THE CRESCE nt and the CROSS TOGETHER: AN ENDURING SYMBOL FOR OUR TROUBLED TIMES

I have been a Facebook user since 2009. For most of that time, my profile picture has not been a picture of me, but of a flag, an Egyptian flag that predates the current red, white and black flag. The flag in my profile picture consists of a green field with a white crescent representing Islam and a white cross signifying Christianity. Egyptian Muslims and Christians used this flag in the early 20th century to signify their unity against the injustice of the British occupation.

More than a century later, this symbol of the crescent and the cross was seen again in Egypt during the weeks that led up to the ousting of Hosni Mubarak. It was printed on signs that people carried to rallies. Crescents and Crosses were carved out of cardboard and Styrofoam; they were painted on walls around Cairo, on T-shirts, and even on the palms and cheeks of people gathered in downtown Cairo.

After the overthrow of President Muhammad Morsi in 2013, as Egypt became increasingly polarized along religious lines, this public display of unity that Muslims and Christians had showed during the revolution all but came to an end. But I did not change my profile picture then — even as a Franciscan church in the Egyptian city of Asyut burned. As sectarian violence erupted in the Central African Republic in 2014, still I did not change my picture. Even as Boko Haram kidnapped and killed Nigerian Christians and ISIS executed Egyptian Copts in Libya, the Crescent and Cross has remained a part of my Facebook presence.

I changed my profile picture recently, but only slightly, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris. Like so many other Facebook users I overlaid my profile picture with the colors of the French flag to show my sympathy and solidarity with the French. I chose to do this only because the Tricolour did not obscure the Crescent and Cross underneath.

The Crescent and Cross remains my profile picture even after the terrorist attacks in Egypt, Lebanon, France, Nigeria and Mali, because I continue to believe that the root of terrorism is to be found more in geo-politics than in religion, and because I believe that the only way to overcome hatred and violence in the world is for the good and faithful adherents of Christianity and Islam, the two largest religions in the world, to join hands, hearts and minds, to end any and all violence (allegedly) perpetrated in the name of God.

The flag bearing the Crescent and Cross will remain my profile picture because Muslims and Christians share beliefs and common values, in spite of what both Islamists and Islamophobes
claim. While members of Boko Haram, ISIS and other such groups blasphemously hold the Qur’an in their hands stained with the blood of innocent victims — Muslim and Christian — I know the Qur’an to be a book that speaks of the nobility of humanity, such that God commanded the angels to bow down to the first human. It’s a book that describes all of nature — the sun, moon and the stars, day and night, the waters of the sky and the sea — as “signs,” signs that we might remember the One who created them — the One who created us in our diversity so that we might come to know one another, and compete with one another only in doing good.

The Crescent and Cross remain my profile picture because I know the Qur’an as a book that speaks of the patriarchs and prophets of the Hebrew Bible: Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Joseph, and others. It speaks of the Torah given to Moses, the Psalms to David, and the Gospel to Jesus. It tells how the Virgin Mary was visited by an angel of God who told that she would bear “the gift of a pure son,” called Christ Jesus, as a Sign for humanity — God’s Mercy, Word and Spirit, who healed the blind, and the sick, and raised the dead; whom God raised to Himself, and who will return in the End Time to defeat all that is ungodly.

The Crescent and Cross remain my profile picture because the Qur’an is a book that reminds us: “God is closer than the vein in your neck,” and: “Wherever you look, there is the face of God.” It tells the faithful that prayer must find expression in charity, that righteousness is found not only in belief and worship, but also in caring for those in need, the orphaned, and the stranger. It says men and women are members and protectors of one another, and that they should have relationships based on kindness, love & mercy. It is a book that enjoins upon Muslims the defense of monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where the name of God is remembered and praised.

The Crescent and Cross remain my profile picture because I know that the intellectual and cultural traditions of the Christian “West” are largely the result of a confluence with ideas, ingenuity, artistry, discoveries, talents, techniques, and materials of the Islamic “East.” There are few academic fields taught and studied on college campuses today that have not been shaped to some degree by Islamic scholarship, which itself drew from the Greco-Roman heritage. As Algerian scholar Mustapha Chérif has remarked: “Whereas the Classical West was Judeo-Islamo-Christian and Greco-Arab, we have been led to believe that it was only Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian.”

The Crescent and Cross remain my profile picture because I will not fall prey to the LIE that militant Islamists and Islamophobes are both perpetuating: that the Muslim and Christian worlds are separate, distinct, unrelated, irreconcilable, and must be purged of the other’s presence and influence. History and human culture shows us something quite to the contrary: that we are poorer without the other, in all aspects of what it means to be human.

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