, the invasion of Libya, the Yemen wars). Today, the explosion is immense, multi-faceted and multi-layered. We are witnessing local inter-group conflicts, but also conflicts between states and local communities. There are tensions between any given state and its neighbors. Borders no longer exist in some places just as they are being closed off in others.

The geographical impact of some conflicts ends with them, and their implications are expunged from history within a decade or two... But others are deeply engraved in the memory of generations – the Crusades are the best example-, causing a major shift and repetitive sharp turns in the course of history. Ramifications extend to human civilization in its entirety. I am afraid we are currently witnessing just such a monumental event.

Events that change the face of the world are those that produce massive human suffering (World Wars), and mass exodus (Jews, Armenians, Palestinians). Today, the exodus of Christians from the Middle East constitutes a terrible human loss whose effects will be felt for hundreds of years to come. This is simply an argument that I am raising at the edge of the widening gap between two worlds: a world that has gotten carried away in stereotyping the East and its Muslims, and one that cowers in fear of the hegemony of the West and its Christians. The only bridge that would save both worlds is the Christians of the Middle East, specifically Lebanese Christians.

The term "Arab" designates a people who speak Arabic, be they Muslim or Christian. The term "Muslim" covers some Arabs while the vast majority (80%) is non-Arab. But Arab Christians, specifically of Lebanese nationality, are the subject of this paper because they are part of both groups. History made them play a distinguished cultural role and they continue to occupy positions as emissaries of communication and peace in times of escalating madness and evil.

On the relationship of Arabs to Lebanon, a celebrated historian once said that the survival of Arabs hinges on Christians remaining in the Middle East. He argued that the Taef Accord which ended the Lebanese War was evidence of the care extended by Arabs to Christians.² Observers of the current Christian exodus can see the draining of a body already depleted by many lances. Some strike the Christian community, but most strike the Muslims. From a factional perspective, there is a Shiite, Sunni, Druze and Zeidi drain, all the

way through all the organs of the Arab body. But cumulative factors and causes that have been snowballing over time are making the current situation worse. In this paper we will illustrate one such factor as a structural misconception. It is the problem of generalization, which branches out into the transmission of misguided and shallow notions.

Among the many questions in this concern are the followings:

- Have Muslims followed the vision laid out in the Holy Quran and treated Christians on its basis? Or have some extremists opposed their scripture and started menacing Christians in their religion and faith?
- How do Westerners explain their backing of oppressive regimes in the Middle East? Do they recognize the resulting perpetuation of exploitation, poverty and emigration? How do they explain the exportation of so many tyrannical patterns?
- The West often complains of the absence of a Middle Eastern counterpart for dialogue given the lack of true democratic representation, and weaves projects of dialogue with expatriates who have forgotten their Middle Eastern origins without being fully assimilated Westerners. Is it true that the West today still views the Middle East as an exotic field for experimentation rather than as a part of the conversation? Would it not constitute a monologue, rather than a dialogue, if one were to pre-establish the characteristics of one's interlocutors?

This is not the place to explore and answer these questions despite their pertinence and the need to come up with answers – answers, plural, because there are as many answers as there are Muslim communities and as varying as the times. What applied to the Muslims of Andalusia does not apply to the *Sahabah* [companions] in the days of the Prophet, nor can it be applied, in any case, it to the actions of Afghani Muslims fighting in the Syrian Desert today.

Having surmounted the trap of generalization, we must also surmount the trap of specialization. Many of the crimes perpetrated against Christians were and are unrelated to their being Assyrians, Chaldeans or Copts. Wide-scale suffering affects Yazidis, Buddhists, Shiites and Sunnis. The horror in western Iraq and eastern Syria surpasses ethnic cleansing. Cultural cleansing is plowing through the animate and inanimate standing in its path.

The tragedy here does not lie in the identity of the killed, but in the character of the killer. The nuance is critical: an accurate profiling of the killer undermines the stereotypes that brand all Muslims with the actions of a handful of evil hands. It is a stereotype founded on rash arguments and a laxity with facts – one which soon commits heinous discrimination against every Muslim on a train, at an airport or in a restaurant. Dignity is injured, rejection looms large, and a Muslim here, a Muslim there becomes a budding “*jihadist*” – the irony being that some who turned to war were born and bred

in the West, and came to fight in a Middle East they had never seen, whose language they do not speak and whose culture is foreign to them.

The crisis is complex. With so many factors and events overlapping, it calls for a panoramic view, an objective diagnosis and a conscientious marshaling of the facts. It also calls for multiple perspectives and research methodologies. What is presented below is just one perspective.

The problem appears utopian for those looking forward and nostalgic for those looking back. In the early second half of last century, a turbaned young man traveled through Lebanon, calling loud and clear on people to be attentive and cautious. Many heeded his call. Some accused him of exaggeration and fear mongering. Others fought his ideas and propositions, and, in the dark of night, decided to eliminate him from the scene. What concerns us here is the fact that he offered, back then, an accurate portrayal of what we have come to today. Far from claiming omniscience or mystic powers of divination, his was a reading of the future undertaken by a keen sociologist reviewing phenomena, observing events, mapping out the consequences – and daring to express stark conclusions. He told his listeners what boils down to this: if you carry on with your foolishness, this shall be your fate. And so it was.

We begin our discussion of the Christian community with the observations of this scholar, a man who was wise, rational, and widely read in theology and modern sciences. Learning about the Christians of Lebanon through Imam Moussa Sadr is a distinctive experience. A leader of social change and a humanist reformer, he lived with the Christian communities of Lebanon, shared in their joy and grief, lectured in their churches, convents and schools, engaged their intellectuals, teachers and leaders in dialogue, and contributed to their organizations and associations. Let us examine his lectures, speeches and interviews to showcase his understanding of the importance of Lebanon's Christians.

We look into the Imam's humanist vision, after highlighting the Holy Quran's teachings about Jesus and Christians. We then learn to recognize the importance of Man in general and Lebanon's culture in particular, and appreciate with Imam Sadr the value of Muslim-Christian coexistence as a sacred civilizing trust.

II. Christianity in the Holy Quran

I picked a selection of the pertinent verses from the Holy Quran touching on Mary and Jesus, and on the Christians as his disciples. The Quran relates Mary's life narrative from her birth to becoming the mother of Jesus, through her blessed upbringing, holy virtue, dedication to the worship of God, and God's choosing her above all other women: {The angels said, O Mary, indeed God has chosen you and purified you and chosen you above the women of the worlds.} [Al Imran, 42]

God announced to Mary the birth of a blessed child named Jesus, the word of God, who was destined to be eminent on Earth and in Heaven: {The angels said, O Mary, indeed God gives you good tidings of a word from Him, whose

name will be Christ, Jesus, the son of Mary – distinguished in this world and the Hereafter and among those brought near to God.} [Al Imran 45] Jesus worked many miracles, the first of which was his capacity for speech at birth: {He will speak to the people in the cradle and in maturity and will be of the righteous.} [Al Imran 46] A second verse on Christ reads: {And I cure the blind and the leper, and I give life to the dead – by permission of God...} [Al Imran 49] And another mentions his teachings and disciples: {When the disciples said, O Jesus, Son of Mary, can your Lord send down to us a table spread with food from the heavens? Jesus said, Fear God, if you should be believers. They said, We wish to eat from it and let our hearts be reassured and know that you have been truthful and be among its witnesses. Said Jesus, the son of Mary, O God, our Lord, send down to us a table spread with food from the heavens to be for us a feast for the first and last of us and a sign from You. And provide for us, and You are the best of providers. God said, Indeed, I will send it down to you, but whoever disbelieves afterwards from among you I shall punish with a punishment by which I have not punished anyone in all the worlds.} [Al-Maeda 112-115]

As in its view of Mary and Jesus, the Quran holds Christians in high respect: {Then We sent following their footsteps Our messengers and followed them with Jesus, the son of Mary, and gave him the Gospel. And We placed in the hearts of those who followed him compassion and mercy...} [Al-Hadid 27] In the Holy Quran, Christians are described as loving and tolerant: {Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabeans – those among them who believed in God and the Day of Judgment and did right – will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve.} [Al-Baqara 62]

Muslims find in the Quran descriptions of those people who, by their faith and good works, have deserved God's favor. The Quran reveals the traits of those closest to Muslims. In fact, it foretells that the ties of love and brotherhood unite Muslims and Christians throughout history: {you will find that the nearest of them in affection to the believers are those who say, we are Christians. That is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant.} [Al-Maeda 82]

The Quran judges people by their works, morality and faith. A man of faith who does good works is a good man. A further exploration of Man in general, and Christianity in particular, calls for an examination of the works of Imam Moussa Sadr, a religious scholar whose learning and knowledge were celebrated by the enlightened and the erudite for his vision of God, the universe and Man.

III. Centrality of Man for Imam Sadr

Imam Sadr was a *faqih*, an expert in Islamic law. He believed in religious renewal, as an enlightened thinker with a rational understanding of religion. He carefully read God's scriptures, drawing out truths aimed at building Man and society. He offered a holistic vision comprising Man, religion and society in Lebanon and the world: God's scripture and the teachings of the prophets, imams and principled *walis* [those responsible] provided the foundations on

which he constructed his intellectual vision, his reform project, as well as social action and relation to others. For him, the fundamental points of departure for faith and worship were to honor, safeguard and serve Man. Man for Imam Sadr **is each and every human person** – Imam Sadr did not concede to selective discrimination but worked for a society that caters to Man and all of Man's capacities and potentials.

3.1) Faith in Man: Imam Sadr renewed religious thought by underscoring the concepts that bring out the essence of religion and restore the dignity of Man crushed by tyrannical authorities in the name of religion and the fatwas of bloated sermonizers. The concepts he adopted constitute an overarching civilizing revolution and the foundation of an integral intellectual renaissance.

Imam Sadr proposes a solid intellectual ground that safeguards Man and Man's dignity, integrity and development. "Faith in Man is the earthly dimension of faith in God." Man is the master of all of God's creations and is deserving of respect and veneration. God breathed life into dust and created Man. "Man is God's noblest creation."³.

His is a renewed invitation for faith in Man, in Man's dignity, capacities, rights and eminence. It is an invitation for people to act on this basis in their lives and translate their abstract faith – which for many has become mere rite and ritual – into concrete practice. It is an invitation by Imam Sadr for people to carry religious teachings and humanist values from the narrow confines of the mosque to the wide expanses of social life in order to protect and serve each and every human being. "The other dimension of faith seeks the preservation and protection of Man, imposes the safeguarding of Man, and affirms that there is no faith unless we commit to serving Man."⁴

Faith in God is practically translated into faith in and in safeguarding and honoring of Man. Imam Sadr believes that serving God in the community is rendered concretely manifest by helping people and dedicating one's life "to serve peace and improve people's lives everywhere. And doubtless as a member of the clergy myself, who serves God and believes that the best form of worship is to serve God's creations, I strive to attain this goal in good faith, honest purpose and pure intent."⁵

3.2) Human Dignity: Islam from Imam Sadr's perspective is inspired by a deep understanding of the Holy Quran and a rigorous examination of its texts. It views human dignity as an essential value in God's clear words: {We have honored the children of Adam.} [Al-Isra' 70] God's honoring of Man in the Divine Will is revealed in God's appointment of Man as His steward on earth. God created Man in the best and most perfect image: {We have certainly created Man in the best of stature.} [Al-Teen 4]

This religion which honored Man, "for whom all religions exist"⁶, is the religion of humanism *par excellence*. It accords with the intellectual vision whose pillars were set down by Imam Sadr with the purpose of renewing religious thinking and launching an intellectual renaissance for social reform in Lebanon. "Man as seen by God's faithful is unlimited in capacity, whose head is held up to the heavens, whose life is eternal and whose diverse potentials are boundless."⁷

Based on his rational understanding of religion and his humanist conception of a principled society, Imam Sadr endeavored to revitalize human values in his public positions and lectures, addressing all peoples, segments, confessions and constituent groups of society in Lebanon and beyond. He also made these values concrete in his daily conduct, and enshrined them in the institutions he built. But he first had to fight preconceptions and prejudices, recall the true doctrine to people's minds, and implant the humanist vision in their hearts, especially that { God will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.} [Al-Raad 11] He began by laying out the indispensable concept: faith cannot be separated from serving people, alleviating their suffering and promoting their dignity.

3.3) Revitalizing Human Values: Imam Sadr proceeded from the fact that Man is innately good, hardwired for morality and sound values. He based his claims on the Quran – {So direct your face toward religion, inclining to the truth. Adhere to the nature of God upon which He created all people. No change should there be in the creation of God. That is the correct religion, but most people do not know it} [Al-Room 30] – and the *Hadith* [saying of the Prophet], "Every child is born with an innate inclination for good." He was intimately convinced that "the Quran affirms the absolute consistency between religion and humanity"⁸.

Imam Sadr explains that positive values in society are aligned with Islamic teachings which call for honoring and respecting all people. "Indeed it is every Muslim's duty to respect others in their person, their property and honor, and a Muslim is therefore prohibited from violating them, in word or in deed."⁹

Being virtuous in a society is a function of serving and being of use to others rather than belonging to a confession, ethnicity or class. Imam Sadr assures us that "all God's creations are His beloveds and His most cherished are those who are useful to His beloveds," as the sacred *Hadith* tells us. Imam Sadr often quoted the *Hadith* establishing the principle of equality in the Islamic tradition: "People are equal as the teeth of a comb." There is "no distinction or discrimination among human beings."¹⁰

Freedom it is the fount of all values in Imam Sadr's view, and governs human relations for all human beings. It frees Man from slavery, oppression and exploitation. Freedom cannot be maintained and preserved unless justice is instituted by law, the state, regulations and institutions. In the absence of just laws, institutions and authorities, tyranny rules and freedoms are trampled. To counter tyranny and strive for a just rule, sacrifices must be made out of one's material property and one's self.

Revitalizing values in human societies also requires a judicious leadership and strong will. These are key traits of an Imam of reform and renaissance, who not only possessed a holistic humanist vision, but proved to be an inspiring leader who managed, in adverse circumstances, to transform his intellectual beliefs, noble principles, social projects, religious teachings and human values into tangible realities, deploying sustained efforts in both principled public positions and charitable social organizations. He projected in Lebanese society a living example of a humanist vision founded on faith in Man and Man's dignity, and on renewing long-standing humanist values.

IV. Muslim-Christian Coexistence: A Cultural Trust

Imam Sadr did not launch his reform project in a vacuum. He examined the historical context carefully and observed that the journey of the Lebanese people had been one of fellowship, unity and brotherhood. "Just as we in the Middle East should live as one family so does the Lebanese people who have preserved an intact heritage thanks to their openness. Christian teachings, similar to Islam, call for brotherhood, love and collaboration."¹¹

Collaboration between Muslims and Christians has carried over the centuries a cultural and architectural legacy. "The Lebanese have managed in these mountains to preserve a genuine heritage, drawing on the contemporary to build one stone over another and create a distinguished civilization that is the pride of the region."¹²

The scientifically minded Imam had studied the cultural, social and historical identity of Lebanon and drawn the conclusion that Lebanon was the legacy of Jesus, the incubator of the Holy Quran's heritage, the land of historic coexistence between its constituents and their religions, the nation of mutual Muslim-Christian sympathy: "...this country which has lived for hundreds of years on the coexistence between different religions and followers of different religions, this country which was bequeathed the legacy and religion of Jesus, this country which carries the heritage of the Holy Quran and devotion to the Holy Quran which emphasizes that the nearest people to Muslims in fellowship are the Christians."¹³

Imam Sadr uses history to prove that Christians – just as Muslims – are native to Lebanon and the Middle East. That a religious scholar with such compelling authority in Lebanon and the Islamic world should proclaim the truth of shared history in this manner is a refutation of the doubters of the key importance of Christian presence in the Middle East, at times in the name of *jihad* and at other times in the name of sectarianism.

In addition to the strength of Christian presence in Lebanon and the Middle East, Imam Sadr underlined the historically civilizing role of Lebanese Christians, speaking of their message in the Middle East and its significance for engaging with the West. "How great and noble the message of the Christians of Lebanon. Are they not the agents of assimilation and transmission and interaction? Is it not because of them that Lebanon was named a window between the Levantine and Western civilizations? Did they not carry with them to the West the deepest spirituality of the Middle East, and did they not return to the Middle East with the most useful of Western experiences?"¹⁴

Imam Sadr described the cultural dimension of Christian presence as a cultural trust, going so far as to describe it as a sacred value: "Coexistence is a historical cultural trust which God has granted this people. It is the will of two major religions, nay, the will of all religions."¹⁵

The sacred cultural trust of coexistence willed by the two major religions of Lebanon has been expressed over time by several representatives of both the Muslim and Christian faiths in Lebanon. High in the list stood Imam Sadr. He never tired from holding up the message of coexistence in sermons, lectures and talks in churches, mosques and town halls on several occasions, in

various meetings and scholarly seminars and cultural conferences across Lebanon and abroad.

Imam Sadr invidiously emphasized the value and sacredness of coexistence, and the fact that it was a special characteristic of Lebanon. This intellectual argument was remarkably reinforced by His Holiness Pope John Paul II in the Apostolic Exhortation "A New Hope for Lebanon", in which he addressed the entire population during his visit to Lebanon on May 10th, 1997 with the memorable sentence: "Lebanon is more than a country; it is a message."

Imam Sadr transformed the public discourse of sectarianism from a dominant negative trait into a positive contribution. God has blessed Lebanon with plurality. But this blessing can become a curse when mismanaged. Imam Sadr realized that his argument for coexistence required partners – confident partners who embody mutual trust. We find him denouncing negative sectarianism (i.e. insularism), offering us an alternative that was the very image of the Lebanese people's life, without discrimination in belief, occupation or region: "Coexistence does not belong to the Lebanese. It was entrusted to them. It is their responsibility, their duty, not their privilege. We stand by Lebanon's unity, preserve it and Lebanon's independence, its harmony with the region, and we safeguard this entity as a trust for global civilization."¹⁶

Arming ourselves with truth, justice and dignity in building society, the nation and the state does not imply shutting others out; neither does it mean instituting an imamate for a government, or blanketing it with exclusive Muslim, Christian or secular rule. Imam Sadr conjured up the unconscious and existential reservoir of the dispossessed – historical injustices, chronic neglect, marginalization and other forms of adversity and oppression – and managed to transform them into positive energy, marked by revolutionary enthusiasm framed within the willingness to effect change toward a virtuous society that is actively engaged in human civilization.

Ridding one Lebanese community of the fears of the minority and the underdog, and ridding another community of the complex of insularity and marginalization, were among the foundational challenges that Imam Sadr confronted to transform Muslim-Christian coexistence from a passing slogan at a certain time or place to a cultural seedling nurtured by humanity through generations. He saw in Lebanon fertile ground to attain this hope.

V. Stances and dialogue approach

The pages of Lebanon's history are rife with figures who realized early on the meaning and significance of Muslim-Christian coexistence; eminent leaders who strove to build a cohesive nation, resilient, capable of surviving and evolving. God blessed Lebanon with pioneers who wove the fabric of a shared life. Chief among them was Imam Sadr who held up rapprochement and dialogue as his banner.

The southern city of Sur/Tyre was the place from which Imam Sadr proceeded from the closed circle of sectarianism to the wider expanse of plurality. A

portentous event that will recur among the Lebanese in subsequent decades occurred early in his Lebanese life.

Joseph Antipas was a Christian ice-cream seller in the city of Sur whose livelihood was being threatened by another seller from a different confession. He took his case to Imam Sadr. Once the Friday sermon concluded, Imam Sadr walked with the entire congregation of worshipers for ice-creams at the Christian seller's shop, amid massive amazement. It was a bold experience in an environment that had closed in on itself, where each confession withdrew into its own shell, and whose members kept to their own small spheres. Imam Sadr dared to break the fragile shell that hid the richness, diversity and intellectual complementarity between the members of society. This was the symbolic start of a long journey.

Imam Sadr was keen to contact Lebanese intellectual and religious leaders, and to build constant bridges of communication with them. He participated in the celebrations of the other confessions, through his attendance, speeches and messages. In 1963, he jointly gave the "National Unity and Christian-Muslim Coexistence" lecture with Bishop Gregoire Haddad, the founder of *"Le Mouvement Social"* and Imam Sadr's partner in social work. He affirmed in the talk his personal conviction that unity "need not mean the dilution of the Muslim medium in the Christian medium, nor the dilution of the Christian medium in the Muslim medium. It means that Christians will maintain their Christianity to the full and will extend a loyal hand to their Muslim fellows. And Muslims will maintain their Islam to the full and will extend a loyal hand to their Christian fellows. This is far more useful, for we would then be living our national unity in deed rather than word."¹⁷

In 1964, a series of seminars was launched by the "Lebanese Forum", and Imam Sadr often appeared on its stage as a speaker, elaborating diligence, Sufism and Islamic culture in the presence of Christian and Muslim intellectuals, clerics and scholars: Father Youwakim Mubarak, Bishop George Khodr, Sheikh Subhi al-Saleh, Bishop Gregoire Haddad..., were his partners in building the nation, and in identifying its points of intersection. He joined a distinguished group of intellectual figures who issued a call to fellowship to all the Lebanese to "meet us in this conversation and make it more constructive and of deeper impact; [our] work as intellectuals giving public lectures is inspired by the goodness of the message of love, and allows Muslims and Christians to live together in the communion of God who is the fount of hope, faith and peace."¹⁸

Muslim-Christian in-gathering and co-existence were, for Imam Sadr, much more than verbal communication. They formed the cornerstone for building and strengthening Lebanese society. Interaction with the other, acceptance and coexistence of all, require an acknowledgement of the rights of the different other.

Challenges and Obstacles

Imam Sadr exposed the structure that created the dysfunction in Lebanon. He found some of that dysfunction in the class divisions between people, and in the wide distance separating confessions. Many in power did not agree,

despite the fact that what they shared far outweighed what set them apart. So he actively worked to create the rapprochement by initiating meetings, gatherings, invitations, visits and efforts "with extended hand and open heart... We meet with all the spiritual communities in Lebanon. We collaborate with them in all faithfulness and frankness. On the national level, too, we collaborate with them in all faithfulness. We are the vanguard, we remain steadfast, we offer ourselves, our energies and manpower and existence, we offer up everything for the sake of a common nation."¹⁹ So spoke Imam Sadr to Patriarch Mar Boulos Al-Moushi, extending to him an invitation to collaborate on the welfare of Lebanon on the eve of his election as the Chairman of the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council in 1969.

Imam Sadr recognized early on the barriers creating the illusion of insuperable obstacles weighing on the lives of the Lebanese with fear of the other, and governing their interaction with tension and insularism. He countered the charged socio-political climate with a principle: diversity and plurality do not threaten coexistence. On the contrary, this wide world with its disparate facets and diverse cultures is an apt home for "people of all confessions and faiths,"²⁰ and "a society devoted to God, with its many confessions, among which, indeed chief among which are the Christians, makes for a major wealth for Lebanon, a major wealth for Arabs and a major wealth for the East."²¹

Imam Sadr presented, along with prominent Christian figures, a full national vision. With its cultural, intellectual and civilizing diversity, his vision was a key step towards bringing the Lebanese closer. It helped create a positive image of religion, unity and belonging. In a tribute ceremony held in his honor by the press and attended by several Christian figures, Imam Sadr "launched a spiritual message in Lebanon that would turn into a humanist invitation founded on love, towering above all disputes, especially that Lebanon, in its composition and community, has proved this humanism possible by showing that worshipping God was not exclusive to mosque or church."²²

For the Imam, Lebanon embraces in its composition a unique plurality of doctrines and religions within a single nation. This requires interaction between educated people of influence, who are capable of detecting the genuine dimensions of society. With Ghassan Tueini, Imam Sadr gave an address at the headquarters of the *Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne* (Young Christian Workers) – Sisters of Charity Convent on Labor Day 1969, emphasizing to the youth the role of the clergy in "guidance, mitigating conflict and adopting sound opinions."²³

When critical everyday issues called for change, Imam Sadr would address the whole of Lebanon in his sermons. He did not communicate with Muslims alone, nor did he single out Christians; he placed both before their looming responsibility for the concerns of people and the worries of the suffering and dispossessed: "O Muslims, among whom none is uncaring about the wellbeing of others; O Christians, who carry the cross of those who suffer".²⁴ He goes even further when he translates coexistence into social conduct devoid of religious and sectarian fanaticism – one that is akin to his faith in God. When he was invited to a celebration at the Evangelical School and the

pastor was late for Bible reading, Imam Sadr prepared to read the passage should the pastor not arrive.²⁵

In the context of the solidarity of religions to defend sacred national values, Imam Sadr established the "Committee of Support to the South" which included Bishop Boulos al-Khoury, Bishop Athanasios al-Chaer, Bishop George Haddad, Reverend Wadih Antoun, Sheikh Ahmad al-Zein, Sheikh Najib Qais and Sheikh Abdul Amir Qabalan²⁶ to attend to the situation in South Lebanon amid war, killing and displacement. The Committee was a faithful representation of the accord between the Lebanese communities in spiritual fellowship founded on faith.

Imam Sadr proceeded from faith in God – the primary driver of human action, according to him. He believed that this faith was also a positive energy with religion as a powerful guide for people in building peace in their society. Imam Sadr participated in the "Spiritual Beliefs and Peace" conference with Bishop George Khodor and Kamal Jumblat at UNESCO's Paris headquarters.²⁷ His strong confidence in intellectuals and their active role in influencing knowledge, and therefore in the process of dialogue and national unity, became a reality on the way to dialogue in 1974. The collective action he inspired resulted in the birth of a manifesto of intellectuals signed by 191 Lebanese figures from different backgrounds, disciplines and schools of thought.

On February 18, 1975, the Lebanese woke up to an unprecedented scene: "Imam in Lebanon Church, Delivering Prayer and Sermon at the Altar: Man's Prayer with Himself – Man's Prayer with God."²⁸

At the Capuchin Frères Church in the heart of Beirut, Imam Sadr gave the Lent sermon in which he spoke of religions and their unity, about faith, and about Man – God's steward on earth – who should always be at the heart of any gathering.

VI. Preserving the Civilizing Model of Lebanon

With these historical facts and tangible landmarks in mind, and in pursuit of humanist values led by the sacred value of coexistence, Imam Sadr saw his sacred national duty to preserve this historical civilizing trust. He felt, early on, the imminent dangers to the country which threatened to destroy civil peace, national unity and Muslim-Christian coexistence.

As Imam Sadr rang the alarm against the partitioning of Lebanon into interwarring sectarian statelets, he underlined the importance of cultural coexistence. "We look forward to the prompt return to coexistence between Lebanese Muslims and Christians. The alternative to coexistence is partitioning. Partitioning Lebanon is a danger to Muslim-Christian coexistence the world over; it portends grave dangers to the whole world. Partitioning itself is a condemnation of both religions, both cultures. Coexistence is not an exclusively Lebanese affair: it is a trust vested in the Lebanese by the Arabs, by the world, by history. Coexistence is their destiny and they should be prepared to carry it through."²⁹

Partitioning Lebanon is also the source of the deadly dangers in the Arab region. "Moral values and peace in the region will be exposed to deadly dangers should Lebanon be partitioned."³⁰

Just as in war, so it was in peace that Imam Sadr stood up to the sectarian political system which he distinguished from the coexistence of sects in their very own country. Time and again, Imam Sadr declared that the existence of sects in Lebanon was an 'absolute good' while the sectarian system was an 'absolute evil'. Sects are a blessing, sectarianism a curse, and political sectarianism a deadly disease to the bonds of citizenship. Sects are cultural windows whose presence and interaction should be reinforced, in contradistinction to political sectarianism. "Political sectarianism is an entrenchment of the tribal system, which cannot give rise to a nation, nor can it unite the population."³¹

On another occasion, Imam Sadr denounced the vices of political sectarianism as a degradation of human dignity in the name of religion. They turn it into merchandize that is bought and sold, "cheap shops opened in the name of God, trading in people, in souls, in lives, in aptitudes."³²

In order to counter this menace to Man in Lebanon, Imam Sadr called for the end of political sectarianism. "Lebanon, the emblem of tolerance through coexistence and the rapport between its communities, must be safeguarded in its civilizing aspect."³³ Imam Sadr also sought to revitalize the value of coexistence in hearts and minds, to implant it in consciousness and connect it to destiny. "The pursuit of coexistence is not a choice for the Lebanese; it is their fate which should be accepted, paved for, acknowledged. An ideology should be laid down for it and the obstacles in its way lifted."³⁴ "Lebanon, the emblem of tolerance in coexistence and relations between its communities, must be safeguarded in its evolved civilizing aspect."³⁵ Imam Sadr proposed the nation as solution in a clear and frank stance. "We stand by Lebanon's unity, preserve it and Lebanon's independence, its harmony with the region, and safeguard this entity which is a trust for global civilization."³⁶

Imam Sadr always proclaimed that Muslim-Christian coexistence is a wealth that should be maintained and all difficulties standing in its path should be dealt with. He recognized the sacred value of coexistence as wealth for Lebanon and humankind. "Muslim-Christian coexistence is Lebanon's most precious asset. It is an enriching experience for humanity as a whole."³⁷

This insistence he pursued relentlessly, in word and deed. In 1963, Imam Sadr participated in the inauguration of His Holiness Pope Paul VI. He also traveled through Europe on several occasions to take part in forums and conferences, and to converse with scholars and university professors as a man who cherished Arab-Western dialogue and considered Lebanon an incubator for it.

Faithful to the Imam's spirit, participants in the 2010 "Revitalizing the Christian Role in the Arab Levant" conference even declared that "the failure of this unique experience... will make it impossible for Christians and Muslims to coexist elsewhere."³⁸ The durability of this civilizing model of coexistence in a tiny country – one with an area barely 10,000 sqm large – is a guarantee for peace in the region and the world. Lebanon constitutes the point of convergence of religions, civilizations and cultures, a unique platform for

Muslim-Christian dialogue. Lebanon is a condemnation of all discriminatory entities in the region and the world, of all entities founded on religious bigotry, sectarian bias and ethnic persecution.

Imam Sadr's call to the Lebanese and those interested in Lebanese affairs is for everyone to collaborate to preserve Lebanon – the nation of sacred coexistence – as a civilizing model of peace, as the meeting point between Islam and Christianity, and as a unique laboratory for the vital interaction between Arab and Western civilizations. Imam Sadr did not stop at statements, addresses and proclamations of national principles and constants. He deployed herculean efforts to defend Lebanon, the nation of eminent human coexistence, while devoting special care and protection to Christians during times of crisis.

VII. Initiatives to build Man in Lebanon

The humanist vision and his faith in Man guided Imam Sadr's view throughout. "The nation was made for Man, for Man's dignity and Man's affairs, to provide the climate to unlock Man's talents and Man's potentials."³⁹

When the process of building up Man with a sound mind and loving heart is completed, building a nation that embraces all its confessions, members and groups makes it easier for its population to prevail.

So Imam Sadr launched an appeal to the people of Lebanon: "What is required from your loving intellect is that you develop an action plan to carry out solutions for Lebanon rather than for Muslims or Christians, individuals or parties, right- or left-wing – just people."⁴⁰

Preserving Lebanon is preserving its people, rather than a single group or segment. Imam Sadr rejected all discrimination on sectarian or political grounds. He also rejected the rule of the jungle, that is the domination of a group over another, whatever its designation. Lebanon encompasses everyone, and Imam Sadr worked to ensure the dignity of all the Lebanese of all confessions, individuals and parties.

He proceeded to translate his vision, his ideas and his faith into tangible works and charitable projects. His work, public positions and accomplishments can be summarized in a series of sub-headings:

- a) The preamble of the 1975 Popular Demands Movement Charter states that faith in Man is a vital principle and the starting point for instituting social justice in Lebanon. The inclusion of this principle in the Charter of a unifying movement laid the cornerstone for transforming the intellectual vision into a national and social approach. It bound Imam Sadr's companions in the Movement of the Dispossessed to respecting people, committing to humanist values and interacting with others without discriminating among the citizens on sectarian or denominational grounds. He also translated his conviction that faith in God cannot be separated from serving people, by deploying ongoing efforts to combat the rampant ills in Lebanese society, not least among which are bigotry, political sectarianism, poverty and deprivation.

- b) Imam Sadr recognized the dangers of political sectarianism. He exposed its role in undermining the nation and creating cults of personality at the public's expense. "One of Lebanon's main ills is sectarianism. Sectarianism that protects feudalism and shrouds political leaders in an aura of sanctity."⁴¹ The danger of Lebanon being partitioned escalated after the two-year war (1975-1976) between the right-wing and left-wing militias took on sectarian colorings. The warring parties used political sectarianism to attract sympathizers and make them fight fiercely under thin pretexts, for their own greedy goals of controlling state services and the country's resources. Slander and threats failed to weaken his determination to strive for peace and national unity. He deployed immense efforts to bring back peace to the country. He never stopped working against partitioning as destructive to civilizing relations and the dialogue between civilizations, and as threat to Arab Christians. For "partitioning is a tragedy for the Christians of the Arab world and the Muslims of Europe. It deactivates Arab-European dialogue which is the cornerstone of building the future."⁴²

Imam Sadr saw clearly the formation of a Middle East torn to shreds by sectarian and denominational wars. This, he thought, placed a huge responsibility at the door of the people of Lebanon – the nation of coexistence. Rulers have throughout history allowed civil, regional and world wars to break out and reap the lives of millions of innocent civilians by stoking racial, ethnic and religious discrimination in a condescending view of the other. Practices of violence, hegemony and tyranny, from ancient history to our modern day, put the responsibility of safeguarding the trust of coexistence squarely with those who believe in Man and devote their lives to preserving human values. This is what the greater national interest required, starting with the preservation of the historical civilizing trust by preventing dangers threatening the nation.

- c) In the context of serving people without discrimination and rejecting bigotry and the hatred of sectarianism, Imam Sadr took memorable positions on the side of Christians, ones which no other Muslim leader had dared take. In the Christian village of Deir al-Ahmar in the Beqaa he declared: "I say, O Christians of Lebanon, O Maronites of Lebanon, I am willing to die and would welcome death for the sake of ending your deprivation."⁴³ He prevailed on behalf of the Christians of the villages of Deir al-Ahmar, Al-Qaa and Shlifa in keeping the peace, and restored quiet to the people who had been under siege by vengeful clans in retaliation for the killing of dozens of civilians of their own kin. He took a firm stance against warring clans. "Any bullet fired at Deir al-Ahmar... is a bullet fired at my house and my heart and my children."⁴⁴

Convinced of the critical need to restore security throughout the country, Imam Sadr wanted an end to the civil war in Lebanon from the very start. He traveled to Arab capitals and met with their leaders for this very purpose. The despotic ruler of Libya Muammar al-Qadhafi – who later abducted Imam Sadr – offered him a plan to eliminate the

Christians of Lebanon. Imam Sadr vehemently refused the deal, emphasizing the point with the argument that if there were no Christians in Lebanon we would have to bring in Christians to Lebanon.⁴⁵

- d) In his continued bid for transparency and honesty, he pointed at certain members of the political class who had torn apart the fabric of Lebanese society with class wars, sectarian strife, weakness, fear and division, and constituted a grave danger to peace and coexistence. "There is one sect, the sect of the hegemon, the opportunist oppressors; its members crop up in every Lebanese confession. They constitute a single sect against the entire population."⁴⁶ He also made it clear that some rulers had wrapped themselves in the cloak of sectarianism and painted the Lebanese conflict as an inter-confessional conflict to justify their takeover of public offices and public funds.
- e) Imam Sadr believed that equality was the pillar of coexistence. It was imperative to build solid foundations for societal coexistence on the human values mentioned above. He chose the value of equality as a guarantee of the perpetuation of coexistence between the constituents of Lebanese society. He called on the Lebanese to reject the political sectarian system and to strive for non-sectarian civil rule founded on justice and the equality of rights, obligations and opportunities. "We are called to shape a future that does not lead to what happened in the past, a future inclusive of the entire population rather than segments thereof, a future in which the people are equal in rights and obligations."⁴⁷

He called on the Lebanese to seek inspiration in the dialogue they aspire to from the holy verse: { "O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable between us and you – that we will not worship except God and not associate anything with Him and not take another as lord instead of God.} [Al Imran 64]

VIII. Lebanon's Role: Reality and Aspiration

Imam Sadr proposed a comprehensive and detailed nation-wide program for a Christian-Muslim Global Conference in Lebanon. "There is no doubt in my mind that once the Lebanese crisis is over, extensive action should be taken to cover the Lebanese territory with activity, intense social interaction and [working for the common] good. On the one hand wide-scale development projects should be instituted. On the other end, a Muslim-Christian Global Conference should be established in Lebanon with broad media coverage to help create further coexistence and deal with accumulated, residual issues."⁴⁸

Christians in the Middle East had a special place for the Imam. "Christians are our fellows in faith, in the nation and as Arabs."⁴⁹

He built an outlook of Lebanon on key human values as pillars of the 'Nation of Man'. "The Lebanon of the future is non-sectarian. It is one of plentiful opportunities and equal justice. An advanced, daring and entrepreneurial

Lebanon, that is a keeper of the trust, committed to values – Lebanon as a workshop and construction site, a table for dialogue and a platform for progress.”⁵⁰

Freedom is a pillar of any just system. It is an essential value for Man, one which Imam Sadr calls for enshrining in Lebanese society. “Freedom in our country is an everyday imperative, which means that if we deprive people of freedom, if we imprison people’s talents and undermine our only wealth – Man – we would be impoverishing our country. If we say in our society that Man is the only asset then freedom is indispensable. In our society, true freedom, not nominal freedom, is indispensable. For Man to be able to speak, to discourse, to write – that is freedom. For Man not to be able to learn, not to be able to choose freely in his life in keeping with his aptitudes, not to be able to choose the right place and the right position for himself – that is a deficiency in freedom.”⁵¹

This desired nation is one in which values, freedom, justice, equality; faith and a coexistence that unites the population in Man prevail. Imam Sadr not only called for the adoption of humanist values, he also built institutions to project these values in national life. Among the active institutions that he proposed to create was an institution dedicated to dialogue. “The conception of the future Lebanon must be born of the interaction of the opinions and experiences of the Lebanese together; this requires an institution of Dialogue.”⁵²

Imam Sadr believed that if Lebanon manages to build its institutions and system on the basis of human dignity, justice, equality, freedom, coexistence and dialogue, then it can surmount the challenges of the age and play a civilizing part in the world. “The next century should feature the best formulas to ensure the respect of all civilizations and cultures, and to create full and equal synergy among them. Lebanon can be, as it has always been, a realistic model for this future we dream of.”⁵³

Imam Sadr warned against the failure of the Lebanese experience and its adverse effects on Lebanon and the world. “Should the Lebanese experience fail, human civilization will be oppressed for at least fifty years.”⁵⁴

But if the Lebanese build their nation on the foundation of human values and just institutions, they can create a future in which Lebanon as a civilizing nation becomes “the emblem of Muslim-Christian dialogue, the platform for European-Arab rapprochement, and the laboratory of cultural interaction. It will be the oasis of a successful global experience tomorrow.”⁵⁵

Roger Dib says that Christians have their roots in the Middle East for two thousand years, making cultural and philosophical contributions and preserving the Arab language. They were involved in liberation movements and in the administration and public policy of the region’s states. They facilitated the cultural meeting with the West and were behind the creation of Lebanon as a state.⁵⁶ (Dib, 2011) Building on this evidence, Lebanon can offer a fertile ground for inter-faith dialogue, for the convergence of peoples, the interaction of civilizations, cross-fertilization of cultures – an oasis of the desired peace and the open civilizing model against all religious fanaticism.

IX. Conclusion

Almost half a century after Imam Sadr began his work in Lebanon, the situation in the region and the world has turned into the worst case scenario which he had warned against. Because of his forced disappearance in Libya in 1978, he did not have the chance to influence these events; he did not have a chance to even witness the early collapse in the region. But his social ideas and the value system he called for remain a shining beacon in the face of *takfiri* radicalism wreaking havoc in the world. His efforts to restore regard to Man's dignity and rights merit a renewed examination by Middle Eastern societies, the cradle of divine inspiration and the birthplace of prophets and apostles, as well as by a West building democratic societies and institutions, spreading the scientific renaissance culminate in the ICT revolution, and purporting to uphold the banner of human rights everywhere and consecrate freedom in all walks of life.

Isolating people from public affairs is at the heart of the problem. Their positive engagement with society, the world and their multiple environments is the solution. Adopting the civilizing Lebanese model, which is founded on the partnership of all its constituents, is a template for the desired solution. *Takfiri* terrorism, openly hostile to Man and destructive of human civilization, perpetuates its brutal crimes in the name of religion, whilst marring its image, twisting its concepts and squandering its values. Here lies the importance of Imam Moussa Sadr's humanist proposal, his vision and method for protecting our contemporary societies from the dangers of horrific deviation and the practices of the mass killing of innocent civilians. The best resistance to *takfir* requires a method based on an integral and comprehensive approach that speaks the language of intellectual and social renaissance.

Imam Sadr's contribution can be pictured as a multi-tiered pyramid. Its base starts with operational services, and its body rises through organizational structures and accountability mechanisms, to cultural reform and deep-rooted social change effected with the participation of women and the enhancement of social justice in all its aspects. At the top of the pyramid are the values that Imam Sadr added to the human experience: his methodology for people to determine their everyday needs and be able to resolve them is the ultimate goal. People to him are women and men – this is the crucial addition to both the rural and urban Middle East. This generates a sense of reward and self-esteem which is a key condition for trusting others, working with them and enjoying the fruits of progress on the way to a better life. Progress reinforces the values of participation, dialogue and recognition of the other, which in turn raise the chances of peace and collaboration. This is true at the family and community levels, as well as between confessions, states and peoples. In Imam Sadr's choice of Lebanon as living proof of the validity of his argument for establishing economic, social and political justice vests an inexhaustible hope.

In a world rent by extremism sowing hatred, criminality and insularism, there is one group of people worthy of the designation of savior. They are the Levantine Christians, many of whom have been scattered across the world. This curse may hold a blessing for humanity. To speak of millions of Levantine Christians dispersed across the globe is to speak of millions of messengers

carrying cultural, communicational and creative gifts. They are the carriers of the Middle East's heritage, culture and mentality. They have breached the cultural barrier with the West. They are exempt from the stigma increasingly affecting Levantine Muslims. These qualities call them to assume a noble mission – that of restoring the people of the world to their senses.

Thank you.

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