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Christian-Moslem Relationships in Eritrea

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1. Introduction

Although Christians and Moslems are all over Eritrea, the majority in the lowlands is Moslem, while in the highlands the majority is Christian. The people in the highlands are normally farmers and oriented toward agriculture, while in the lowlands they are mainly pastors and nomads.

In general, ChristianBMoslem coexistence in Eritrea has a rich legacy, in spite of the continuous conflicts that occur. Moreover it was strengthened by the same fate that all Eritreans were subject to during 30 years of struggle. During the thirty-year war Eritreans tried to help and console each other without regard to faith. They worked with each other and, as part of their tradition, were hospitable to everyone. The bond of unity was strongest among the patriots who were fighting a common enemy. Even at ordinary levels one notices that Christians and Moslems interact without much distinction. It is normal to see them together as friends: gathering, talking, and working together in offices, schools, hospitals, etc. Among Christians and Moslems who were converted from Christianity to Islam one finds people belonging to the same tribe, using the same social rites and having both Islamic and Christian habits.

Before independence all the infrastructure of the country was concentrated in the highlands, while the lowlands were almost completely abandoned. Schools, health centers, factories, administrative offices, and other facilities were all in the highlands. After independence the government took a different orientation. The government had as a policy that all development projects were to be distributed throughout the country according to its possibilities. Schools were to be opened in remote areas of the country to combat ignorance, which is the cause of fundamentalist tendencies. Health centers were to be opened in the remote areas as well.

2. Growth and spread of Islam

We cannot speak much of growth and spread in terms of numbers neither for Christianity nor for Islam. There are not many converts on either side. Usually whatever religion one receives from his/her parents he/she retains. But in terms of quality, we can say that there is quite a drawback for both sides. This is due to the fact that since the government is a lay government, it tries its best to form young people with this secular spirit.

While the government is not against any religion, neither does it have a religion of preference. In fact, in government schools, religion is taught as a subject in all classes.

On the other hand, the government is well aware of the potential problems that can arise because of religion. To fight these potential problems the government has two efficient methods: 1) students= summer program, and 2) national service for everyone. Here it should be noted that religion is not the only reason for this campaign but it also serves to tackle other social, economical and political problems.

Every year during summer time all senior secondary students have to go to the countryside for development work such as planting trees, making or repairing roads, repairing the railways. All Eritrean students are involved in this vast project. What is beautiful in this project is that all students from the four corners of Eritrea, regardless of their religion or tribe, are mixed together in order to have a good experience of living and working together. In this atmosphere all kinds of prejudices disappear. Usually this is the first and only chance that they have had to mix so freely without the shadow of the old, closed tradition. Here it is worth noting that the government is investing a lot of money, energy and personnel because it believes that this is a healing project for the new generation.

3. Living Together

Usually both Christians and Moslems coexist peacefully, except now and then some conflicts arise. This usually happens in the countryside where ignorance is higher. Here we can speak of the old generation on one side and the new generation on the other side.

§ The old generation of both religions prefers to respect the boundaries of each other; each one in his place without stepping on the other=s field. It is rare, for example, to have a mixed marriage and, if it happens, it will not last long since pressure put on by the families is heavy.

Whenever there are feasts, marriages, or other occasions everyone is invited to the social. All eat together, both Christians and Moslems, unless dishes of meat are served. In this case different dishes are served for Moslems and Christians because Moslems will never eat an animal that has been slaughtered by Christians and vice versa. In fact, signs indicate if it has been slaughtered by Christians or Moslems, and no one will buy meat if it is not slaughtered according to the dictates of one=s religion.

§ The new generation does not bother much for these things. This new generation is the generation that joined the national service. During the service they are trained to eat whatever is available in the dish. I think that, on this point, the government is playing a good role.

4. Inter-religious dialogue

An official centre for dialogue in our area is absent though we can say that they have worked together on various initiatives that concern the nation.

§ For example, we tried to coordinate our efforts in helping the deportees from Ethiopia and we were able to animate the benefactors for this humanitarian gesture.

§ Together with our counterparts from Ethiopia, we tried to present some points of reconciliation for the nations (Eritrea and Ethiopia) in conflict.

§ Catholic priests and Sheikhs gathered together to help in solving a conflict between two tribes (Tora and Tsenadeghle).

The Tora are Moslems while the Tsenadeghle are Christians. The conflict lasted for more than 60 years. At the beginning the problem was just a land problem, but later it became a tribal and religious problem. During all these years there were many attempts to reconcile the two groups in one way or the other. All these attempts were quickly aborted. When the priests and Sheikhs took the case in hand the first thing they did was to animate the two groups in searching for peace. To promote this peace process the government has contributed all its efforts. Patriots from both sides have worked without reserve or any allowances.

5. Conclusion

Generally we can say that the relationship between Christians and Moslems up to now is tolerant and respectful. As Vincentians, we try our best to be the center of encounter for both sides. We apply this by giving our services to anyone regardless of his/her religion or faith. In our schools, clinics and promotion programs for women both Christians and Moslems are treated equally.