MOHAMMED SAMMAK

Secretary General of the National Committee for Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Pierre Morel, Director of the Pharos Observatory of cultural and religious pluralism

Merci Monsieur le Sénateur. Nous partons des Balkans et des bords de la Mer Noire pour aller vers les bords orientaux de la Méditerranée vers la terre du Liban, terre de dialogue par excellence. Et je me tourne vers Monsieur Sammak qui a été depuis des décennies un homme de dialogue dans le monde libanais, Secrétaire général du comité national pour le dialogue islamo-chrétien, et bien d'autres instances libanaises, pour nous parler de cette expérience du dialogue entre les religions entre le Proche et le Moyen-Orient.

Mohammed Sammak, Secretary General of the National Committee for Christian-Muslim Dialogue

The French philosopher Andre Marloux might be the first to declare clearly and openly in the late sixties of the 20 th century, that "Le XXI siècle sera religieux ou ne sera pas" , "the 21 th century will be "the century of religion or it will be not".

Few months ago Professor Krieg Calhoun, director of social studies in New York University declared in a lecture at the Center of religious studies in Baghdad-Iraq, that religion is still able to fear atheist thinkers who thought that "religion will decline with the rise of enlightenment and modernism".

Religion is not a private matter, nor it is irrational as Habermas (1929) clearly said, back in the late twenties of the last century.

There has long been a tension between seeking perfect time in life or in the afterlife. The Enlightenment and the scientific revolution made it possible to think about the material world without reference to any transcendent power.

Optimists in the Enlightenment and the 19th century came to believe that the mass of humanity could one day lead happy and worthy lives here on Earth.

They were bursting with ideas for how the world might become a better place. Some thought God would bring about New Jerusalem; others looked to history or evolution. Some thought people would improve if left to themselves, others thought they should be forced to be free, some believed in the nation, others in the end of nations; some wanted a perfect language, others universal education, some put their hope in science, others in commerce, some had faith in wise legislation, others in anarchy.

Modernity implies a range of possible ways of thinking, including many variations of theism and atheism. Theocracy is not monolithic. Societies can be brutally theocratic in either or both of two senses.

Sometimes worldly leaders draw on religious symbolism to enforce their authority, impress their subjects or legitimize war. Alternatively, "pure" clerical power can use its prerogatives (over sacraments like baptism or marriage or absolution) to exercise authority over everybody else, including worldly rulers. Neither kind of theocratic power can guarantee that its subjects are deeply religious in their personal consciousness; indeed the opposite is very often the case. (Charles Taylor- A Secular Age – Belknap press).

For most people the question was not whether progress would happen, but how. Today for most of the Islamic world, this is the question.

In his book "Secularism confronts Islam" (Colombia University press) Oliver Roy a French scholar, admits that "the problem is not Islam but religion, or, rather the contemporary forums of the revival of religion". For the past 25 years or so, the notions that religion should be a purely private affair has been challenged by a new breed of charismatic (often born-again) Christians, Jews, Muslims and others. The new believers are often individualistic, rejecting conformity with either Orthodox theology or institutionalized religion. The secular European state, where mainstream religion is in decline, is uncomfortable with this new, assertive and unconventional religiosity. But Islam has been singled out, partly because of its terrorist fringe (Economist, August 11th 2007).

In principle, two systems are not referred to in the Islamic doctrine: clergy system and political system. Instead, Islam mainly focused on other principles:

- a- Human dignity: as a gift from God to every human being regardless of his-her- religion, ethnicity, belief or disbelief.
- b- Human differences, as a manifestation to the will of God and to His greatness in creation.
- c- Human beings are preferred over all other creations, even over the angles, as God vicars, to preserve humankind and to develop the Earth.

The first state in Islam, the state of Medina, established by the Prophet Muhammad himself, was a national state. The Medina document (something like a written constitution) said that Muslims, Jews, Christians and non- believers of the Median, are one nation.

There is a common understanding among Muslim scholars that governance is a human responsibility and endeavour. That, it is not God's jurisdiction. That's why it is classified among the branches and not the origins of the doctrine. The manifestation of this fact can be seen :

1- Today there are about 1,6 billion Muslims; 1/5 of them live in non-Muslim countries and societies. That is , they are not under Islamic rule, or the Sharia law. But this does not mean that they are not Muslims.

2 – The Islamic Organization of Cooperation (IOC) includes more than 52 member states; but these states –from Indonesia to Morocco- do not follow one political system; There are democracies, autocrats, kingdoms, republicans, militaries, etc.. They all claim at the same time to be Muslim states, and their peoples are Muslims too.

3 – The concept of religious state, is not part of Islamic doctrine. Islamic rulers, since the dawn of Islam (Abu-baker, Omar, Othman and Ali), asked their peoples to correct them when they commite mistakes or when they misjudge. And they were corrected several times openly even by ordinary people. Three of the four historic Khalifes were

assassinated. Rulers, in religious states claim that they receive authority from God, i.e. they are always right and no one has the right or the power to correct them, not even the courage.

4 – There is no political system to be classified as Islamic. There are general principles in Islam like (Shoura) or consultation, and representation (elections), that open the way for many venues in implementing law.

5- Sharia is misunderstood to be considered as a penalty code; it's the backbone of a social system that respects human freedom and human dignity .

By the end of the 19th century Imam Muhammad Abdo said that :"Islam did not give (after God and His prophet) any authority to any Muslim over the belief of any Muslim or of anybody. The prophet –he said- was simply informer and reminder, He did not try to dominate or to govern".

Imam Abdo declared too that "No Muslim, no matter how important he is, has any right over any Muslim, no matter how humble he is, except the right to advice".

No one has any right to check the belief of the other or to try to uncover his-her- drawbacks – he said.

These declarations, based on Islamic doctrine, opened the doors for him to be nominated in 1899 to be the first Mufti in Egypt.

Later this year, Al-Azhar published three main documents

a) 	Supporting the establishment of a Modern Democratic and Constitutional National State, on the basis of a constitution that responds to the aspirations of the Nation. A constitution that separates between the State authorities and its governing legal institutions, that sets the governance framework and guarantees the rights and duties of all citizens on equal basis. Which means that the legislative authority becomes in the hands of deputies chosen by the people.

b) 	Adopting a democratic regime, based on free and direct elections to guarantee diversity, and rotation of power.

c) 	Respecting the fundamental freedoms of thought and opinion,.

d) 	Confirming the principle of diversity and the respect of all monotheistic religions. (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) .

e) 	Considering equal citizenship as the right to every member of the Egyptian community.

f) 	Abiding by the ethics of diversity and dialogue.

g)　Considering **sectarian conflicts and racism a crime against the nation.**

The document asserted too, that Islam does not call for the establishment of a religious state.

This principle was later asserted too by a conference of Muslim scholars held in Amman-Jordan, and declared that "civil state does not contradict with Islam", but on the contrary "it goes well with Islamic teachings".

Extremists say something else. They have wide presence today but not deep. They also have loud voices, but not right. They are listened to, simply because they tune out of the Orchestra.

Progress depends on trial and error. Someone has to be bold enough to risk making these errors. In our case, extremists are playing this role now. They have already afforded us with a lot of errors. It's our responsibility now to use these errors as an incentive to progress.

In the Middle East we, Christians and Muslims, have now a clear sense of our situation, which seems to be that we are like that great Gericault picture (the Raft of the Medusa) that we are on this huge piece of floating wreckage. It is not going to sink, but we have the choice of cooperating with one another with the scarce resources on this piece of floating wreckage or of eating one another. We can no more follow the un-sacred rule of politics, where "one man's hope is another man's fear". We have to learn and to behave in accordance with a sacred rule, where "one religious community's dream is not necessarily another community's nightmare". To insure this, we call for building civil states where all citizens of different religions, confessions cultures and ethnicities are equal and have equal responsibilities.

 Isaac Newton said: " If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of countless ordinary humans, even of pygmies". In the Middle East we can see further by standing on piles of accumulated miscalculations and disappointments. We can see that the trick in a successful society is for minority citizens to be able to feel that they are more than one thing at once.

It is not that multi-ethnic societies are impossible. It is just that they are often rather delicate. Divisions of race, of language, of class, of religion can be accepted, tolerated and even enjoyed : They add to the complexities and to the possibilities of life. But they also make a society more fissible, especially when the divisions all line up the same way, and one group can be racially, religiously and economically distinguished from another. Societies with such internal divisions do not seem to stand up well to external shocks.

Unless we give people of diverse religious backgrounds a sense of belonging, unless we give them a sense that their identity and heritage are valued threads in the tapestry of Middle Eastern society, real community is impossible.

We learned, and are still learning to oppose a notion of diversity that becomes a substitute for neighborhood and community. Diversity without a spirit of community leads to tribalism. Community without a spirit of diversity leads to alienation for all minorities.

 For plural societies, either the notion of diversity or the goal of integration must give way. After all, safety and prosperity is in the diversity of Middle Eastern societies. But diversity cannot survive without freedom; fanatics and

extremists are against freedom. Islam is not. As a matter of fact no religion is without freedom, and consequently no Islam without freedom.

Pierre Morel, Director of the Pharos Observatory of cultural and religious pluralism

Thank you very much Mr Sammak, starting from your words about the Middle East without its Christians it would not be the Middle East and finishing again on this very important message.