

# HAÏM KORSIA

## Chief Rabbi of France

### Thierry de Montbrial, Founder and Executive Chairman of Ifri and the WPC

The running thread of our session is that we see that the region's political substrata is still religious. That is very hard for Westerners to grasp, especially Europeans and the French, because we value secularism and Europe is becoming a post-Christian society. This does not mean the end of a religion, but the end of a civilization deeply rooted in religion. We are in a very different situation. And now let's talk about Israel. That is why you are here and holding a microphone, dear Haïm.

### Haïm Korsia

First, I would like to thank you and express my surprise at seeing so many people here because it is time for mass and there is an incredible place here, the House of the Family of Abraham, which was founded by the Emirates. It has a bright church, a lavish mosque and an amazing synagogue that symbolize Abraham's tent and are connected by a garden called the Garden of Peace. I said to myself, "Mass is at noon, there will be a lot less people." I think that in later editions, dear president, you could make mass not compulsory, because of secularism, but possible.

In the wake of what Olivier Roy said incredibly well, I think that here in the Emirates they have understood that religious openness reaps political benefits. When we hear about religious freedom in Syria, it must never be forgotten that this is also essential for Eastern Christians and for us in France. That has always been our line, because religious diversity is already in tatters. In almost all of these countries, not a single Jew is left. That is already a reality. In Aleppo for example, there are still a few Armenians, but not a single Jew. Aleppo's entire Jewish community went to Panama. François Gouyette can confirm this. The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs looks after the interests of the Jews who fled Aleppo for Panama and keeps this dossier as a testament to a time when religious diversity really existed. The same can be said about Lebanon.

Religious diversity is embodied in this country in the House of Abraham. Yesterday I listened to Gargash, who gave an amazing talk because he had important things to say. I was in the synagogue yesterday, and I would like to thank everyone who attended the Friday evening service. It was an extraordinary moment of brotherhood. In the synagogue you can hear the church bells ringing and the muezzin's call to prayer. This shows respect for everyone. It is also what I am trying to build with Muhammed Al Issa, secretary general of the World Islamic League. The first time we met, I explained three points to him. The first was that the Ummah, the entire world Muslim community, must take account of local realities. One can have a vision of the Ummah, as I see it, as I see Judaism, as monolithic, which it is not. There are local differences

depending on the majority. Israel is not the same thing as France or Uzbekistan. Every country is different. But that does not undo the Ummah, as I explained to him.

The second point is that France is a secular country. This is hard to understand because it is not atheism. People who are not French have trouble understanding our brand of secularism. It took me a long time to explain that it is not atheism. Secularism is the freedom of religious practice. The state guarantees Muslims the right to practice their faith.

The third point is that if he could start a movement in the Muslim world, it should be what is called *ijtihad*, the interpretation of the texts instead of following them by the letter. The Torah, I can assure you, does not say anything about elevators, cars or mobile phones. I looked it up in the Bible but never found it. On the other hand, the body of rabbinical thought since the Torah was given to us 3,300 years ago has integrated modern questions and answered them with invariants. Principles are adapted to questions. You could even talk about artificial intelligence based on the Bible if you wanted to. However, I think the Ten Commandments were written on stone tablets, not a couple of iPads.

### **Thierry de Montbrial**

It is the rabbis' job to make interpretations like that.

### **Haïm Korsia**

And we do. So I asked Al Issa to start a movement. Amazingly, he said, "I want to see you in a few days." He consulted the chief rector at Al Azhar Mosque and all his partners. He came back and said, "We are going to do something." There was a big launch at the Paris stock exchange and he made a speech setting out those three points. Like I said about the magnificent House of the Family of Abraham, religion, religions and coexistence between religions are becoming a major issue, including for the democratization of societies. Like the Carmelite sisters that were talked about, this is also a major issue for the history of Syria to guarantee them the possibility of enduring and breathing life into what has always been part of the Middle East.

I deeply believe in the invariants of history. One of those invariants is the proximity between Judaism and Persia, maybe not Iran, but Persia, especially when you read the Book of Esther in the Bible. Queen Esther was the wife of Xerxes, the king of the 127 provinces of biblical Persia. And their son is the one who allowed the Hebrews to resettle in the Holy Land to build the second temple. Up to the Shah included, there was a close proximity between the State of Israel and Persia, the Iran of the time.

So the existence of an adventure, even a long one, does not prevent the invariances of history for various reasons. The only thing I did not completely agree with you about—you will have to ask His Excellency Daniel Shek—I do not have the feeling that there was an Israeli-Palestinian war. There is an Israeli-Hamas war. There is no doubt about that. Then there is Israel's war against Hezbollah. But there has certainly not been an Israeli-Palestinian war since October 7. To me it seems very important for Israel to allow a new generation of Palestinian leaders to take the helm and manage the area of what would be the Palestinian state.

Perhaps I now have a purely religious contribution to make, dear Thierry. It took 11 days for the Golani—funnily enough that is also the name of an Israeli unit—to take Damascus and Syria.

It took Joshua seven walks around the walls of Jericho for the walls to fall. Like you, I think Iran is very weak. I will tell you why. This morning, we listened to a terrific round table about the geopolitics of health. When a body is very sick and the heart is no longer strong enough to pump blood to the limbs, it sends blood to the vital organs. The first extremities to lack blood are the fingers and feet. The weaker the heart is, the less space there is that receives blood. That is what is happening with Iran's endemic weakness. Like Hamas, Hezbollah is no longer irrigated. So symbolically, like a heart pumping blood, hatred and weapons can no longer go far enough. There is terrible internal weakness.

So I absolutely agree with you. External elements will make an overthrow of the government a credible eventuality. Then, the people will go out into the streets like they did three years ago, nearly toppling the regime. Except that the government took back the streets with violence. But look at the attempts and pay homage to the women who dared to stare the government's violence in the face, dared to show the world that there is another way to be Muslim. That is another invariant of history. Situations can change very fast.

You talked about the Shiite axis. Bahrain, a Shiite state, signed the Abraham Accords. And none of the other signers dropped them. So I think that in the long run religion will be a means to express the yearning for democracy.

### **Thierry de Montbrial**

Thank you, Haïm. Unfortunately, we do not have enough time to discuss all that. It would take at least an hour, especially since there are leading Syria experts in this room. In any case, this discussion stimulates the intellectual appetite before the other appetite.

From my viewpoint, this round table has achieved its goal. I am glad that we returned somewhat to the theme of hope. In WPC meetings, it is always important not to be afraid of imagining the worst. I even think it is absolutely necessary, if only to avoid it. However, it is good to feel the wind of hope from time to time.

### **Haïm Korsia**

Speaking of which, I have a very short text about hope by Bernanos. May I read it, dear president?

### **Thierry de Montbrial**

Bernanos.

### **Haïm Korsia**

Does it replace mass? I have to ask François. Bernanos replaces everything.

Listen to this stirring text by Bernanos about hope.

*Whoever has not seen the road at dawn between two rows of cool, living trees does not know what hope is. Hope is the soul's heroic determination and its highest form is despair overcome. Hope is a heroic virtue. It is believed that it is easy to hope, but only those who have had the courage to despair of illusions and lies, where they falsely found a security they took from hope,*

*truly hope. Hope is a risk that must be run. And perhaps it is even the risk of risks. Hope is the greatest and most difficult victory a man can achieve over his soul. One moves towards hope only through the truth at the price of great efforts. To reach hope, one must go beyond despair. When one reaches the end of the night, one meets another dawn.*

**Thierry de Montbrial**

That is a variation of Pascal's wager.

In order of appearance, we applauded Olivier Roy, Haïm Korsia and Bernanos.