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CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Antoine Douaihy, c.m.

The Orient Province of the Congregation of the Mission extends over four countries, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt and Syria. In each of these countries Islam is lived out in a different way. It is therefore hard for me to speak of Islam in general. I will content myself with giving a brief idea of the relationship between Arabic Islam and Oriental Christians ¹.

In general, this "*Islam is a political force, basically directed against Christianity*" ². For it, Christianity remains invariably the Christendom of the Middle Ages, the mother of the Crusades. The Christians in the Orient are, for Islam, the henchmen and agents, in its very heart, of that West, formerly an invader, which has become today atheistic and corrupt. They are Crusaders in camouflage ³.

Islam has therefore reduced them to the status of "DHIMMI" ("*protected*"). It "*tolerates*" them in Islamic territory ("Dar al Islam"), in contrast to "Dar al Harb": the war zone, the zone not yet Islamised ⁴. They are subjected to Islamic law which recognizes especially that they have duties and some rights. Their religious leaders (the Patriarchs) have to be sometimes nominated, always recognized and confirmed, by the Moslem political authorities, (the Maronite Patriarch of Lebanon being an exception), who can, at any moment, banish them and even depose them ⁵. It is forbidden for them to practise their religion, or to preach the gospel, outside their places of worship, which they cannot repair, much less build new ones, without the permission of the Moslem authorities ⁶.

These "*protected persons*" must show themselves grateful to their benefactors by paying them an exacted tax or by making themselves useful, though always remaining in the background with respect to their masters. Haven't we seen the present secretary general of the UN, Mr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in his own country, Egypt, occupy the post of Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, subject to the orders of a minister, Moslem of course, by reason of this portfolio?

The Moslem state "*uses*" Christians for their human qualities, their professional competence, or to show international opinion that it does not practise religious discrimination. So, the President of the Republic of Egypt himself nominates some Christian deputies to the Egyptian parliament, as none of them could hope to get there by means of election. They are always made to feel second class citizens, and to realise how precarious is their promotion. To sum up, while there is no religious discrimination between Christians and Moslems in the public statements of the leaders of Moslem countries, the lie is given to this by the facts. Don't we see thousands of Egyptian Christians convert to Islam in order to obtain work? ⁷

The second side to this is: How do Oriental Christians react to this situation? Several kinds of reaction can be noted:

1. One kind of Christian, unable to put up with this inferior status, emigrates. Because of this the Lebanese of the diaspora outnumber those in Lebanon, and the Egyptian diaspora keeps on increasing (Canada, Australia...).
2. Another kind of Christian has no problem at all in living with this "Dhimmi" status. This is an ambiguous and opportunist attitude, which is not afraid to use flattery at times. Sometimes it may also arise from ignorance of religion or history.
3. Others, especially intellectuals or ideologists, have established themselves as an integral part of this Moslem world, but without any religious dimension. They have declared themselves exclusively lay. Most of them come from the Greek Orthodox community, like Michel Aflak, Antoine Saadé...
4. A small circle of intellectual and learned Christians and Moslems tried to set up some sort of dialogue, but without any impact on the population as a whole or on public opinion.
5. A larger number of other Christians collaborate with Moslems in the social sphere. It goes without saying that all the social or educational works of the Vincentians or Daughters of Charity in the Province are open indiscriminately to all who need their services.
6. One sort of Christian has chosen on the spot resistance, resistance to being absorbed into the Moslem world, or to a phagocytosis. The backbone of this group is formed mainly of Maronites.

They are the Christians of the Patriarchate of Antioch, viscerally attached to Catholicism. Under the courageous and wise leadership of their Patriarchs they have always known how, even though "Arabising" themselves, to hold on to their own personality, based on independence, freedom, attachment to their land and their Catholic faith.

In order to keep themselves in this situation, the least about which one can say is that it is uncomfortable, they have had, all through their thousand-year history, to put up with all sorts of interference, persecution and massacres.

These are the Christians who, today, are afraid, faced with the emergence of a violent Islam, nourished and supported mainly by Iran, which aims at nothing less than pure and simple elimination of Christianity from the Orient, and the establishment of a pure, rigid and triumphant Moslem power.⁸

Islamic fundamentalism, in its wide, rapid and violent expansion, poses a problem not only for Oriental Christians who are its first victims, but also for western Christians and the entire Church.

NOTES

1. While all the time maintaining a hard core Islam can show itself differently, according to country, region or, above all, to whether it is in a minority situation or not.

2. Cf. Farid Jabre CM: "L'Islam dans le monde arabe aujourd'hui", unpublished photocopy, 1981.
3. Ibid.
4. Cf. Antoine Fattal: "Le Statut Légal des non-Musulmans en Pays d'Islam", Imprimerie Catholique, Beyrouth, 1958.
Cf. Bat Ye'or: "Les chrétiens d'Orient entre Jihad et Dhimmitude", Editions du Cerf, Paris 1991.
5. In 1980 Anouar Sadat, President of the Republic of Egypt, deposed the Orthodox Coptic patriarch Chenouada III, and confined him to living in a monastery in the Egyptian desert. He replaced him by a committee of five bishops whom he nominated, in order to take charge of the running of the Orthodox Coptic Church. The patriarch Chenouada III was re-instated in his role in 1985 by Husni Moubarak, Anouar Sadat's successor.
6. In order to renovate the toilets of an Orthodox Coptic church a presidential decree, from Husni Moubarak, President of the Republic of Egypt, dated 21 April 1991, was needed. Cf the Egyptian journal "Watani", No. 1537, 9 June 1991.
7. The recent Roman Synod for Africa, October 1994, increased the figure by 20,000 conversions to Islam per year.
8. Iranian and Lebanese Moslem religious leaders drew up, in Iran, on 30 January 1986, a projected Islamic Constitution for Lebanon. Cf.: "Cahiers de l'Orient", Paris, No. 2, pp. 248-250.