

CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY INVOLVEMENT VIS-a-VIS MOSLEMS IN THE NEAR EAST

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I. THREE PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

1st Observation:

There are two tendencies in the attitude and behaviour of Moslems in the Near East region:

1. A rigidly integrist, fundamentalist, tendency which demands the establishment of an Islamic State, governed by Schari'a", the Moslem law, in basics and structure. This has followers in all milieus and in all areas of society: economics, politics, culture and the media. It is a call for a return to the golden age of Moslem society, in the time of the Moslem Empire which stretched from India to Spain, and which was in power for centuries. This is the vision and ambition of millions of Moslems.

It has its roots in the religious indifferentism of Westerners and the weak state of evangelization. The Moslem integrists see a field wide open for the spread of their ideas, and they grasp the opportunity to establish Islam as the only religion and the only civilisation, in opposition to the decadent western civilisation called Christian. In so far as it concerns us, in our region of the Near East, this tendency excludes and aims at eliminating Christian presence in the Moslem world, considering this presence as an obstacle to Moslem unity and to the establishment of a purely Islamic state.

But as it impossible for them to eliminate Christians, or to force them into emigration, they do everything possible to turn Christians into second-class citizens, depriving them of their right to participate in the administration and to occupy key posts in government, even excluding them from the army and police. This enables us to understand the so-called persecutions of, and discrimination against, Christians.

2. A lay tendency which calls for nationalism, not for religious adherence. This tendency has begun to attract followers among the educated classes, thanks to encouragement from the government. It is made up mainly of thinkers, men of letters, journalists and university professors. It remains, though, weak and limited, and does not reach the ordinary people. Nationalism remains the corner stone on which is built the relationship of the citizen to his country, and of the citizen to his fellow citizens.

There is deadly rivalry between the champions of these two tendencies. The integrist vision is confronted by the laicising movement. Fighting over the seizure of power and awakening the awareness of the young and of the ordinary people. Christians, understandably, try to support strongly the lay movement.

2nd Observation:

The divisions among Christians continue to be a stumbling block for Moslems in their attempts to understand Christian doctrine and morality. The multiplicity of Churches, all in opposition to one another and criticising one another, is one of the most serious reasons for Moslems not to accept that the Christian faith is true, and founded essentially on charity. Jesus said: 'By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples (Jn. 13:35).

Generally speaking, the Orthodox Churches consider themselves national, authentic, Churches and resent bitterly the presence, zeal and dynamism of the Catholic and Protestant Churches. They keep repeating the word 'proselytism' as the great crime of these Churches in their contacts with the Orthodox faithful.

Moslems wonder about the causes of the rivalries among Christians, and the efforts of the different Churches to supplant one another. In this they see the fulfilment of what the Koran had already foretold: 'There will always be enmity and hatred among Christians until the end of the world'.

It is imperative, therefore, for the Christian Churches to preserve unity among themselves, to respect one another, to love one another and to help one another in the proclamation of the Good News, so that the Kingdom of Christ may be strengthened, and to eliminate all types of criticism and opposition, so as not to be giving counter-witness to Moslems.

3rd Observation:

No one denies the positive and constructive role of the Church in Moslem society, especially in the fields of education, culture, health-care and social development. Moslems themselves greatly appreciate the contribution of Christians to the evolution, opening out and civilisation of the Arab world.

However, these efforts and various activities, good in themselves, remain isolated and disconnected, and they do not give the impression of a unified vision of evangelization, with a well defined aim. It would, therefore, be possible and opportune to unite the activities of bodies which are similar and are found in the various Churches, and so indicate a clear vision and shining evidence of the

apostolate of the Church, in the field of education, for example. This means that it is of prime urgency that we deepen our sense of Christian mission and of clear witnessing to Christianity in Arab and Moslem society.

Also, we must not be afraid to admit that the Churches, in the multiplicity of their beliefs and activities, lack qualified persons, specialists, in the various fields of knowledge and action. The different Catholic Churches, the Orthodox and the Protestants, must revise their system of formation of priests, catechists, teachers of Christian doctrine, and preachers, as well as of all who are involved in the various apostolic and missionary activities. Without wanting to follow the West slavishly, there must be no fear of opening up and renewal, while keeping intact both principles and substance.

The Churches must respond to the present needs of Arab and Moslem society, by and adequate and effective formation of priests and missionaries, who really belong to their country and their society, with equal attachment to their beliefs, their faith, and their Church.

The function of parishes in Arab society must also be re-considered. The parish is the primordial cell of the Church, it is the living Church; it impinges daily, in a real way, on the life of Moslems. The Parish Priest of a small rural village parish represents both the Church as a whole and the lived reality of Christianity for all the villagers, Christian and Moslem. As a result, the role of the Parish Priest is irreplaceable for the teaching and living out of the Christian faith for Christians, as well as for Moslem understanding of this. This means that each priest needs a sound human, cultural, doctrinal and moral Christian formation.

We must add to this the important role of the Christian family in Moslem society, and the shining example of Christian living which it can, and should, give. However, we cannot but be ashamed of the degradation of certain so-called Christian families, even in our region of the Near East which is supposed to be traditional and sound: free marriages, trial marriages, divorce and separation, abortion, euthanasia.

II. OUR CHRISTIAN INVOLVEMENT IN A MOSLEM SOCIETY

1. THE WORK OF RAISING AWARENESS AND OF EVOLUTION OF THE ARAB AND MOSLEM WORLD

Our Lord, Jesus Christ, recommended his disciples to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Mt 5:13-16). Christians have tried to put this advice of Christ into practice all over the world. Oriental Christians also, after the Arab occupation and islamization of the region, tried, in spite of all the well-known difficulties and harassments, to co-exist with their Moslem fellow citizens over a

period of fifteen centuries. They carried the standard of Christian civilisation, especially in the fields of education and culture. We would like in particular to pick out the Christians of Syria and Lebanon who, in the 19th and 20th centuries, were the pioneers in teaching, literature, journalism, printing, art and cinema in the countries of the Near East. On the eve of the year 2000 we feel that the Christians of the Near East have a specific mission to fulfil, a mission to enlighten their Moslem brothers and to be the leaven in the dough of the great mass of Islam.

The Moslems themselves see in the schools, institutes, universities and Christian religious congregations, centres of enlightenment. From that fact flows the missionary duty of Christ's Church towards society, of which it is a part, in the field of teaching and education.

We are proud that many prominent Moslems have been former pupils of our schools. Many artists and men of culture are indebted to our schools and continue to play a very significant role in Moslem-Christian relations. This means that we must cultivate this very important talent for the development of our society, which has a Moslem majority.. It should be noted that many integrists among Moslem businessmen and the wealthy, especially in Egypt, have established very modern language schools in order to displace our Catholic schools and to poach our clientele. Many well-off Moslem families who had sent their children to these new centres of learning realised quite soon that these schools gave neither the teaching nor the education which they wished for their children, and they brought them back to us, more than ever convinced about our work in education.

Isn't that both a sign of the times and a vital mission of the Church? We must place all our trust in Him who said: 'Do not be afraid. I am with you till the end of the world' (Mt 28:20). Our schools and institutes must remain as centres of enlightenment and of moral and spiritual renewal for our society and for our countries.

2. THE WORK OF HUMAN AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

His Holiness Pope John Paul II said: 'Development is the charity of today'. It is another sign of the times and an authentic witnessing to the truth and credibility of the gospel and to Christians' attachment to their faith. All possible efforts must be made to intensify and update development works: health (dispensaries and hospitals), feminine advancement, small and medium scale industries, literacy centres, youth clubs and oratories, old people's homes, centres for the handicapped, all open to Moslems as well as Christians. It is in works like these that Moslems appreciate our devotion and so forgive us our charity. This is because these works are carried out in a spirit of devotedness and not for self-interest, they are just for the love of God and the poor, poor in all meanings of the word, and not for gain.

These works are the surest route and the most solid bridge towards real Islamic-Christian dialogue.

It is the example of the Good Shepherd, put into practice, which makes a greater impression than anything else, and makes our religion credible. Christianity is the civilisation of love and the foundation of all real and lasting progress, both for the individual and for the whole of society and humanity. The Church has a duty to bear witness to this by means of works of social development and to serve all people, and the whole person, following the example of Christ who said: 'I have come to serve, and not to be served' (Mk 10:45).

Our region of the Near East needs men and women who are totally committed to the cause of humanity, giving themselves, without counting the cost, following the example of Christ who gave himself right up to the last drop of his blood for all people and for each individual person.

3. A DEEPENING OF THE NATIONAL AND PATRIOTIC SPIRIT

Do we Christians, both people in power and ordinary citizens, have a sense of belonging to our country? Are we convinced that God has called us to live on this earth, in this country with a Moslem majority, to proclaim here, for our entire life, the good news of salvation? Are we aware that God has destined us to live as living and authentic witnesses of His well-beloved Son, in this part of the world where the incarnate Word, like us in all things, apart from sin, lived like us, worked miracles, but also suffered, was crucified, and died on the cross for the salvation of all, among a people and living conditions as difficult as our own. Then he was raised and ascended to heaven. He wants us to continue his earthly mission courageously and perseveringly, among our brothers and sisters, Christian, Moslem and Jewish, in this land watered by the blood of martyrs and blessed by the holiness of hermits, monks and doctors of the Church.

Doesn't the idea of emigration to distant countries in search of comfort and greater freedom haunt us and impel us to leave our country, which is counting on us?

Love of country is a quality which should be very much alive in us and should constantly urge us to work for our brothers and sisters, Christian and Moslem, and to unite our efforts so that this Near Eastern part of the world might be, in reality, a haven of peace and freedom and a living example of getting on well with Moslems, while we progress together confidently towards the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

For my conclusion let me draw attention to the following points, which emerge from all that has been said at conferences, symposia, meetings, at which we

have been present as Christian and Moslem representatives, or which are simply the result of our personal reflection. I summarise them as follows:

Islamic-Christian dialogue is a necessary development of our mission as Christians, consecrated persons and even more so as Vincentians.

Theological Islamic-Christian dialogue, based on the doctrinal fundamentals and teaching of Christianity and Islam, is to be reserved to specialists, and must not in any way be undertaken by individuals or communities who are not authorised to do so; otherwise it would be more harmful than helpful.

In our Islamic-Christian dialogue it is better to concentrate on what draws us together, such as prayer, youth, works of mercy, peace and social justice -as outlined in 'Nostra Aetate' of Vatican II- and not on matters which set us in opposition and run the risk of pushing us apart and creating debate and animosity.

The sort of dialogue to be set up between Christians and Moslems is that which is usually called 'Le dialogue de vie', which consists in balanced conviviality, life-witness, work in common in an atmosphere of cordiality, service of others with love and understanding.

What is needed for effective dialogue:

Removal of every malicious prejudice or any preconceived idea.

Living in hope, even in the face of contrary experience, as St Paul said when speaking of Abraham.

Listening to the other with esteem and respect, and not believing that we are the only ones who have the full truth.

So, humility

Patience, and waiting for God's moment: the Spirit breathes where and when He wills.

Assiduous prayer.

(THOMAS DAVITT CM, translator)