

## Domestic Violence

Bishop George Khodor

It appears that we are witnessing a debate taking root between Muslim scholars or “propagandists” and the state over the issue of domestic violence which is a form of violence. These brothers see the proposed draft law to be at odds with Islamic law and use the latter to ensure that a woman is obedient to her husband. This is what little I read in the press. In the absence of the integral text refuting the law, you cannot take a position, especially if you are a non-Muslim. I expect there will be major divisions not only among the various religious communities, but also within one and the same religious community.

There is no doubt that violence is only exerted by someone who has power. This is expressed via the means at his disposal, such as his muscles. Modern society emphatically speaks of dialogue, but dialogue is not always a meeting of equals except superficially, because the strong often show kindness in order to assert themselves. Violence of different degrees is rooted in nature, but it must be superseded by the justice and equality that God wants to be universal among us.

Violence is sanctioned by laws or social structures that the strong person uses and benefits from. Divine words, regardless of the source, are always invoked to justify a husband’s violence until one discovers equality in dignity, and that compassion is stronger than physical force or force derived from the law. This brings us back to the ego once again. Am I an agent entrusted with power, or a monster in disguise taking advantage of the authority I am entrusted with in order to crack down on citizens, who according to me, break the law? The one who holds power is tempted by the mere fact of possessing it, but in reality he has only received it in order to fulfill God’s commands, God’s justice. Going back to the issue of the family, Christianity demands from the wife full submission to her husband, but it mitigates this command by asking the husband to love his wife as much as Christ loved the Church, i.e. to death. But I have rarely come across a man who is satisfied with having

an obedient wife. People read the Scriptures and discard the parts that do not serve their interest. What about Islam? Verse 34 of Surat an-Nisa’ says the following: “As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them [first], [Next], refuse to share their beds, [And last] beat them [lightly]”. I asked the late Sheikh Sobhi as-Saleh about the beating issue, may God have mercy on his soul. The problem is that I have no witnesses to what he said, now that he is dead. His answer was that the beating should be light, which is corroborated by *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* (the Qur’anic interpretation by the two Jalals). This means that the beating is intended to be a warning, not an act of real violence. As for Sayyed Muhammad Hussein Tabataba’i, he deals with the issue of beating by considering it to be a type of admonishment because Surat an-Nisa’ (the Quranic related chapter) does not have anything that can be understood as promoting violence. What also downplays the beating issue is the content of verse 187 in Surat al-Baqarah: “Permitted to you, on the night of the fasts, is the approach to your wives. They are your garments and ye are their garments”. In philosophic jargon this is called oneness, i.e. symmetry in love, which absolutely precludes violent beating.

I do not see in the Holy Qur’an anything that justifies domestic violence at all. How are we going to deal then with tens of verses of mercy that allowed for the labeling of Islam as the religion of mercy? Mercy is necessary everywhere and not just at home. The problem is how to reconcile our modern times’ perception of things with God’s commands. How are we going to face modern civilization with issues of non-violence? Is achieving peace all over the world a heresy? Are religious interpretations limited to a specific period, or are they suitable for all times? Does the current attempt to secure safety in the household dissatisfy God?

Is it true that the country is going to be divided?

But this time people will not fight on a sectarian basis. In my opinion, we will witness the emergence of a category of people who consider this positive law to be against the Islamic *shari'a*, and another Lebanese community that will include all Christian and Muslim liberals who, while being strong believers, will pay no attention to those who accuse them of going against religious dogma because they are against domestic violence. Indeed, religious liberals believe in the equality between husband and wife when managing the affairs of the family. There is traditional and conservative thinking on the one hand and a modern approach asking for renewal in Islamic thought and is closer to contemporary civilization on the other hand. This reformist school of Islamic thought exists in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, as well as in other countries.

Women's journey to achieve equality with men is a big phenomenon in modern Islam and is not about to stop. It raises the banner of an Islam that is true to itself, and in tune with the development of civilization in our world today. Within this civilization, no one accepts violence, be it inflicted by a man or a woman. Domestic violence works against both of them. I have previously witnessed a woman's cruelty to her husband and her ruthless behavior. The idea behind a law promoting domestic safety is to lift any oppression that might affect any of the parties. Obedience to the man is recommended by religion but does not include his right to discipline the woman. He cannot be a party to the dispute and the judge at the same time. And this is for sure incompatible with being merciful towards one another. Neither of the two can in any way subjugate the other. Union is not subjugation. It is a mutually exchanged love. The woman does not just receive affection from her spouse, she also gives it and expects her life companion to be responsive, until they both become one being.

One does not eliminate the other. Both of them develop together within the family unit. Children can only develop if they witness mutual respect

between their parents. Their love for their parents grows stronger and stronger when sons and daughters see this complementarity between the mother and father. You welcome your wife's abilities and wit, and complete them with your intelligence. There is no melting here. This is called facing, and in linguistics, this means that the faces should be facing each other, and the souls as well. My dream is for those with strong muscles and those with wealth to understand that the other might be greater spiritually and culturally and that they will reap what they sow.

This leads me to say that we cannot live together if we remain divided between traditionalists and reformists. I know that all societies are divided along those lines. However, if we remain divided between the people of the text and the people of the spirit, the country will have a long wait before it sees its revival. However, what makes me rejoice is that the disagreement is not between Christians and Muslims, but rather between conservative people on the one hand and those who are interested in development, growth, and the future on the other. The two groups exist in both religions. A true civil society will slowly take shape alongside an old, outmoded society, until the society that progresses toward truth is victorious, tomorrow or the next day. There is no doubt that human reality is spiritual and is shaped by lived circumstances that force human beings to shun inaction and delusion.

One should examine the issue of violence, be it domestic or else, in light of a profound reform of humanity. If there is no unity based on true understanding, we are going to remain in the realm of courtesy, compliance, and fake peace. In the absence of any pact based on traditions as well as on righteousness, love, tranquility, and confidence in the others' ability to advance, we have no life.

Translated from Arabic by Rada Soubra

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