Islam between Past and Future
The Islamic World
At an Historical Crossroad

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Pope Benedict XVI said: "Interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends". ("Meeting with representatives of Muslim Communities", Cologne, 20th August 2005).

Islam between Past and Future

1- An overview of the history of Islam.

1-1. The history of Islam spans through fourteen centuries (from the VII to the XXI). From its beginning Islam expanded in all directions: east and west, north and south, in the past and in the present, and in different ways, by wars and by peaceful expansion. Islam has penetrated into a great number of human societies and civilizations, and it has produced one of the most important civilization in human history: the multifaceted and rich Islamic civilization. After a time of stagnation, under the colonialist rule, the Islamic world is now on the move for an 'Islamic resurgence' (*sahwa islamiyya*) in very rapid evolution.

1-2. The actual presence of Islam in the world: it represents more than one billion people, i.e., the second religion in the world, spread across all countries, races and languages; and now for the first time in its history also in the west. Islam is considered by all as the fastest expanding religion in our present time.

1-3. Islam represents a great challenge for all, believers or not. We have to face dialogue or clashes with it. **Pope Benedict XVI**, in one of his first declarations, said: "**Interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends**". ("Meeting with representatives of Muslim Communities", Cologne, 20 August 2005).

1-4. Therefore, we all have to know Islam in order to be able to come in touch it as it is. Like it or not, Islam will become all the more an active presence all over the world. Thus, we have to come to terms with its presence. To ignore it means to live out of history.

Here, I will give a short overview of its reality through history.

2- Islam, a plural reality

What is Islam? This is a basic question to start with. Different answers are found in the field. My personal view is that Islam is not only just a religious belief, or a simple code of moral behaviour, etc. Islam is a multifaceted and complex reality that one must know in all its basic aspects as they appear from a deep analysis of it, both on its historical data and on its theoretical contents. A wrong reading of the Islamic reality has given, and continuous to give rise to a lot of misunderstandings and illusions, which events regularly, and sometimes in a dramatic way, contradict. Therefore, we have to know this reality in-depth, if we want to relate to it in real terms. Analyzing the Islamic reality, **four basic aspects** come to the front that must be kept in mind, in my view, since they all are always present in it, in its manifestations, though with different emphasis: **Islam is a religion (*dîn*), a law (*sharî'a*), a civilization (*hadâra*), a political project (*dîn wa-dawla*)**

2-1. Islam is a religion (*dîn*)

There is no doubt that first and basic aspect of Islam and its fundamental force throughout its history is its religious character. Islam is aware of having a mission in human history, and this mission is first of all a religious one: i.e., **asserting the absolute monotheism (*tawhîd*), against any evident or hidden form of idolatry**. The sources of this religion are the revealed Book (the Koran) and the sayings and deeds (*hadîth*) of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. Islamic religion is organized around a set of practices or religious duties (*'ibâdât*, summarized in the 'five pillars'), and a number of beliefs or dogmas, (*'aqâ'id*, summarized in the articles of faith). These constitute the basis of its identity, to be accepted by all those who intend to be and to be recognized as Muslims. In fact, every believer that deviates from them is considered an 'infidel' (*kâfir*), an apostate (*murtadd*), and as such to be eliminated from the Islamic community.

Islamic practices and beliefs, taken from the two sources of Islam, Koran and hadith, were quite early codified by Muslims into the so-called 'The Islamic Law' (*sharî'a*). In Sunni Islam, the Caliph, i.e., the successor (*khalîfa*) of the Prophet has the charge of leading the community both in spiritual and earthly matters. Then, in time the Caliph institution lost its influence in favour of the body of doctors (*'ulamâ'* or *ulema*) of the Islamic Law, who are now the essential reference for Sunni 'orthodoxy' (Sunnism). The Shiite Islam has exalted the figure of the *imâm*, the leader of the Islamic community (*umma*) a descendant of the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*). In Shiism there are different chains of *imâms*, all of them claiming to be the qualified leaders of the Islamic community. At any rate, the religious aspect is the first and the

fundamental one for Islamic identity. In spite of what many sociologists state, from this point of view there are not many (*sunni*) Islam, but one, the Islam confessing the true **tawhîd**. Differences are at the level of interpretation and some local practices, but not in the substance.

2-2. Islam is a law (*sharî'a*)

Islamic religion, however, does not confine itself to the private sphere. On the contrary, it embraces all social relationships (*mu'âmalât*), concerning family life, marriage, inheritance, different kinds of transactions, economic relationships, rules of living together and social conventions, till the most particular actions. In this respect the Islamic law is nearer to the Mosaic Law than to Evangelical law. The basic idea is that all human life must be ruled by only by God through the (*sharî'a*) He gives to humans, since He is the sole and only legitimate lawgiver for humans. No human can dictate a law to another human being. Therefore, Muslims often contrast Islamic legislation (coming from God) against those decreed by human societies, the Western ones included. Muslims qualify (or rather, dis-qualify) these laws as just human inventions, that must be revised in the light of the only and trustworthy 'law of God', the *sharî'a*.

In a quite early time, different 'schools of law' have developed in Islam, claming to be the true interpreters of the God's law, deduced form its official sources: the Koran and the Prophetical tradition (*sunna*). These 'official' schools of law in Sunni Islam are basically four: Hanafism, Malikism, Shafi'ism, Hanbalism. Such 'effort of interpretation' (*ijtihâd*) done by the first Islamic generations ended practically with the 3rd/9th century with Ibn Hanbal (d. 240/854), the founder of the last recognized school of law. After him, according to the current juridical opinion, there would be nothing more than imitative application (*taqlîd*) of what those pious and wise ancestors (*salaf*) have said.

Nevertheless, such an opinion has now entered in a deep crisis, because of the meeting-clash between Islam and modernity. Many Muslims now ask for re-opening the 'door of interpretation' (*bâb al- ijtihâd*), in order to open Islamic jurisprudence to face the modern world view so as to be able to meet the needs of modern times.

2-3. Islam is a civilization (*hadâra*)

Islam has given rise in human history to a new and original type of human civilization, which rightfully is called 'Islamic', which stands side by side with the other great civilizations of humankind, ancient and modern. This does not mean, of course, that Islam created its civilization from nothing. On the contrary, it is well known that Islam, during its long history, assimilated a

lot of elements coming from other civilizations, especially from the classic Greek-Roman or Hellenistic heritage, but also from the Persian, Indian worlds, and so on.

It is important to stress that Islam did not just imitate pre-existent civilizations, but did succeed in producing an original synthesis of all knowledge and sciences inherited from other civilizations, merging them into its own religious vision based on the Koranic monotheism. Koran in fact is considered by Muslims the center that synthesizes the whole Islamic culture, i.e., its vision of the human being and the world. In a word, Koran is beyond doubt the basis of the Islamic world-vision (*Weltanschauung*). On this ground, Islam has developed the ancient cultural heritage enriching it with important and original contributions of its own in all fields of human knowledge, from humanities (such as literature and philosophy) to natural sciences (such as mathematics, astronomy, geography, history), etc. This Islamic culture has become the basis of all Islamic historical civilizations, since there have been a number of expressions of Islamic culture in space and time. At this level, not on the shari'a-dogmatic level, one can speak of many Islams.

In spite of its incontestable splendour reached in its history, the Islamic civilization has been undergoing, starting by the end of the Middle Ages, a deep internal crisis up to our days. Muslims are now facing a great problem: is it possible a real 'renaissance' of the Islamic civilization in our times? At what conditions? Starting from such a problem, many Muslim thinkers are trying to launch a deep and radical reform of Islam that should become the ground for the making of a modern Islamic civilization.

2-4. Islam is a political project (*dîn wa-dawla*)

Islam is not only a religious and moral message. Islam intends to be an all-comprehensive religion, shaping all aspects of human life, even the political. This vision is expressed in a saying continuously repeated by Muslims: "Islam is religion and state (*dîn wa-dawla*)". It is quite odd to remark in this regard that, in spite of many clear statements from the part of Muslims themselves, the political aspect of Islam is often, and almost on purpose, disregarded by a lot of Western information about it, as if it were something just accidental, or even made up by those villainous 'Orientalists' with the purpose of discrediting Islam. On the contrary, everybody knows that Muhammad, the Prophet and founder of Islam, was at the same time the political chief of the first Islamic State. The Islamic state of Medina represents, in fact, the first historical realization of the Islamic religion in all its dimensions, and, therefore has become the model and the ideal point of reference for any Islamic society. It embodies the ideal of unifying the whole world under the Islamic world-view or law, so that in the end there should be only one religion (*dîn*)

and one nation (*umma*) under one guide (*imâm*). There lies the root of the historical Islamic imperialism.

Muhammad himself appears to have been fully aware that his religious message, and therefore Islam, was destined to spread and dominate all over the world. It is reported that, in the last year of his life, Muhammad sent out four letters to the great powers of his time (the Emperor of Byzantium, the Shah of Persia, the Negus of Ethiopia, and the Byzantine governor of Egypt) calling them to 'convert to Islam in order to be safe' (in Arabic: *aslim taslam*) both from temporal and eternal punishment. True or not, this story shows the clear consciousness of a universal mission that will become the main motivation of the first great Islamic conquests (*futûhât*) after the death of the Prophet of Islam, even if, of course, other and more 'material' reasons were also at work in those conquests.

A Koranic verse in fact says to Muslims: "You are the best of the nations (*umma*) that (God) aroused among humankind" (Koran 3, 110). Such world-view gives to every Muslim the sense of being a 'chosen nation', i.e., the best among all humans, and, therefore, charged with a universal mission for all humankind.

This basic religious-political project has been in the past the inspiration of the great Islamic conquests, and the great Islamic empires (the Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids, Seljuks, Ottomans, Moguls, just to mention the most known). The same project is being resumed in our present world by many Islamic states, and many Islamic trends and movements.

3. Islam in contemporary world: its trends and movements.

Premise: Some important dates for contemporary Islam.

In the year 1998 there was the recurrence of three important dates which, although not directly related to each other, have a special symbolic meaning in relation with some problems that are troubling the contemporary Islamic world.

a. 1198-1998.

Eight hundred years have passed since the death of the great Arabic Muslim philosopher Averroes (in Arabic Ibn Rushd, d. 1198). According to many contemporary Muslim thinkers, the opposition to the point of ostracism that the thought of this great rationalist philosopher met in the Islamic world has been a real cultural catastrophe. For many contemporary Muslim thinkers such a condemnation of **Averroes' rational thought** meant for the Islamic world:

i. The rejection of the inquiring-scientific reason in favour of the pure traditionalism.

ii. The beginning of the cultural decadence of the Islamic world until the modern age.

iii. While, the acceptance of Averroes' rational thought by the West meant the starting point of the 'European cultural rebirth' (Rénaissance) after the darkness of the Middle Ages.

These can be seen as questionable and over-simplified theories, nonetheless they indicate a common feeling inside the Islamic world: there is a permanent conflict between rational and traditional thinking not yet pacified. Returning to the 'Averroistic rationalism' is now seen by many contemporary Muslim reformers as the only way of salvation from the fundamentalist obscurantism that is paralysing the Islamic world.

b. 1798-1998.

Two hundred years have passed by since Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt. This meant the first major **encounter-clash** between two worlds that in previous centuries had evolved in different ways and along different patterns.

i. On the one side, there was the European West in the full bloom of the scientist and rationalist Enlightenment, wanting to propagate it all over the world.

ii. On the opposite side, there was the Middle-Eastern Islamic world, under the domination of the Ottoman Turks, closed up in a culture of stagnation. From such an encounter-clash between Islam and Modernity, the issue of reform (in Arabic *islâh*) in Islam has become all the more a hot one.

c. 1948-1998.

Fifty years have passed by since the *'Universal Declaration of Human Rights'* (UDHR), issued by the United Nations in 1948. For the first time in human history the vast majority of peoples of different races, cultures, ideologies and religions agreed on some fundamental principles of respect for the human person as such. Many Muslim countries, however, did not sign such a Declaration in its original wording, because, in their opinion, some of its statement contradict Islamic law (*sharî'a*). That is why, in 1981, they issued in Paris their own *'Islamic Universal Declaration of Human Rights'* (IUDHR), based on the principles of Islamic law, in which many statements sound rather ambiguous. Since then, the relationships between human rights and Islamic law have not ceased to be one of the hottest issues in contemporary Muslim societies.

3-1. Islam and modernity: the encounter-clash between the two has been a difficult confrontation, stirring the different modern trends in Islam.

Premise: reform (*islâh*), a recurring topic in Islamic history.

Contrary to what many traditionalists think, the need of reform (*islâh*) is not a novelty in modern times, but it has been a constant and traditional issue in Islamic history. It is a common place in Islamic tradition the idea that the Islamic society over time unavoidably undergoes some sort of decline, and therefore, is in need of a constant movement of reform. A famous hadith (saying attributed to Prophet Muhammad) states that God at the beginning of every century will send a 'reformer' (*muslih*) or 'renewer' (*mujaddid*) of the Islamic community. Such a title 'reformer' or 'renewer' of Islam has been in fact claimed by many people throughout the Islamic history.

Now, especially since the XIXth century, the harsh confrontation with the modern world modern has stirred the reform movements in a highly dramatic way. Many leading Muslim thinkers appeared in this time presenting themselves as the 'reformers' of the Islamic society. Among most representatives are: Jamâl al-Dîn al-Afghânî (1838-1897), Muhammad ʿAbdûh (1849-1905) and Muhammad Iqbâl (1873-1937).

In a somewhat simplified way, one can say that the modern reformist movement in Islam has taken two basic directions. The first one calls for a return to the past tradition, keeping it as it has been in the past: such a trend is represented by movements called 'Salafism' or 'Islamic neo-traditionalism'. The second one thinks that Islam has to accept the basic tenets of Modernity, and therefore calls for radical reform of Islam, especially of its law: this is represented by the movements called 'Islamic reformation or Islamic modernism'. We see them now in detail.

3-2. Traditionalist or Salafi movements

Salafism, or Islamic neo-traditionalism, is the Islamic reform movement that wants to go back to first Islamic tradition handed down by the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, and later codified by the great doctors (*'ulamâ'/ulema*) of the Islamic law (*sharî'a*) in the first Muslim generations. These are the 'pious ancestors' (in Arabic *salaf*, hence the term *salafîyya*, translated as 'Salafism') who formed the first Islam, which remains for most Muslims the ideal Islam, i.e., the perfect model to be imitated, because thought to be valid for all times and places.

This **Salafi Islam** maintains that in order to restore such an ideal Islam one has first of all to purify it from all later additions that have corrupted it. Mystical and philosophical currents are especially targeted by this trend. In the same way, modern values too (such as reason, science,

democracy etc.) have to be examined through the lenses of the 'true original Islamic tradition' (*sunna*), embodied in the accepted Islamic law (*sharî'a*), and whatever has no support in it must be rejected. This kind of Islam can be defined in Western terms as **traditionalist** (because attached to tradition excluding any change in it), **fundamentalist** (because it asserts some fundamental positions of it with no interpretation or adaptation), **integralist** (because it calls for the full application of Islamic traditional law in all fields, without any compromise).

Many scholars point out that actually these 'Islamist movements' are not simply a return to the 'pious Muslim ancestors' (*salaf*)' as they claim. In fact, their aim is the 'islamization of modernity', i.e., making use of modern technology and means to spread their Islamic vision all over the world. But even in such instance, I think, there would be nothing really new and unprecedented in Islamic history. Even in the past Islam did inter-act with its cultural environment. For instance, it adopted the ancient philosophical and scientific thought (especially the Greek-Roman one), putting it at the service of its religious message, providing in this way the Islamic religion with an new apologetic weapon, that was 'modern' for those times. Thus, there is no surprise that in modern times too several Islamist movements are trying to adopt modern scientific techniques to promote a re-Islamization of the Islamic societies, as a precondition for a propagation of Islam at world level, fulfilling the old Islamic dream of a world dominion, to which Islam feels to be called by God's mandate. This is the ultimate goal, openly stated in many ways, of the effort-fight (*jihâd*) of the Salafi movements in Islam.

The Salafi movement, or Salafism, has two key trends.

a. A reform 'from above': this has to be done by taking the political power in order to impose the Islamic law (*sharî'a*) on the whole society. This trend is primarily represented by the movement of 'The Muslim Brothers', founded by Hasan al-Bannâ (1906-1949) in Egypt in 1928. They intend to restore Islam as 'the government of God' on earth through a strict application of the Islamic law (*sharî'a*). The movement of the Muslim Brothers has been the model and the source of inspiration to many other similar movements, often catalogued under the generic label of 'Islamists', or 'political Islam' (*al-islâm al-siyâsî*).

The other important parallel trend is the Wahhabi movement, founded in the Arabic Peninsula by Abd al-Wahhâb (1703 – 1792), a strict Hanbalite theologian who intended to restore the strictest application of the Islamic law in the Arabic Peninsula, as a starting point for the conquest of the world. Such movement is now supported by the Gulf Countries that invest great financial means to spread such a rigid legalistic Islam all over the world. The basis of their

ideology is the revival of *jihad*, i.e, the effort through all means to spread the religion of God, i.e. Islam, to the whole world.

Such Islamic militant and militarist ideologies have given rise to a large number of 'Islamist' movements that have spread violence and killing in many Islamic countries form East (Indonesia, Philippines) to West (Nigeria, Algeria). One of the most active in our time is the so-called al-Qa'ida, i.e., the basis for the fighting in the name of God.

b. ... or a reform from 'below'? This trend of Islamic reformism is based on the Islamic tradition too. But, it sees that the seizure of political power without previous moral reform cannot but lead from bad to worse, i.e., to perpetrating the worst injustices in the name of Islam. In fact, the Koran says:"God does not change the situation of people till they have changed what is in their hearts" (Koran 7, 53). These Islamic movements, then, intend to work first and above all for an inner 'moral' reform of the Islamic society, starting from the 'reform of individuals', to end up with the 'reform of the whole society'. Only at that point, the restauration of the 'Islamic state' and the application of the Islamic law (*sharî'a*) will be possible. A typical representative of this trend is the movement of *Tablîgh-i Jamâ'at* (Community of announcement), founded in 1926 by *mawlânâ* Muhammad Ilyâs (1885 - 1944) near Delhi (India) and widely spread throughout the Islamic world, East and West.

However, despite their differences in inspiration and methods, both these trends of modern Islam, i.e., the Islamist-political and the moral-reformist, agree on the common aim that must be pursued: i.e., the purification of Islam and the application of Islamic law (*sharî'a*). In a word, their aim is the total re-Islamization of the Islamic society, in order to proceed later on to the submission of the non-Muslim world to the Islamic order, which is the order wanted by God. It should also be noted that this Salafism, or this political Islam, has become now dominant in the Islamic countries, and in particular in the Arabic ones, even after the 'Arabic springs', to such an extent that many people believe that this is the Islam *tout court*.

This political Islam has been given a tremendous boost by some recent political events.

First of all by the long conflict between Israel and Palestine has always stirred a very strong emotive reaction in the Arabic countries first, and in the Islamic world at large.

The success of the Iranian revolution lead by of Ruhollâh Khomeini (1902 – 1989) in 1979 has given the assurance that an Islamic revolution can succeed even against the more powerful state in the world, i.e., the USA.

The defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan has given the certitude that the Islamic armies can face and defeat all Western powers, Marxist included.

The aggressive policy of the USA against the Islamist movements with three wars (Iraq 1, Afghanistan, and Iraq 2) appeared to those Islamic movements a new Western imperialist policy to submit their territories to American control. A deep anti-American feeling has spread around the Islamic world.

Political Salafism has grown all the more radical, joining forces even with pre-modern reform movements (e.g., Wahhabism), and giving rise to a wide range of political-religious movements of militant-militarist nature. The movement of the Muslim Brothers, and especially their ideologue and martyr Sayyed Qutb (1906 - 1966), has provided these Islamic militant movements with the ideological basis and the operational strategy for their fight against all corrupt Islamic regimes firstly, striving to restore a real 'Islamic World order' based on the application of the Islamic law. These extreme movements have infiltrated almost everywhere the present Islamic societies, influencing the decisions of governments and institutions. Moreover, they have managed to put themselves at the centre of world attention by sensational coups, such as the destruction of New York Twin Towers on September 11th, 2001. It interesting noticing that the term *qâ'ida* (lit. basis), with which Bin Laden named his organization, has been literally taken, along with its ideological contents, from Sayyid Qutb's important book *Highmarks on the way*, in which he explains his ideology and the way to put it into practice. Such extremist and integralist Islamic ideology proves to be extremely powerful and active all over the world, becoming a most dangerous one in our global village.

Against such background, it seems clear that the support given to Salafist Arab countries, especially the 'oil countries', by Western countries, by the United States in particular, is ultimately a suicidal policy, although at present it seems to bring home... cheap petrol barrels! These countries in fact are major financial sources to fundamentalist, integralist and anti-Western Islamist propaganda. And it is easy to notice that the demons of religious fundamentalism and fanaticism, once unleashed, are very hard, but impossible to control. The events of September, 11th, 2001, are a clear proof of the suicidal nature of the policy pursued by the United States!

It is also important to stress that similar extremist movements have always been present in Islamic history from its very beginning. One has only to think to the similarities that exist between these modern movements and that of the Kharijites in the first Islamic century. One cannot help remarking a strange continuity at the historical and ideological levels between these

two movements, in spite of their distance in time, to the point that these modern movements have been often named neo-kharijite movements.

3-3. The reformist movements or the Islamic modernism

Along with the above mentioned Salafist movements that are dominating the present Islamic world and occupy almost all the media space, there are also reformist and innovative movements in Islam, though often ignored by our media. These reformist movements intend to take on seriously the values of modernity (reason, science, human rights, democracy etc.), looking for some openings to them from inside the Islamic tradition itself, so as to achieve a real integration between tradition and modernity. These reformers think that in order to open Islam to modernity, one has to mature firstly a critical 're-reading' of Islamic tradition, in opposition to the traditional and fundamentalist reading of it. Unlike Salafism, however, these modernist movements do not form yet a large unified movement or school of thought within the Islamic world. In most cases, they remain personal undertakings, often risky, of a few brave individuals, most often marginalized by the Islamic societies that are more and more dominated by the Salafî trends. Furthermore, this modernist reformist trend, which should be a natural ally of the West, is very often ignored and marginalized even by Western cultural and political circles. The latter, in fact, for various reasons (mostly for economic and political interests), prefer in the most to deal with the representatives of Salafist Islam. Moreover, one can also notice that even among Westerners converted to Islam, the Salafî trend seems to be the dominant one, as if it were a mark of a clearer Islamic identity in the confrontation with Western secularized societies.

As a result, one must take note that these liberal voices of the 'Islamic quarter' (which are, in my opinion, those who really seek to liberate it from the 'demons of tribalism', and so of fundamentalism) are in most cases silenced both within and outside Islam. On the contrary, every honest intellectual should feel bound to give voice to these voiceless people, so as to open new paths of dialogue between the two worlds.

For this reason, leaving aside those who can be considered the 'fathers' of Islamic modernism, such as Muhammad Abdûh (1849 - 1905), 'Alî Abd al-Râziq (1888 - 1966) in the field of Islamic science, Tâhâ Hussein (1889 - 1973) in the field of literary criticism, and others, who are already relatively well known, I have preferred to present the reader some contemporary marginalized voices of Muslims reformers to have a larger picture of Islamic reformism. I will mention some of them according to the field of their research, in which they have tried to promote a true Islamic cultural renaissance.

a. A new understanding of Islamic law (*sharî'a*): Muhammad Sa'îd al-'Ashmâwî, Mahmûd Muhammad Tâhâ (executed 1985).

b. For a new reading of Islamic history: Khalîl 'Abd al-Karîm, Sayyed al-Qimanî.

c. For renewal of Koranic exegesis: Nasr Hâmid Abû Zayd

d. For a secularization of society, with the separation between religion and state: Fu'âd Zakariyya, Mahmûd Amîn al-'Âlim.

There are a lot more of them, who deserve to be known and made known in order to reconcile Islam with modernity, and make it a positive factor in it.

Conclusion.

As we have said, the dominant and most rapidly expanding trend in the contemporary Islamic world is without doubt the Salafist Islam, in all its currents, the prominent ones being now, the Wahhabites, the Muslim Brothers, and the Jihadists (al-Qaeda in particular). These currents enjoy the large support of many Islamic governments and the major international Islamic organizations. Salafist Islam clearly aims at a global expansion, and it is therefore a permanent source of fanaticism that manifests, like an endogenous factor, in a lot of violent and bloody events in many parts of our global village.

However, I wanted to point out that this kind of Islam is neither the 'whole' nor 'the only' Islam, though it is often the most present in mass media. On the contrary, within the Islamic world there are many thinkers who feel the need for radical renewal of Islamic reality, opening it up to the values of modernity (reason, science, democracy and human rights, etc..), seen as positive values for all human societies, and that can be accepted in the Islamic vision, after a deep reform of it, especially of the Islamic law (*sharî'a*). As we have seen, these are in most cases individual initiatives, marginalized both within and outside the Islamic world. These people often live in situations of risk, both at a social and psychological level, and some of them have already paid with their life for the courage to speak. Such 'modernist and reformist' Islam has not yet formed a real school of thought, with clear principles of reading and interpreting of the Islamic sources, to be opposed to the traditional reading upheld by the Salafist Islam.

Nonetheless, it is important to make these voices heard. In my opinion, is the duty of every honest intellectual to give voice to the voiceless. In fact, it will be precisely through the commitment and sacrifice of people like these that the Islamic quarter will join the human global village in peaceful and positive way, and not, as in the past, in a hostile approach.

This is our hope, and the purpose of our commitment, and we wish to find more cooperation on the part of all people of 'good will'.

4. Islam facing the future: what will be the future of Islam?

4-1. Traditionalist or salafi? This is now the prevalent trend for many reasons. In this case we are going to face very hard confrontation with the Islamic world.

4-2. Or reformist and moderate? This is still a minority trend, but should be helped to become more influent. In this case there will be a more peaceful coexistence between Islam and other religions and cultures.

4-3. In any case, dialogue is the principal way indicated in the Church's documents in order to open ways of mutual understanding and cooperation towards a peaceful coexistence in the global village where there is a pluralist presence of different religions and cultures.

These are open, but dramatic questions. The answer to them depends on our inter-action with the Islamic world.

Are we going toward a confrontation at the intellectual, social and political levels? In this way we shall continue the tragic clashes and wars that signed in the most the relationships between the two worlds in the past. In such perspective, we can only expect more bloody and destructive clashes as those that are now taking place in many parts of our present world, starting with the destruction of the Twin Towers of New York, in 2001.

Or do we want to foster a dialogical and cooperative approach, trying to help Muslims to develop a reformed Islam or an Islamic reformation, helping them to become a positive factor in our global village? In this case, we hope that little be little Muslim reformists will create a new, reformed Islam, capable of peaceful coexistence and cooperation with the other quarters of our global village.

Where is the Church in such question? Where are we Combonians?

In the light of the present reflections we can understand the importance of the statement the emeritus **Pope Benedict XVI said in one of his first declaration on the topic during his visit to Germany on the occasion of the World Day Youth in 2005:**

"Interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends". ("Meeting with representatives of Muslim Communities", Cologne, 20 August 2005).

Our future is, of course in our hands, and we are responsible of it. We hope it will be a future of dialogue and peace, not of clashes and confrontation.

3.2. Forms of dialogue

Rather than elaborating on a theology or theory of dialogue, Church documents have focused more on practical suggestions for dialogue of people belonging to different faiths. The document *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), which is perhaps the most complete on the subject, suggests (no. 42) four forms or levels of dialogue, which have since become a reference point for later reflections and encounters. The document formulates them in the following way:

a. **Dialogue of life,** where people of different religions attempt to live in an open, good, neighbourly way, sharing their daily joys and sorrows, problems and worries.

b. **Dialogue of works**, where Christians and people of other religious cooperate in view of an integral development and liberation of all.

c. **Dialogue of theological exchange**, where experts of different religions try to deepen the understanding of their respective religious legacies and appreciate the mutual spiritual values.

d. **Dialogue of religious experience**, where people of different religions rooted in their own religious traditions share their spiritual riches, for example prayer and contemplation, faith, and the ways of searching God or the Absolute

The document does not claim to be either exhaustive or systematic, although it makes clear that dialogue must involve all levels of human existence, individual or social.