

VARIOUS TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAM

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More than a thousand million people at present (about 18% of the world's population) claim to be Moslem. Formerly these believers were to be met in "Moslem" countries or where there had been a strong Moslem incursion. Nowadays a Moslem presence is seen in Western European countries.

We cannot be indifferent to this reality, for we realise that engagement with Islam is an important challenge for the Church and our society in the years ahead, perhaps worldwide. What will the relationship be? At present we notice everywhere, to some extent at least, degrees of relationship that range from benevolent welcome, often because relations on a human level are good and long-standing, to incomprehension or fear based on mutual misunderstanding or on attitudes in certain groups which are tending more and more towards aggression and proselytism. I am in favour of an ever more realistic and fruitful meeting between believers, and, regarding myself as a "friendly witness", I would like to cast a rapid glance over some matters which are being debated at present in Moslem society.

At the outset I would like to remind you that I am speaking here from experience which embraces Islam on both sides of the Mediterranean and in sub-Saharan Africa.

1. Contemporary Interpretations of the Koran

The first point I want to deal with is that of some contemporary interpretations of the holy book of Islam. Alongside the traditional interpretations, which remain relevant for many Moslems, perhaps even for the majority, other approaches to the text arise from questions which modern science asks, or from Islam in confrontation with modernity (1). Islam searches in its sources for ways towards a necessary development, but sometimes it also hardens, and rejects all development because it judges that to be contrary to its spirit and likely to corrupt its purity. I will give two examples of these contemporary interpretations.

a. The first example is what I will call "**scientific interpretations**" of the Koran. These are, above all, apologetic interpretations. They aim at showing that advance notice of contemporary scientific discoveries can be found in the Koran. This is a way of trying to demonstrate to Moslems and non-Moslems that the

Koran must have a divine origin. There is a book, fairly well known in the West, which lays out this thesis. It is *La Bible, le Coran et la science* by Dr Bucaille, and has been translated into several languages. He adopts the approach of Moslem authors in Egypt (Tantawi Jawhari, 1940) or Tunisia (Ahmed Hanafi) and attempts to show that all present-day discoveries were foreseen in the Koran, whilst there are a number of errors and improbabilities in the Bible (I am simplifying)! To serve as an example I will quote a passage from the introduction to a book by the Algerian Mohamad Kassab *Gloire à Dieu, ou les mille vérités du Coran*, 1990:

You will find, for example, that matters as diverse as the primeval atom, the Big Bang, the expansion of the universe, the speed of light, the organization of the cosmos, the formation of the earth, the cycle of water, human reproduction and very many others as well, were set out more than fourteen centuries before western experts “invented” them in their turn.

There is no difficulty, obviously, in showing how risky such an interpretation is, and it is becoming more and more widespread and popular!

b. Let us move on to another sort of interpretation of the Koran, **the political interpretations**. These develop in opposition to western influence and its “models” of society which up to now have been imposed on Moslem society, especially in the wake of colonialism. We can see at present a multiplication of commentaries, interpretations, and reflexions on the relationship of religion and politics in Islam. Several trends can be cited:

- The Egyptian Sayyed Qotb, “The Moslem Brother” (one of the political islamist trends, or of what I have called radical Islam), bases himself on classical interpreters, known as reformists, from the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries., such as Mohamed Abdou or Rachid Rida, as well as the famous Ibn Taymyya who is the inspiration of the Wahabites of Saudi Arabia. In this trend it is a matter of making present the original koranic experience in order to “renew spiritual, social, political and economic life by Moslem law and an Moslem state”. In other words, it is a question of establishing an Islamic state in which all laws are based on the Koran. There is no sovereignty other than that of God, no law other than divine law. Man has no power over his fellow man since all power belongs to God. All Moslems, no matter what their origin, are united under God’s flag. From this perspective there can be no talk of “human rights”, but only of the rights of God.

- On the other hand, Moslems such as Mohammed Arkoun (who lives in France) try to define more accurately the links between religion and politics, by demanding a new interpretation of the Koran involving a genuinely scientific analysis of both history and the coranic text. Others, such as the grand mufti of Marseilles, Soheib Bencheikh, are endeavouring to demonstrate that there is no incompatibility between Islam and everyday human living, and therefore that Moslems can live out their faith in the context of a secularised west. This is certainly a very interesting trend for the future. But these are often Moslem thinkers

who live outside Moslem countries and who cannot always express their opinions in their own countries.

2. In Contemporary Europe

The trends of which we have spoken above stretch right across the whole spectrum of the Moslem world., though of course there are varying nuances from one country to another. I would like to go on now to deal with what concerns our western European countries.

The situation varies because Moslems are in a minority in the countries, or, as a rule, arrived only recently. (I refer here to countries like Italy, or France, and not to European countries such as Albania where the presence of Islam goes much further back).

The first thing to be noted is that Moslem communities in our countries are very fragmented. There is a huge variety of ethnic and ideological backgrounds. There are very many Moslem organizations. They often depend on foreign countries, depending on the background of the Moslems. Let us examine two important trends in contemporary Moslem communities:

a. **A contented Islam**, fitting as minorities into society as it actually exists in Europe. This, I think, is the case with most of the immigrant Moslems assimilated into our countries. For them there is no question of trying to establish Moslem states in Europe. They are trying to enable Moslems to be fully Italian, french, German, etc, while at the same time being fully Moslem. It is against this background that we have to view some of their claims, such as the possibility of building mosques or having a visible presence in society.

b. There is also a more “**missionary**” Islam which wants to win Europe over to Islam. Their thinking is simple, namely that Islam is the final revelation, the religion for everybody. In addition to this these Moslems say that they notice the bankruptcy of the communist and capitalist ideologies, as well as the moral degradation of Europe. In their opinion only Islam can bring salvation. This, moreover, should encourage us to look closely at the way in which European or western culture is perceived in the Moslem world, especially as portrayed on television. We must not forget that for the majority of Moslems (at least of those in the mediterranea basin) European and Christian are synonymous! This “missionary” message of islam is communicated to Moslems in many ways: the work of many Islamic centres, publications, preaching, in the family ceircle, etc..., and sometimes even in mixed marriages. In a family the children follow the religion of the father, who is always Moslem; in practice, a Moslem woman cannot marry a non-Moslem. In this way the growth of the Moslem community is always safeguarded.

We Christians, up against this state of affairs, should not retreat into ourselves. The attitude of a Christian cannot be other than an attitude of encounter, of welcome for others, of dialogue. This does not mean a naïve attitude! This should not make us blind to the real problems which face us, nor prevent our trying to solve them in truth and charity. That calls for learning the ways of true discernment.

3. Some Present-day Challenges

Let us make a quick survey of some of the challenges which face Islam today, and that means our Moslem contemporaries. We have already referred to this. I want now to put it in a more schematic way.

a. Authenticity and modernity.

In today's world Islam is up against its wish to retain doctrinal authenticity which links it to its past, and in which it finds its nourishment for the present. We see this desire to return to the past especially in the movements which are called traditionalist, Islamic or otherwise. But also, in a more general way, many Moslems have their eyes fixed on a "golden age" to which they are constantly referring, the period of great Moslem artistic, literary and scientific culture, a period which has assumed a mythical aura.

But opposed to that there are the challenges of modernity. Moslems have to face the present and work towards a future of which they are no longer the architects, and this is so even in places which they would regard as their own territory.

On a still deeper level Islam's fundamental truth is a book of revelation whose contents are divine, eternal, immutable and valid for all places and times. That means that truth has been revealed once and for all. The Koran is the definitive form of this right down to its wording. Now a characteristic of the modern mind is a certain relativity with regard to truth, or at least its concrete expression, as well as a progressive development in the discovery of truth. There is a constant on-going search for truth. Modernity is also a state of mind which holds that there is nothing which is beyond questioning or not subject to being elaborated in other ways. This is a challenge also for Christianity, which, however, is better able to face up to it because it does not see truth as a book to be taken literally, a fund of knowledge, but sees truth as a person. In a certain sense it can be said that a Christian does not possess truth, but allows himself to be possessed by it. Truth is the person of Christ. While keeping a proper sense of proportion the Koran should be compared with the role of the person of Jesus and not with that of the bible. And starting from that we can see that everything is changed in our understanding of the meaning of life. On the one hand there is a Book which has an answer for everything, and on the other

people allow themselves to be possessed by a person who guides us on the paths of the truth which has to be discovered and welcomed.

This means that Islam is caught between, on the one hand the authenticity of a truth given as a blunt fact, unchangeable, the Koran, and on the other the modernity of truth, a knowledge which is in continual re-structuring in all areas. Because of that the question is whether we are to try to modernise Islam or islamise modernity! Moslems have to work that one out. There is in some way an opposition of fact between an authenticity which is Moslem and a modernity which is not. This is a challenge which Moslems have to live with, a sort of basic question: how can one be Moslem today without losing what comprises the authenticity of the faith and at the same time accepting the challenges of modernity.

b. Some questions which stem from this

With this as my starting point I want to touch on various questions which Moslem thinkers have to ask today in order to answer these challenges.

* The first is the understanding of the concept of revelation. In my opinion this is the really fundamental question which colours all others. As I have just said, the Koran is the Word of God, given once and for all, unchangeable, giving literally God's law, etc. All a person has to do to obey God is to submit to this law. Given this understanding of Scripture it becomes difficult, or rather impossible, to lay hands on it, to make new interpretations of this Word of God for today. It is, moreover, easier and safer to accept a book which says all that has to be done rather than to try and find out what God wishes to say to us today by his Word. This is also a tendency of certain believers outside Islam.

* Linked to the idea of revelation is the idea of freedom. It may be easily understood how that way of understanding revelation runs the risk of limiting a person's freedom. A person merely has to obey divine law as expressed literally in the Koran. "Religions of the Book" are, of course, allowable, but their members must be faithful to their books in so far as they have not been falsified. Fundamentally it is Islam that is the original religion of the human race, and all people must return to it. On the other hand, although the question of individual freedoms has become essential in modern societies, in Islam it is the communitarian dimension which remains the most important. Deviating from the religious laws of the community means being excluded not only from the religious community properly so-called, which could be acceptable, but also from society itself. It can, therefore, be seen that it is religious freedom which is seriously compromised in that way.

* There is another point which seems to me to be very important when it comes to Islam facing up to the questions posed by modernity. This is the idea of God which Moslems have, a Unique God in the strictest meaning of the adjective.

Because of this idea of God it is very difficult to justify diversity in any field whatsoever. It is amazing to note how the idea of unicity has prime importance in all aspects of Moslem life. One sole God (I would say Monolithic), only one believing people (the Umma, the Moslem community), which survives as a myth which people are constantly trying to make present, the rites which are unique for everyone, but also in other areas there is the search for one sole nation, even one sole political party, etc. To be different is not regarded favourably! It is, however, true that in the Koran itself there may be seen some openings towards recognition of diversity: "If God had wanted to He could have made of you one sole nation", but the underlying idea there is that he did not so wish. Nowadays certain thinkers, starting from there, are trying to show that other people, with their differences, can be accepted. As for those of us who are Christians, we could profitably deepen our idea of God as Trinity, and the consequences flowing from our ideas of man and existence, in all their diversity.

To finish off, and as something to take away, I indicate some other important themes in the life of society which are challenges for Islam in the face of modernity:

- the role of religion in a secularised society, and questions such as separation of Church and State, democracy, the laity
- the place of woman in society.
- representation of the Moslem community in national or international situations where they are in a minority. As there are no clergy in Islam, as each one is, in a certain sense, alone before God, who in actual fact has the authority to represent Islam?

All these questions, and many others, are important for contemporary society. Moslems find this out in so far as they acknowledge other societies, other religions, other people. Dialogue between Christians and Moslems can, of course, help us to seek together for satisfactory answers to questions which we have in common, even if they emerge in different contexts.

Bibliography: In preparing this talk I have drawn on the work of Mgr Pierre Claverie and, above all, of that of Père Henri Sanson SJ, of Algiers, and especially his booklet *Que penser de l'Islam?*, Editions Fidélité, Namur 1993, 50 pp.

(1) Translator's note: The author uses the French word *modernité* throughout this talk. There is no exactly corresponding English word in common usage. The large Harrap's dictionary gives three translations: modernity, modernness, up-to-dateness. I have chosen the first, as the least grating.

(THOMAS DAVITT, C.M., translator)