

**BETWEEN  
RELIGION AND SCIENCE  
HOW DID ARABS REACT TO  
THE IMPACT OF  
THE CORONAVIRUS?**



## Between Religion and Science: How did Arabs React to the Impact of the Coronavirus?

Sherif Rizk

### Preface:

**“You and I do not see things as they are. We see things as we are,” negotiator Herb Cohen says.<sup>1</sup> This saying could tell us why “sacred” is hard to define. Is it what people hold sacred? It follows then that “sacred” refers not to a phenomenon regarded as sacred by a group of people but to what those people believe to be sacred. For that reason, agreeing on a single definition of “sacred” at a global level or even among a group of people who share the same belief of sacredness becomes difficult, as followers of religions all over the world agree and disagree upon many things.**

### Introduction:

**This paper discusses the definition of “sacred”, its relativity, and the disagreements that emerged with the emergence of COVID-19: how do theologians interpret the pandemic, how did people react, and why has the reaction taken that form? How does the world work? Does it work haphazardly or according to a precise universal system?**

### The Absolute and the Relative

**One of the most complex and controversial problems concerning the universe relates to what is relative and what is absolute. Debates surrounding this issue may get really fierce, so much that the debate could turn into a fight, with every party trying to pull the other into its camp, believing that it is its duty to guide the other towards the right path, but this is not how things are. There are distinguishing features that define what is absolute and what is relative.**

**Researcher Sherif Rizk emphasizes that what is absolute is only absolute for someone or a group at a specific time.<sup>2</sup>**

**A simple study of the world's history would conclude that change is inevitable; what someone deems absolute today might turn into relative or remain unchanged tomorrow, or they might modify or erase it from their**

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<sup>1</sup> "You Can Negotiate anything" Herb Cohen

<sup>2</sup> Sherif Rizk, The absolute and the relative.

mind due to a number of reasons, notably exposure to new experiences and interaction with life permanently and constantly. Relativity as a cornerstone in the social structure will promote positive thinking in multi-cultural and multireligious societies, allowing no culture to dominate the cultural criteria of a society.

Diversity itself is one of the driving forces of any society, for diversity of ideas, talents, beliefs, customs and traditions, as well as recognizing those is nothing but the natural movement of life.

What is deemed sacred in a culture is not necessarily sacred in other cultures, and this neither underestimates it or them. This is referred to as “difference”, which is one of the axioms of life. The more we address issues concerning medicine, art, geology, nature, engineering, chemistry, and natural phenomena (e.g., earthquakes, volcanoes), the more complex problems become.

## **How does nature work within the sacredness framework?**

**Followers of religions see the way the universe works differently. Whilst everyone believes that God runs the universe, there is no consensus on how the universe is run. People disagree over how the universe is run; some employ their holy texts in understanding the universal phenomena, and others might use their own holy texts to distort those of the others. To return to Cohen's saying, "You and I do not see things as they are. We see things as we are", one would find that a "sacred text" is 'sacred' to those who hold it sacred, but it is not sacred in itself. The Holy Quran is sacred to Muslims, the Bible to Christians, not to followers of other religions and other believers. The problem becomes even more complex when one interprets what s/he deems sacred, with all its minute details, in the others' behaviors based on a different text in a different culture.**

## **Do religious rituals cure illnesses of the soul only or those of the body as well?**

**This question was the subject of debate in social media and private discussions, and it remains unanswered, for every camp has its line of reasoning and way of understanding its own sacred text.**

**Dr. George Farag of the Orthodox Patristic Center states that we believe that God runs the world by natural laws, not by miracles. Miracles are the exception that God performs at the time He desires according to His own good willing, but the world is run by God's natural laws. Because of that, we obey these laws and respect science. And we should not test God by challenging the laws of nature. For example, a person who throws himself off a high place should not expect a miracle to happen, and that angels would carry him off on their wings to land peacefully. In fact, this is a challenge to the laws of nature, which might cost him his life as a price. This is not an act of faith, but an act of recklessness and an inappropriate serious risk!<sup>3</sup>**

**Recognizing these complementary facts, which are not incompatible with faith, enables us to understand why when Saint Paul was sick, he received communion regularly, while dressings on his body were healing his wounds and releasing evil souls!**

**Whereas Farag emphasizes that "the world is run by laws of nature which God created", many religious leaders contradict him. Farag believes that miracles are an exception, but others regard Communion itself as a miraculous act, claiming that Christians have been taking Communion for approximately two thousand years, and we have never heard of infection**

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<sup>3</sup> God and laws of the universe, George Farag.

transmission through the holy spoon used to drink Blood of Christ by different persons one after the other.

The Bishop of Assiut (a governorate in Upper Egypt), Anba Youannes, affirms that “if we pray earnestly from the heart, covid won’t even touch us.” He asked the audience to repeat after him the following words in his sermon on the importance of prayers, emphasizing their miraculous power: “that power which can do miracles and move mountains.” Some might disagree with him, considering that what is scientific should be addressed by science, and what is spiritual should heal the soul not the body.

Researcher Sherif Rizk holds that the vast majority of people in the Arab Region and around the world do not distinguish what is spiritual from what is scientific. People employ religious verses to explain universal phenomena, but the universe is the reality we live in, the physical world, and the physical world is the study of naturalists, biologists, chemists and physicians, who are in constant and continuous exploration. There are no absolute answers in science, and if exist, they remain so until modified or refuted. The history of science is replete with examples of scientific theories that scientists used for some time until they were modified, refuted or changed entirely by other scientists. Science moves from a question to another, and scientists are delighted with new questions. The real world is in constant pursuance.<sup>4</sup>

The spiritual world addresses the soul, which makes one do things that are not subject to physical laboratorial matters, but goes beyond those in one's pursuit of happiness and content. Ali ibn Abi Talib says: “True devotion does not mean not to possess anything, but not to be possessed by anything.” Devotion to God is a pure spiritual notion, and searching and fighting within the soul is not easy, but we tend to intermingle things.

Blending what is scientific with what is spiritual is an old story, from which many scientists and thinkers suffered in the East and West. Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) suffered, and Averroes (1126-1198) suffered, and so did many others.

In 1614, Galileo was accused of heresy because of championing Nicolaus Copernicus's theory (1473-1543), the Copernican heliocentrism, which states that the sun is the center of the solar system. Most people then believed that Earth is the center of the universe, which was a literal interpretation of the Bible, as believed Galileo. In 1616, Galileo was prevented from teaching and upholding Copernicus's theory.

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<sup>4</sup> Sherif Rizk, Life between Galileo and Covid.

He was a suspect of heresy once more in 1632 following the publication of his book “Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems” that was a dialogue between two men discussing Copernicus's ideas. He was summoned by the Roman Inquisition and was sentenced for life, which was later commuted to house arrest. Galileo was also forced to abandon his championing of Copernicus’s ideas with respect to the center of the universe.

This blending continues to exist, and will remain so until we define “scientific” and limit its study to scientists only. Epidemics, viruses and diseases will not vanish by prayers, neither will we be happy and in love with one another through chemical laboratories. Defining what is spiritual is like the people's salvation from confusion, perplexity and delusions. The spiritual world is not calculated digitally; in matters of the heart and soul, we go far beyond the mind and logic and move to distant horizons where we can soar in another world.

### **Religious Text in the Fundamentalist Mind**

Many fundamentalists believe that the religious text answers all the questions. Be it a question in science, religion, or economics, you will certainly find an answer in the religious text. A scientific discovery may happen to prove what is in a holy text, and here lies the problem. Science is changeable; a characteristic feature of science is that it is always testable and changeable, and what is proved to be true today might become untrue tomorrow. For the fundamentalist mind, a holy text is ‘absolute’ and definite and never changeable. It is an accurate, impeccable, thorough text that can

the Text. The problem, therefore, lies in construing certain world phenomena, such as the coronavirus, through the religious text. Some even believe that praying, or praying along with following the necessary measures, can overcome the crisis, and some considered the virus a sign of Doomsday. Fierce controversy remains.

Dr. Mona Abu Senna holds that secularism is the optimal solution to that problem, referring to secularism as looking at what is relative through what is relative, not what is absolute. This definition, she argues, is likely to remove the confusion surrounding the concept of secularism, shifting it from the domains of politics and religion to the realm of cognition, i.e., human mind, in all the issues it is faced with.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Mona Abu Senna, *An Introduction to the Arab Mind*, Cairo, General Egyptian Book Organization, 2018.

The issue to which Abu Senna refers is manifold. For some people, “secularism” is basically to do with atheism, a view that many religious leaders promote, to the extent that they regard secularism as an explicit threat to true religion. The key definition that underpins Abu Senna’s conceptualization is “looking at what is relative through what is relative”, and this is the main issue in the relation between fundamentalists and secularism. The former regard whatever provided in the holy text concerning the physical world as absolute facts and believe that the holy text proves the validity of the scientific facts.<sup>6</sup>

Abu Senna stresses the same problem, stating that mythical thinking related to the agricultural Egypt still dominates the Egyptian popular culture and has not yet turned into rational thinking that can recognize the post-agricultural era, i.e., the industrial era. Popular cultural, or more precisely the public’s culture, is based on a value-based system that embodies the absolute unification of public knowledge and experiences. This value-based system is mainly distinguished by mythical dominance, which tends to remain stable and hinder change and development. This mythical popular value-based system has merged with the religious irrational thinking, which contradicts the rational one, where the public voluntarily looks forward to those promoting such type of thinking and takes them as curators of their own mind and life. This public surrender is likely to eliminate the public mind, making it impossible for the society to access enlightenment that requires an enlightened collective mind.<sup>7</sup>

In the same vein, Dr. Mourad Wahba wonders what the alternative is and says that the answer to this question requires looking for an ‘antidote’ to fundamentalism and its terrorism. For me, secularism, as an antithesis of fundamentalism, is that antidote. Fundamentalism, on the one hand, is considering what is relative from an absolute, not a relative, perspective, according to my own definition. Secularism, on the other hand, is considering what is relative from a relative, and not an absolute, perspective. In this respect, it should be mentioned that religious sciences need to liberate themselves from their tendency towards the absolute, which places them under the illusion that they are a possessor of the absolute truth. Truth is relative, given that it is the product of human effort, and it helps us

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<sup>6</sup> “Owners of the Absolute Truth”, Mourad Wahba, General Egyptian Book Organization, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> Mona Abu Senna, Criticizing the fundamentalist mind, The Political Library Series, 2015.

understand what ‘we believe in’, which, in turn, is too sublime a mission for the human mind. Hence, the saying “I believe so that I may understand”, or “I believe because it is beyond mind.” Whether you sufficed for faith, according to the latter, or went beyond faith, according to the former, in both cases you are within the realm of relativity.<sup>8</sup>

Wahba agrees with Abu Senna on the need to understand what is relative using relative means. Fundamentalism continues to use holy texts as the interpreter of all the world's scientific, natural, psychological and social events. Fundamentalists assume that holy texts are able to provide answers for all the questions, and here emerges the collision between what is deemed absolute for the ‘holy text’ and what is relative for the ‘world’. Secularism interprets what is relative, which is the world, using what is relative, which is the scientific interpretation of the universe, and this is what both fundamentalism and conservatives reject.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst German poet Goethe believes that man is the mainstay of life, and that human act is the main driving force behind that life, fundamentalists believe that everything simply moves forward at God's will: Man is merely an instrument in the hand of God.

Heywood emphasizes that what characterizes fundamentalism is refusing to separate religion from politics; for fundamentalists, politics is actually a religion. To illustrate, he demonstrates that fundamentalists seek to tinge all aspects of life with religion, including all the natural sciences, whether those that have been proved or what is to be proved in the future.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the clash is existing and upcoming, as none of the two parties will compromise its own principal concepts. The main issue now is which of the two will be enabled by the current circumstances to lead the society, and, therefore, decide which direction we should be heading for: are the natural phenomena, such as epidemics; viruses or diseases, to be addressed in the manner dictated by theologians, by scientists, or by both? Despite its obvious contradiction, *both* is not a joke but a suggestion that many put forward. And those are in a serious intellectual struggle between what is scientific and what is religious, so they listen to both teams and become even more baffled.

Theologians’ impact upon young people places them in a fierce mental struggle between holy texts and the natural phenomena, under the

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<sup>8</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Mourad Wahba, *The Backwardness Germ*, General Egyptian Book Organization, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Heywood A “Fundamentalism” Oxford University Press, 1994.



theologians' claim that holy texts explain every phenomenon in the universe. This has been happening for centuries, since the church forced Galileo to say that Earth is the center of the universe.<sup>11</sup>

### COVID-19 between closing places of worship and the role of media

Many Arabs look at art and its role as a marginal part of life, which by no means exceeds its entertaining role, and many rejected the decision to close places of worship while leaving studios open for filmmaking. The problem here is ruling out the scientific factor; no one considered whether it was the right thing to go to places of worship at the time of the pandemic. Some merely rely on trusting in God while being lenient towards the health situation, and many do not make examinations and tests for many reasons, including illiteracy, the level of education, negligence, the prevailing culture, and reliance on religious texts only while excluding all the other sources of knowledge and sciences. For example, many of the religious people reject birth control, claiming that it contradicts with God's willing, but they avoid discussing the mother's reproductive health and the economic capacity of the family provider under religious/ cultural pretexts, such as "God sends every new child along with his daily bread" or "it is God Who sends one's means of living".

The upshot of comments on closing places of worship was more or less that the coronavirus consequences that apply to the physical world do not apply to places of worship. Some went so far as to deny the death of clergymen in Italy and USA. Certainly, everyone accepted the decision reluctantly and powerlessly, given that it was a State decision. However, some sheiks prayed stealthily at mosques, and cases were found there. This shows clearly what those really think; they do not separate between the natural physical world and God's will, believing that they will not get hurt so long as they are inside a place of worship, which might even prompt them to deny the existence of the virus in the first place.

In his book "Text, Authority, Truth", Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd discussed the need to end the monopoly of awareness-making tools in the hands of those in power.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, he raises a highly complex issue, though no longer applicable, since information and knowledge today are transferred so fast via new media. Therefore, no power can monopolize information and

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<sup>11</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, "Text, Authority, Truth", The Arab Cultural Center, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Thinking in the Time of Anathema, 1995.

knowledge any longer. We are now in an open space, and knowledge is accessed by and affects people with varying degrees.

Returning to liberation from the authority of texts and their all-inclusiveness, Abu Zayd calls for liberating the human mind so as to debate with nature in the area of natural sciences and with the social and human reality in the area of humanities; arts and literature. Does this calling contradict with the religious texts or collide with the authority which some have granted some of those texts, turning them into restrains upon the mind and thought?

The issue that Abu Zayd raises here is related to the people's reactions when they suffer highly from the serious spread of Covid. Some people resort to the religious discourse to find reassurance or to the theologians' interpretation of the virus. In all cases, religious leaders have the upper hand by dint of the reigning, reliable, religious discourse that enables them to discuss all matters whatsoever, medical, psychological, etc. Here, the problem becomes highly complex: who controls the masses' minds? Do people only respond to medical information or is there a supreme view that explains all the reasons and controls them all?<sup>13</sup>

The clash between the religious thinking and theologians' dominance over the discourse continues to exist. Egypt's religious leaders dominate several platforms. Accordingly, they have access to a large number of people, and they deliver and repeat their speeches over and over day and night. As a result, theologians' impact on the content of the prevailing discourse is almost overwhelmingly dominant.

Abu Zayd highlights the importance of education, critical thinking and the sharpening of students' skills by means of appreciating arts and literature as a solution to form a collective mind that can distinguish what is religious from what is mundane.<sup>14</sup> What Abu Zayd calls for is probably one of the fundamental tenets of human development, for education is the cornerstone where every human advancement starts and begins towards some future. We should recall that it was Taha Hussein who was the first to call for free education in 1950, refusing to be appointed a minister of education until El-Nahas Pasha approved of making education free for everyone.<sup>15</sup> Knowledge

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<sup>13</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, "Critique of Religious Discourse", 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Suzanne Taha Hussein, "Avec Toi", Dar El Ma'arif, 1977.

is power. As Foucault says, power and knowledge involve each other; knowledge is power and power can spread knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

“Conflicts never end,” Manuel Castells says,<sup>17</sup> adding that for each power, there is a counter-power, but “there is never absolute power.”<sup>18</sup>

Castells’ statement sheds light on the ongoing battle concerning the coronavirus. Although the problem is sheer medical and should only be addressed by scientists, we will find that religious leaders have the largest share in the public discourse; consequently, they affect a large number of people. Then follows the endless debate: is the virus a punishment by God, a lesson to learn, or the end of the world? One will also see a layperson not bothering to wear a facemask, commenting that “what is predestined to happen will happen.” The struggle is manifold, and everyone has their say in the matter, no matter whether they know anything or nothing at all.

**Will the conflict come to an end?**

Clearly, the conflict is ongoing and manifold, and will not end with the end of the coronavirus. The solution appears to be what both Taha Hussein and Abu Zayd proposed: education and critical thinking. And this seems to require a great deal of effort and hard work.

**Problems surrounding the ongoing conflict**

The current conflict is ideological not cognitive. An adopter of an ideology gives his/ her heart and soul to that ideology, and defends it staunchly. It is not a cognitive conflict, where the debate is about verifying knowledge and where there can be a dialogue. A follower of an ideology regards it as a faith, which therefore renders the dialogue useless. Followers of an ideology seldom reconsider it. For this reason, we see Marxists, leftists, Nasserists, etc. loyal to their ideologies for good without reconsidering them. There are means to resolve a disagreement on knowledge, but a disagreement on faiths remains unresolved. This is consistent with Castells’ statement about power.

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Foucault, Power and Knowledge

<sup>17</sup> Castells M, Communication Power, Oxford U.K, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Castells M, The Network Society, Cheltenham UK, 2004.

**Conclusion:**

**Undoubtedly, the interaction between what is sacred and what is going on in nature, as well as how to address the natural problems in the light of their relevance to what is regarded as sacred requires redefinition of “sacred” and all that is relevant. Does it only concern the spiritual aspect or all the spiritual and material aspects? These questions continue to be raised and debatable even amongst followers of the same religion. Discussions over the sacredness of certain concepts remain subject to debate and disagreements that might turn into battles and wars. After all, the origin of many wars was related to religion or beliefs in a way or another. The key question about the relation between the absolute and the relative is still vague. Can we understand what is absolute by means of what is relative? Or is our understanding of the absolute relative, since humans’ understanding of the absolute is itself relative? Is the absolute incomprehensible to the human mind? If so, does this exclude the concept of the absolute from the issue? Do many people agree on certain qualities that characterize what is sacred and what is sociologically and psychologically discussible?**