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Obituary: Mahmoud Ayoub (1935–2021)

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Words cannot grasp the luminous soul and bountiful contributions of Professor Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub, who passed away in Montreal, Canada on October 31, 2021. He was a master with humble origins, hailing from the rural mountain countryside of southern Lebanon, where he was born June 1, 1935. Ayoub's schooling inculcated within him an appreciation for both Muslim and Christian education. After attending the British Presbyterian Missionary School, he converted to Christianity which came into conflict with his working class family's Shī'ī-Muslim faith. Ayoub would later revert back to Islam. However, little did the world know that the bright and curious lad would grow into one of the greatest scholars of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations in modern times.

Ayoub's journey took him to the American University of Beirut, where he received a B.A. in Philosophy in 1964, and then to North America, where he would subsequently emigrate. In 1966, he received an M.A. in Religious Thought from the University of Pennsylvania and, in 1975, completed his Ph.D. in Religion at Harvard University under the supervision of the indefatigable Annemarie Schimmel (d. 2003), also working with the influential Wilfred Cantwell Smith (d. 2000). His dissertation on "Redemptive Suffering in Islam," later published as a monograph in 1978, remains a classic until today.

Ayoub served as faculty at several universities but chiefly as professor and director of Islamic Studies at the Department of Religion at Temple University (1988–2008) and faculty associate at the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace (formerly Hartford Seminary). His other faculty posts took him to Georgetown University, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Toronto, McGill University, the University of California at Berkeley, San Diego State University, and the University of Balamand, Lebanon.

Ayoub published scores of articles and over a dozen books, making a comprehensive assessment well-nigh impossible. In what follows I would like to survey the oeuvre of Ayoub's scholarship in three areas: (1) Shī'ī and Islamic Studies, (2) Qur'anic Exegesis, and (3) Interfaith/Intrafaith Studies, noting his rich and impactful contributions to both the academic and the public spheres.

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His first book, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of ‘Āshūrā’ in Twelver Islam* (1978), was a landmark study on how a seismic historical event continues to shape contemporary religious life. And yet the book’s message and its author’s voice are distilled in the simple words of its dedication, “to the people of Iran,” with whom Ayoub studied in Mashhad, and to whom he is grateful on account of “their devotion to the memory of the Martyr of Karbalā’ and his family.”¹ Among this book’s numerous contributions are animating in great detail the suffering and piety of Fātimah and her son al-Ḥusayn, alongside that of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, thereby establishing a full-fledged “Islamic Christology.”² He also published “Religious Freedom and the Law of Apostasy in Islam” (1994), arguing there is no basis for apostasy (*riddah*) laws in the Qur’ān and Islamic Tradition, integrating a distinctly Shī’ī perspective, and ultimately ascribing the problem of apostasy laws to the advent of colonialism and Christian missionary activity.³ For Shī’ī Studies his book, *The Crisis of Muslim History: Religion and Politics in Early Islam* (2003), is essential reading. In it Ayoub engages in critical analysis of the Sunnī sources, demonstrating their support for Shī’ī succession after the Prophet Muḥammad.⁴

Ayoub is famously known for his exegesis of the Qur’ān. These include *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters*, volumes 1–2 (1984–1992), explicating Sūrah 1–3 while critically assessing their reception among the traditional *mufasssīrūn*. He also produced *The Great Tiding: An Annotated Translation of the Thirtieth Part of the Qur’an* (1983), which he republished in a second edition under a new title, *The Awesome News: Interpretation of Juz’ ‘Amma* (1997).⁵ Despite his erudite translation and rich interpretation of Islamic scripture, Ayoub was never satisfied with his work on the Qur’an and continually sought to improve it.

Islam: Faith and History (2004) is considered by many to be Ayoub’s *magnum opus*. The book is a comprehensive study of Islamic civilization, from its inception until today, affording unmistakable attention to the religious sciences, Sufism, gender, and modernity. In its preface he makes clear,

1 Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of ‘Āshūrā’ in Twelver Islam* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), 5.

2 Ibid., 199.

3 Mahmoud Ayoub, “Religious Freedom and the Law of Apostasy in Islam,” *Islamochristiana* 20 (1994): 75–91.

4 Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Crisis of Muslim History: Religion and Politics in Early Islam* (Oxford: One-world Publications, 2003).

5 Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Great Tiding: An Annotated Translation of the Thirtieth Part of the Qur’an* (Tripoli: The Islamic Call Society, 1983); idem, *The Awesome News: Interpretation of Juz’ ‘Amma*, 2nd ed. (Hiawatha, IA: World Islamic Call Society, 1997)

My Christian upbringing left an indelible mark on my moral and spiritual life and character. It has colored my Islamic faith, theology, and worldview. My Christian past and my present Islamic faith-commitment have convinced me that God is the absolute truth or ultimate reality, and that Islam, Christianity, and indeed all religions, are only ways to this transcendent Truth... I regard my return to Islam not as a repudiation of Christianity, but as a deepening of my faith through the return to my cultural and spiritual roots.⁶

In a world marred by cultural polarization and religious bigotry, I come back to these beautiful words, which I imagine vocalized in Ayoub's comforting, soft spoken voice. He is the only person I know who could embody the values of both Christianity and Islam simultaneously, effortlessly and with complete authenticity.

The cross-section of Ayoub's life, as well as his intellectual and spiritual development, are latent throughout *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue* (2007).⁷ The essays collected reflect his Shī'ī origins, his shared heritage with fellow Sunnīs, and the efflorescence of his scholarship in conversation with Christianity – notably the Presbyterians, Baptists, and Quakers with whom he shared close friendships. The essays address scripture, history, theology, law, and politics, and they stand out for their capacious approach to Christian-Muslim dialogue, mending old wounds and building new bridges. Ayoub was unsettled by all manner of religious intolerance. And he was just as pre-occupied with instructing fellow Muslims about the breadth and diversity of Islamic tradition. Indeed, his influential article, "Religious Pluralism and the Qur'an" (2012) presents religious diversity as the "fountainhead of civilization."⁸

When I first met professor Ayoub, it was 2003, I was wide-eyed M.A. student at Temple University and hungry for knowledge. I could barely contain my enthusiasm to learn from the great master who, despite being blind, commuted between Hartford and Philadelphia. To him blindness was the redemptive suffering he endured. Blindness, he felt, also sharpened his other senses and granted him an astonishing, some would say encyclopedic, memory. He recalled a seemingly inexhaustible database of authors, titles, and particular passages with a kind of facility rarely seen. He was pleased at my appetite for reading all the texts in our Islamic Foundations course, even lending me Arabic books of his own. The kindness and compassion Ayoub shared with his students is the stuff of legend, but he was also firm with us, and more than once challenged me to provide evidence where I had slacked off.

⁶ Mahmoud Ayoub, *Islam: Faith and History* (London: Oneworld, 2013), 4–5.

⁷ Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View Of Christianity: Essays On Dialogue*, ed. Irfan Omar (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007).

⁸ Mahmoud Ayoub, "Religious pluralism and the Qur'an," in *Contemporary Approaches to the Quran and Sunnah*, ed. Mahmoud Ayoub (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2012), 39.

Ayoub could see in me what I could not see in myself at the time, a potential scholar still rough around the edges. Deep down I was a restless soul, and he knew it. This may have been partly because I was a foreign student of Arab-Muslim origin living alone in the wake of 9/11 and then subsequent wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. Professor Ayoub asked how I was doing constantly and bestowed kindness and wisdom upon me during a precarious time in my life. After I married, he showed the same gentle-heartedness to my wife. Meeting Professor Ayoub for the first time was akin to meeting a saint, and I owe a debt of gratitude to him and Professor Khalid Blankinship, who would supervise my M.A. thesis.

I was adamant about studying Syriac and the Qur'an for my Ph.D. But this was a nascent area of research at the time, and most graduate programs lacked support for it, leaving me a bit lost about the next chapter in my future. As I struggled to plan the next phase in my educational path, Professor Ayoub requested to meet with me. It was early 2004. I happily obliged not knowing what to expect. We began chatting in Arabic as usual. Then like a prophet declaring scripture he uttered words which, despite his soft voice, struck me like lightning,

Emran you are on to something. The missing link between Jewish tradition and Islamic civilization are the Syriac churches (*al-kanā'is al-suryāniyyah*) of the orient.

And just like that my future was sealed. Before departing for my doctoral program at the University of Chicago I saw Professor Ayoub one last time in the Spring 2005. It was to be our last meeting.

From heads of state to the pious masses, Ayoub embodied curiosity, humility, and piety; and he inspired love, ecumenism, and kindness. He was a towering scholar, mystic, philosopher theologian, and historian, who never boasted his hard fought reputation, but rather tread humbly upon the earth (Q 25:63). Ayoub was beloved by all who had the fortune of crossing paths with him. He was also a violinist, poet and at times a comedian with a charming sense of humor, a trait which lightened the mood of many serious academic encounters.

Ayoub's legacy lives on both in the academy and with his family. The Imam Ali Chair for Shii Studies and Dialogue Among Islamic Legal Schools at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace was spearheaded by him. Finally, Ayoub was a devoted family man, and is survived by former partners Lina Ayoub, Linda Clark, and children Firas and Sumayya.