

Values in Public Life: an interview with Sami El-Yousef

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The Center for Arab and Islamic Studies hosts the “Values in Public Life” series exploring the views and experiences of people from a wide variety of backgrounds and careers whose public lives exemplify their values. Here, Sami El-Yousef, the Chief Executive Officer of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, talks about understanding how our religious faith shapes our communities across religious boundaries.

Sami El-Yousef is the first lay administrator to ever serve as the Chief Executive Officer of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. He was previously the Regional Director of the Jerusalem field office of the CNEWA - Pontifical Mission for Palestine, and before that role, he had a long career in academia. He is a native of the Old City of Jerusalem and belongs to one of the thirteen oldest Christian families with continuous presence in Jerusalem for centuries. Sami strongly believes that to maintain a vibrant Christian presence in the Holy Land, one must strengthen the Christian institutions that provide invaluable services without any distinction to race, religion, color, or creed.

The term “values” is used a lot in American public life, and it often refers to religiously-informed moral judgement, but of course not all values are religiously derived, and even devout people sometimes disagree about important values or how to express them. What would you say have been the most important sources of your values and beliefs about how we should live together in society?

There are two most important source of my values and beliefs. The first is my parents who raised me along with my three siblings in a way to be global citizens; to think of others, especially those who are disadvantaged, and to and support them to the best of our abilities; to treat people with full respect, even when they are disrespectful to us; to always pray and keep deep faith despite all the challenges, even to pray for our enemies; and to be humble and courteous at all times. They taught us that all children of God were created equal, and all deserve the same set of opportunities.

The second source was the religion teachers in school, starting from the early grades till about tenth grade. They tried to bring to life the Bible, especially as we read the stories that for people reading them around the globe are thousands of

miles away, but for us growing up in the Holy Land are sometimes only a few steps away from where we live. We were taught to appreciate the land and how lucky we were to be born and raised where Our Lord in the Christian faith was born, died and risen.

Where do you see your values most reflected in your life?

The values are most reflected at home and in the workplace. I consider myself very lucky to have worked throughout my life for institutions of the Catholic Church (Bethlehem University, Pontifical Mission, and the Latin Patriarchate) serving society at large mostly in the fields of education, health, and social services. What is certainly worthwhile is that the Christian institutions serving in the Holy Land are not here to serve the Christian community, but rather help in building our societies at large through these institutions with the Christian value set at heart. In many institutions, the number of Christians being served is in the minority, yet the values that filter through the delivery of the service touch the hearts of all who are exposed to them. Whether Christians, Jews and Muslims are sharing a hospital bed or a classroom together, they share a service that teaches them the value of respect, dignity, love, hope, coexistence, equality, and life. Even when the streets are charged after tensions rise for political or religious reasons, these spaces are preserved given the strong value set that bonds people together. These institutions become models for the interreligious dialogue experience that is lived rather than talked about!

Has your thinking about the place of values in public life – in your own or in society generally – changed over the course of your life?

Of course, with the rise in religious fundamentalism whether Islamic or Jewish in the Holy Land and around the Middle East at large, many likeminded people regardless of their religion (whether Christian, Muslim, or Jewish) have become alienated and either withdraw into their own comfortable bubble (or ghetto depending how one looks at it) and start to isolate themselves seeking protection in their bubble, or even worse they start to look at immigration. That in my opinion is the most dangerous trend as the land becomes stripped of people who have strong values and is left to extremists who see the values as a threat to their beliefs. Regretfully, these are the trends that we see around us with more Christian immigration mostly to the West. This trend is not exclusively amongst

the Christian communities, but it is more noticeable within this group given their smaller numbers. This is when the contribution of the Christian institutions is needed to stop these trends and try to reverse them when possible.

Can you tell us about a time the issue of “values and public life” presented a difficulty? Or conversely a time when it presented an opportunity or a source of satisfaction?

Unfortunately, when one lives in a constant conflict zone, the values become challenged daily. When there are different laws and norms that apply to you based on your nationality or religion, the values certainly become challenged. When justice and peace are a dream rather than an attainable goal in one’s lifetime, the values certainly become challenged. That is when one has to go back to the basics and renew the faith in order to have hope that tomorrow, despite all the challenges, will be better than today. One must search deep in the faith to sustain a lifetime under occupation, double standards, and living the life of a second-class citizen. That is when the values help in reminding us to concentrate on what is more important in life and what is truly worth fighting for.

There are endless examples of sources of satisfaction when it comes to practicing the values in public life, especially through the work of the Christian institutions that have become beacons of hope and optimism. One particular example I cite is when the parents of the Muslim students pleaded with the Catholic Church leadership not to close one of its schools in a small village on the West Bank. They so much appreciated the value set their children were receiving in the school and did not want to send their children to the public school knowing that the values will be lost along the way. It was not the academics they were entrusting their children to a Christian school, but the value set!!

In conclusion -

It is a huge challenge living and working in the Holy Land and across the Middle East as fundamentalism continues to be on the rise. However, this is no time to fold and move on. This is the time to appreciate the value set of our Christian institutions and do whatever is possible to preserve them and develop them and allow them to grow. Their contribution in value raising with the various societies is a priceless contribution that should be preserved at all costs.