

Gad and Arshad: A tale of two men from two different worlds

By Mounir Bishay, Los Angeles

Gad and Arshad are two young men in their twentieth. What brings them together is their hate for ISIL, and the desire of doing something to tell others about it. However there are many things that set the two men apart. They differ, in their ethnic and religious backgrounds, in the place where they live, in the way their respective communities accept them, and in the tragic circumstances that await one, compared to the honor that surrounds the other.

Each of the two men has a remarkable story to tell. Let's ponder some of the highlights.

Gad is a Coptic Egyptian Christian from the village of Nasereyya, Governorate of Menia in Upper Egypt. He is a new graduate at just 22 years old and works as an English teacher in Junior high schools.

Gad found himself, overnight, subject to investigation and imprisonment by the authorities in Egypt for taking 20 seconds video tape of 4 students mostly 15 years old. The students were playfully making fun of ISIL who pose as religious people but in reality they kill, slay, and burn their victims alive.

The tape was later considered an insult to Islam and mocking the way Muslims pray. But it is clear from the consequences of events that the purpose of the tape was mocking ISIL and exposing their hypocrisy. Those who were accused of making the tape did not mean to distribute it. The tape was distributed by the Muslims of the village after they found it by chance.

Soon after the tape was distributed, Muslims of the village went on a rampage destroying and burning the homes of the

Christians while occupants were still inside. Security forces failed to respond to calls by the Christian asking for help.

The Coptic Christians in that village are living now in fear. Students don't feel safe going to school. The board of education ordered Christian students to stay home for fear of being harmed. This is a very critical time for students to miss school. The school year is approaching the end and final exams is about to start.

As it always happens, even before the court issued its ruling, the mob has already made their demands that the 5 Christian families leave the village as a condition of returning to calm.

On April 17, 2015, a council meeting made of prominent people in the village along with representatives of government officials, took place to bring reconciliation. The council made a decision that the teacher leave the village after the court announces its verdict, and regardless of what is the verdict.

Still, the final future of Gad is unknown. The video that lasted only about 20 seconds which was meant to be criticism of ISIL became evidence against him of insulting Islam. The punishment in such cases depends on the judge who can get out of legal penal code, using instead Sharia law which differs drastically according to the school of jurisprudence. Thus the punishment could be double or triple or can even reach capital punishment. However, even before the judge pronounces the ruling, a punishment is already in place for Gad which is departure for ever from the place where he was born and raised.

In contrast, Arshad is a Muslim young man of a Pakistani heritage. Arshad (29) was born in London, England and lives there. He works as an aspiring comedian. Unlike Gad, Arshad receives a great honor from the British authorities. The

English Police employs Arshad on their staff to visit schools in London, and expose ISIL and appeal to students to abandon religious extremism.

What Arshad does is talk about the issues that are dividing the British community in dealing with the Muslim community.

His tool is poking fun of the issues. In one of his meetings in a school, Arshad asked the audience that those of Muslim background lift up their hands. About one third raised their hands. Then Arshad said, "Wow, with this we can take over the country, Sharia law is in the way!" but then, he quickly said that he was only kidding. Arshad's purpose was to make fun of what people believe that Muslims plan to take over the country and impose Sharia Islamic law on everybody. On another occasion a young woman asked if she can give him a hug. After the hug, Arshad screamed "you stole my wallet!" still that was Arshad's way to dispel the belief that Muslims are less honest than others. But, Arshad's criticism was never looked on as insulting to anyone but as a tool to fight insults.

No doubt that Arshad does a great service for his community by correcting many misconceptions thru laughter. But the greatest service Arshad does is to his country, England, by trying to stop young British males and females from leaving England to join ISIL. It is estimated that about 600 have left England to Turkey and from there to territories controlled by ISIL.

An important factor for the success of Arshad to reach the hearts and minds of his audience is that his message is personal, sincere and clear. He often talks about issues in his own life and in the lives of many who listen to him. He uses humor, rather than violent protests to express his feelings

The story of Arshad started after the police authorities have seen YouTube tapes made by Arshad of community situations he dealt with, using his funny style, and ending it with positive

constructive message. They thought to add him to their staff to spread that message of reconciliation between the Muslim community and the British society.

A thought came to my mind: what would happen if we switch places of operation between Gad and Arshad? How about if Gad, the Coptic Christian, lives and works in London, and, if Arshad, the Pakistani Muslim man, lives and works in Upper Egypt? Would both experience the same problems/ rewards as they do today? My answer is in the negative. It is the community with its values and ideals that makes all the difference.

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A Call to the Free World: BAN POLITICAL ISLAM

By Mounir Bishay

This article is not about Islam as a religion or most of the world's Muslims. It is about combating an extreme version of Islam that is defined as Political Islam that claims to be the only true representation of the religion of Islam.

Political Islam and its hateful tentacles are as dangerous for the welfare of American Muslims as it is for non-Muslim citizens. Most global Muslim populations reject Political Islam as they are more apt to be victimized by its irrational fanaticisms than are non-Muslims.

The distinctions between the religion of Islam and Political

Islam must be made clear. Any action against Political Islam must not be interpreted as an action against the religion of Islam or world's Muslims.

The situation is very similar to the 30 years of trouble between the Protestant and Catholics of Northern Ireland. When the Protestant British government said it was at war with the Catholic Irish Republican Army (IRA), no one took offense. Citizens of all faiths instinctively understood that the IRA was not one and the same as Catholicism; just as Political Islam is not one and the same as the religion of Islam.

I am calling upon the Western democracies to Ban Political Islam. Political Islam is incompatible with Western democracy. The belief of Political Islam is that Islam is a religion and a state. The ultimate goal of Political Islam is the submission of the entire world to Caliphate domination. This demands Shariah Law as the law of the land. If that becomes a reality, all citizens have some very difficult choices to make: Give up their birth religion by converting to Muslim; or exit their homeland; or accept 3rd class Dhimmi status. This status renders human rights practically nonexistent and penalizes with a prejudicial Jezya tax that must be paid. The only other choice is death by the sword.

There is no time to waste in uniting to identify the real enemy, because the various factions of Political Islam are getting more violently aggressive every day. The latest news from Al Qaeda leader Ayman Al Zawahiri is the formation of a Jihadist organization intended to erase the borders drawn by the British in the 20th Century that divided the Muslims of South Asia from those of the rest of Asia.

In the Middle East, the IS Movement is gaining new ground daily by barbarous leaps that are noted for beheadings, crucifixions and slave auctions of Christians, Yazidis, and Shia Muslims. In many other parts of the world militant

Political Islam organizations such as Nigeria's Boko Haram are terrorizing Christians through mass rapes, kidnappings and by selling school age girls in sex slave markets.

The implications of IS's progress toward this end is at last registering on the radar of the governmental representatives of free nations including those of the USA. The recent gruesome slaughters of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff has caught the attention of America's, the UK's and Europe's national leaders. At last, they are seeing that their open society policies invited the infiltration of Political Islam's extremists. The justified fear is that the infiltrators will join existing sleeper cells that will strike with multiple coordinated attacks at the right moment to cripple their nations.

Muslims do not have that choice under Political Islam and its interpretation of what is called the Islamic Umma. It is the collective body of Muslims worldwide that demands loyalty to Muslims over loyalty to the nation of residence. For Political Islam, the motto is, "Take your Muslim brother's side whether or not you believe that his actions are right or wrong

Due to the Umma policy, after September 11, 2001 when the United States got involved in two wars against two Muslim countries, the service of Muslim Americans became complicated. Muslim scholars in the United States were hesitant to issue a blanket statement accepting the notion that American Muslims could fight in a war where the USA is fighting a Muslim country. They issued a vague opinion approving the principle, but qualified it with the condition that the conflict must meet the Islamic standard of a "just war." This is actually another way of saying "no, it is not acceptable" for American Muslims to fight an Islamic country because Muslims are never allowed to raise weapons against a fellow Muslims.

This must have played a role in 2 major incidents committed by

radicalized Muslims who were in the US Army. On March 2003 two days after the United States invaded Iraq, American Muslim soldier, Hasan Akbar killed 2 colleagues and wounded 14 others. Subsequently, on November 2009 at Ft Hood, TX, Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan opened fire killing 13 high ranking military personnel and wounding 31 others.

However, this should not be an excuse for a generalized condemnation of all American Muslims serving in the armed forces. More than 3,500 US Muslims were deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. As of 2006, 212 Muslim-American soldiers have been awarded Combat Action Ribbons for their service in Iraq and Afghanistan, and 7 gave their lives for the USA.

With all of this considered, the governments in the West would be free to open investigations on any person, mosque, and organization that propagate incendiary speech and materials. Those who enlist in the armed services could be thoroughly investigated to insure that they do not have Political Islam sentiments or any type of terroristic inclinations. This would also apply to anyone filing for citizenship with automatic denial for ties with questionable organizations and contacts.

The underlining fact is that Political Islam is on the move. The IS threats to humanity that are now posed are greater than Nazism and Communism ever were. The seriousness of the situation emphasizes the need for developing a strategy and enacting plans of action to deal with problem as soon as possible. Delaying at this will put the West at a disadvantage from which it will be very difficult to recover. Political Islam must be separated from Islam as a religion. The seriousness of these political views are not just because they are against the ideals that the West holds dear, but also because the views are like cancer that can spread in every direction ruining everything in its way. "BAN POLITICAL ISLAM" is my cry for America and the West. The sooner it is done, the better. If you fail to do so now, the cost later

will be infinitely higher.

A ONE PHRASE SERMON: Don't BE AFRAID

By Mounir Bishay

As they are accustomed, the congregation of the SAINTS Church in Alexandria, Egypt, came to their church to bid the past year farewell and to welcome in 2011. It is an occasion when they prefer to be in God's House and in God's presence.

The year 2010 was about to come to an end with all of its tragedies for the Coptic people of Egypt. The congregation in the Saints Church was looking forward to the New Year 2011. They were cautiously optimistic, hoping it would be better than the year before. The hands on the clock were racing towards the dividing moment between the two years. At that moment they usually heard the sound of a ringing bell ushering in the New Year. However, this year's sound was completely different. A few minutes after midnight, the congregation heard a huge explosion. The whole building shook as glass windows were blown out and flew into the congregation. Everybody started to scream, it was heart wrenching to see the dead and injured with blood streaming from their facial and bodily wounds.

In the video clip that recorded that dreadful moment, we saw the building shaking from the blast and heard the disconcerting screams. We also heard the priest uttering a phrase to his people, saying: *don't be afraid.*

I don't know whether or not the priest had an opportunity to deliver his New Year's message prior to the explosion. But, through the phrase, "don't be afraid"; the priest gave his congregation the shortest, the timeliest and the most eloquent sermon they had ever heard. In just one short phrase they heard a full sermon on a subject that relates to the occasion of the New Year. The sermon was also meant to deal with problems that resulted from the terrorist attack. There is no more appropriate message to be delivered than that of triumph over fear. There is no better style than his three word message. Nothing beyond "*don't be afraid*" could be better to calm the situation and to invigorate his parishioners' hearts and minds to bravely face the New Year. That sermon will be remembered as long as they live.

Fear is a God-given instinct designed to protect us from impending dangers. Fear is a very strong feeling that is usually directed against the future and that which is unknown. But, preoccupations about past fears and the possibilities of future dangers can incite miserable bondage to fear. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the commandment "fear not" was mentioned in the Bible 366 times, one for each day of the year. The Lord Jesus also included freedom from fear as one of the central themes of his teachings.

Regarding fear as a result of insecurities about life, Jesus said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows." Matthew 10: 29 – 31

Regarding fear of being killed, Jesus said, "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Matthew 10: 28

Regarding fear from the life to come, Jesus said, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give the kingdom." Luke 12: 32

However fear about real issues can turn into fear about imagined issues. Thus fear in itself becomes the problematic, and it turns into phobic with paranoia.

In his inaugural speech, president Franklin Roosevelt said, "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself." The words were spoken in 1933 during the darkest economic crisis ever to face America and civilized nations worldwide. Roosevelt's words became the motto to rescue the economy of America and the rest of the world from the brink of collapse. The motto of "there is nothing to fear, but fear itself" was credited for reviving the American morals and bringing hope back to the country.

Jesus wanted to treat that same malady in his disciples. He once ordered them to travel by boat to across the lake to wait for him to arrive later. Jesus purposely stayed behind. He went up into a mountain to pray and stayed there until the evening. In the mean time, the ship with the disciples was being wind and wave tossed by a sudden storm. The disciples were in great fear of dying, although some of them were experienced fishermen. Jesus delayed coming until the fourth watch of the night. In the midst of this grave circumstance, Jesus came walking towards them on the sea. When the disciples caught glimpse of Jesus, they cried out in fear that a ghost was coming to trouble them. Fear in itself was so dreadful that it made them scream. At that moment, the words of Jesus came in to cast away their fears. He assured them with the words, "Be of good cheer, it is I; be not afraid." Matthew 14:22- 27.

With those same words Jesus speaks to all that are suffering fear as a result of what happened in the first few minutes of 2011 in the Saints Church of Alexandria, Egypt. Those who were martyred are now with Jesus relieved from all pain and fear.

Jesus has words for the physically and psychologically wounded; for the relatives and friends of the dead and for all Copts who live in fear of future persecutions. Jesus says “be of good cheer, it is I, be not afraid.” It is I who quieted the storm, who walked on water, who went through closed doors. It is I who raised the dead, healed the sick, wiped tears from those who wept. It is I who redeemed humanity on the Cross, who defeated death, who ascended to heaven, who sits at the right hand of God to intercede for his followers. Jesus says, I will come again to take all believers to myself and into heaven. That will put an end to all of their fears and suffering.

It is also the message that the faithful priest of the Church of the Saints spontaneously spoke to his congregation, in the most dreadful of moments: Don't be afraid.

Mohammed and Zeinab Higazy

The latest victims of “balances” in the Egyptian society

By Mounir Bishay- Los Angeles



Twenty five year old Mohammed Ahmed Higazi (L), and his pregnant wife Zeinab, 23, read from the bible August 2 in their home in a Cairo. Higazi who converted from Islam to Christianity has launched a bid to have the change recognized officially in what is believed to be the first such case, he told AFP today. In Egypt, identity cards say whether the bearer is Christian or Muslim, but those who convert to Christianity complain that administrative hurdles prevent them being able to change their official papers



Mohammed Higazy (25), an Egyptian young man who was born a Muslim but converted to Christianity at age 16 and changed his name to the Christian name Bishoy. Zeinab (23), an Egyptian young woman, was also born a Muslim, converted to Christianity and changed her name to Katerina. The couple are now married and expecting their first child. They made news when Mohammed decided to go to court in Egypt trying to get their conversion officially recognized so that their unborn baby would be born

a Christian. The case attracted much attention internationally as well as it has in Egypt. It's the first time in Egyptian history that a Muslim has dared to do so in Egypt. The Egyptian authorities usually welcome the Christians who seek to convert to Islam but deny the same rights to the Muslims who want to convert to Christianity. Since it is a test case of the Egyptian system, many await eagerly and cautiously the outcome of the case.

Due to the sensitivity of the case, I carefully followed the debates surrounding it in the Egyptian media. I was surprised to see that the general consensus in Egypt is to forbid this young man's request to change religions. On a personal level, it was said that he is not truthful or genuine about the matter. The claim is he is only seeking media attention in an effort to become famous. From a religious standpoint, it raises the apostasy from Islam issue and the punishment that goes along with it. For the purpose of this article, I am not going to discuss the Islamic religious issue of apostasy. Likewise, I cannot speak of this man's motives, as I don't personally know him. Nevertheless, I don't believe it is my business or anyone else's to judge what is going on within this man's conscience. We need to leave such judgment to the man and his creator.

However, there was a specific argument that attracted my attention. It was the assertion that it would somehow undermine the "balances" of society if he were allowed to convert. I was astounded to know that some people would sacrifice undisputable individual rights just because they believe they don't agree with the changing trends of society. I could not help wondering if some people are making such a sacred cow out of societal values that none dare to touch.

My mind went back and pondered what I had discovered about Egyptian society after being away for almost three decades. It was a completely different society from the one that I had once known. Those who continually live in the Egyptian society

may not notice the changes, but they are certainly a shock to those who have been away for any length of time. The contrasts are apparent in most everything. For example, one cannot miss the appearance of religiosity especially in regard to the way that people dress. Most of the women wear Islamic hijabs and many men are growing beards. There are religious overtones in the everyday language of the people. However, a deep look exposes that much of what one sees is only superficial. An astute observer will soon recognize that there are other religious values that could be lacking. Values like chastity, honesty, love, mercy and kindness are not equally demonstrated in the dealings among people. I heard new mottos circulating that indicate that people would accept and do most anything if they feel it will get them ahead. People are racing for making money. And, it seems that no matter how much they accumulate, it's never enough. Everything is available in the marketplace, but the prices are so outrageous that many things are out of reach for most people. There is however a small wealthy minority who can afford to buy what they want. This creates various degrees of envy and competition, moral or immoral. The Egyptian society is going through drastic changes; religiously, economically, and socially. Such are causing people to rethink the traditional values and to replace them with values foreign to Egyptians.

Do we want that these present and changing values of the Egyptian society to be the foundation that shape our lives and dictate what we accept and what we reject?

In cases such as the one in question, what are we to do? If the society rejects a perfectly legitimate issue that will help preserve individual rights, which side should we take? The side of legitimacy or the side of supporting the unreasonable and flawed dictates of society?

I understand that if security is the main consideration, it is easier to maintain peace when things go the way that the majority within society is most apt to accept. While this

might be the easiest way to accomplish peace, is it the moral and right way? Should we sacrifice the rights of people to achieve peace in society? Where then are the security forces that are supposed to protect individuals from immoral and unjust masses?

At this point, some may object on the grounds that the views of society represent the opinion of the majority. They argue; in a democracy, the majority's opinion rules. They sneer those who call for democracy accusing them of being selective and hypocritical about applying it.

These people misunderstand the true meanings of democracy. Democracy doesn't mean that one person over the 50%, can do whatever he/she wants in society regardless of the rights of others. If that were the case, the whole foundation of the society would be turned upside down. In addition to the concept that the majority rules; there are other important elements that are part of a democracy that must be considered. For instance, in the United States, the White majority cannot enact a law that would enable them to deport all of the Blacks. Even if the majority did accept such a law, could it become the law of the land? Of course not, for one thing, it would be deemed unconstitutional and would certainly be rejected by America's Federal court.

The word "balances" of society has been used as a cliché to deny the legitimate rights of many people in Egypt. We have seen it used not only about the right to change religions, but also about a host of other injustices. It has been used in denials for churches to obtain building permits; forbidding Christians to advance to high-ranking jobs; and in the lack of just punishments for Muslims who commit crimes against Christians.

In all these situations the victims are asked to accept injustice because of the "balances" of society. "Balances" of society has become an elastic word that can be applied to

almost anything and everything. It is also a word that sounds nice, but has a nasty, wicked and objectionable meaning. It simply means that the majority of people in the Egyptian society no longer accept the minority that differs from them in religion.

The government has choices to make. It can accept the present situation and continue with business as usual. Or, they can pause and ask themselves; why have things in our nation sunk to such a shameful condition? They should be contemplating how to change the society and get it back on the right track.

Great leaders are the courageous ones who swim against the tide. They are able to challenge the status quo and change the direction of their nations for better. They deserve recognition and the honor of being numbered with those who changed history.

It is wrong when the balances of Egyptian society tilt against the legitimate rights of two of its citizens, Mohammed and Zeinab. This is not Egypt that I am proud of. I pray that my Egypt will again become an oasis of hope and security for the weak and the oppressed that seek refuge against tyranny and injustice.

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