

ZE10070902 - 2010-07-09

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-29843?l=english>

IS ISLAM PART OF GOD'S PLAN?

Interview With Jesuit Father Samir Khalil Samir

By Mirko Testa

ROME, JULY 9, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The coexistence of Christians and Muslims is good for civil society because their mutual questioning of the other's faith acts as a stimulus and leads to deeper understanding, says a Jesuit priest who is an expert in Islamic studies.

This is the opinion of Father Samir Khalil Samir, an Islamic scholar and Catholic theologian born in Egypt and based in the Middle East for more than 20 years.

He teaches Catholic theology and Islamic studies at St. Joseph University in Beirut, is founder of the CEDRAC research institute and is author of many articles and books, including "111 Questions on Islam."

ZENIT spoke with Father Samir regarding the June 21-22 meeting in Lebanon of the Oasis International Foundation, which seeks to promote mutual knowledge among Christians and Muslims.

ZENIT: Why was the subject of education placed at the center of the Oasis meeting this year?

Father Samir: The problem we are experiencing both in the Church as well as in Islam is that we are not always able to transmit the faith easily to the new generation and the generations to come. The question we ask ourselves is: In what way should we rethink the faith for young people, but also in parishes or in mosques, in the talks that religious address to their faithful?

This is what we want: to make a study of the Christian experience in Lebanon, and the Muslim Sunni experience and the Muslim Shiite experience in this ambit. We want to compare, to identify even if it is only the common difficulties, to seek together an answer to them. I think this has been the main objective of our meeting in face of a dialogue of cultures in the Christian and the Muslim faith.

ZENIT: What effect would the disappearance of the Churches of the Middle East have on the Christian and Muslim world?

Father Samir: The disappearance of the Churches of the Middle East would be, first of all, a loss for Christianity, because, as John Paul II said, the Church, as every human being, lives with two lungs: the Eastern and the Western. Now, the Eastern Churches were born here in the land of Jesus, in the territories of the Middle East, where Christ lived. And if this experience, these millennia of tradition are lost, then the loss will be for the whole Church, both of the Christians of the East as well as the Christians of the West.

However, there is more to this: if Christians leave the Middle East, in other words, if the Muslims remain alone, an element of stimulation will be lacking -- represented, in fact, by that element of diversity that Christians can contribute. Diversity of faith, because Muslims ask us every day: How is it that you say that God is One and Triune? This is contradictory. And we say: How is it that you say that Mohammed is a prophet? What are, for you, the criteria of prophecy? Does Mohammed answer to these criteria? And what does it mean that the Quran is from God? In what sense do you say that it descended on Mohammed? We say that the Bible is divine, but mediated through human authors, whereas Muslims want to remove Mohammed's mediation.

These questions that they ask us and that we ask are a stimulus, not only for civilization, but also for civil society. It would be a great loss because the risk exists of wishing to found a society, a state based on the sharia, that is, on something that was established in the seventh century in the region of the Arabian Peninsula, even if for Muslims the sharia is generic and true for all centuries and all cultures.

And this is Islam's great problem: how can Islam be re-thought today? The absence of Christians would make the problem even more acute.

ZENIT: Will there be at some point an enlightenment for Islam?

Father Samir: For the West, for the Church, the Enlightenment meant a renewal of the mind of the faith, which enabled us to be inspired by the culture and the criticism that came with it. The Enlightenment meant throwing full light on the realities of the world of faith. The risk of the believer is to begin only from the religious phenomenon, which is a partial phenomenon in human life and in the life of society.

If we don't confront this religious phenomenon with science, with human rights, with the development of psychology, of the human sciences, with the cultures of the world, we will not have an open Christianity or, in this specific case, an open Islam.

Your question is: would Islam be capable of an enlightenment? In theory, yes. We had an example in the ninth and 10th centuries. There was then an enlightenment inspired by Syrian Christians coming from Syria, Palestine and Iraq who assimilated the Hellenic culture, transmitted it, translated it, commented upon it, were inspired by it,

thus producing generations of Muslim thinkers who did the same applying it to the Quran, to the dogmas and sacred traditions.

This phenomenon continued until the 11th century and then it died slowly, because there was an Islamist reaction, which translated it into a strictly religious reaction, with the exclusion of philosophy, for example, and of historical religious criticism. If this continues to happen, there will never be an enlightenment. A prior condition is that Muslims increasingly study all the sciences and agree to study the text of the Quran as any other text of Arab literature, with the same criteria.

The main objective is to begin with a demystified history. And I hope that we will come to this critical and also religious rereading of the Quran: faith and culture, faith and science, faith and reason. This was the essential point of the Regensburg address of Sept. 12, 2006, and it continues to be this, although it was a shock for many Muslims in particular, and for certain Eastern Christians who are culturally Islamized.

ZENIT: In what way can we insert the birth and diffusion of Islam within the salvific plan?

Father Samir: This is a delicate but legitimate question. We can express it thus: "Insofar as what has been given to men to know about this, does Islam have a place in God's plan?"

In the course of history, Christians of the East have often asked themselves this question. The answer of Arab Christian theologians was: "God has permitted the birth of Islam to punish Christians for their infidelities." I think the truth about Islam leads back to the division between Eastern Christians, a division often due to nationalist and cultural motives hidden behind theological formulas. This situation impeded them from proclaiming the Good News to the peoples of the region, something that Islam has done partially.

Islam served to reaffirm faith in one God, the call to dedicate ourselves completely to him, to modify our life to adore him. It was a healthy reaction, in continuity with the Jewish and Christian biblical tradition. But in reality, to come to this it eliminated everything that created a bit of difficulty, in particular: the human and at the same time divine nature of Christ; the One and Triune God, who is dialogue and love; and the fact that Christ became obedient unto death on the cross, that he emptied himself, as St. Paul says, out of love for us.

Hence, it is a rationalized religion, not in the sense according to the Spirit and divine rationality, but in the sense of being simplified of those aspects that human reason cannot contain. Hence, Islam presents itself as the third and last revealed religion ... and for us, obviously, it isn't. After Christ -- whom the Quran recognizes as Word of

God, Verbum of God -- it is incomprehensible that God sent another Word that is the Quran.

If the Quran was in agreement and served to clarify the Gospel, I would say: why not? Like the saints who throw light on the Gospel and on the person of Jesus. But here, no: it is in contradiction. That is why I cannot say that God has sent a prophet -- which would be Mohammed -- with a new revelation. Even less can I say of him that he is "the seal of the prophets," khatam al-nabiyyin, as the Quran states, namely, that he completes and corrects and leads the revelation of Christ to fulfillment.

ZENIT: But then, what is Islam's place in God's plan?

Father Samir: I think that for us Christians it is a stimulus to lead us back to the foundation of it all: God is the Only One, the Ultimate Reality -- which is the fundamental Jewish and Christian affirmation, taken up by the Quran in the beautiful sura 112: "Yes: God is the Only One! God is the Impenetrable One!" etc. An affirmation, which modern life runs the risk of making us forget. Islam reminds us that, if Christ is the center of the Christian faith, he is so always in relation with the Father; to remain in unity, even if the Quran has not managed to understand what the Holy Spirit is.

We are questioned every day by Muslims about our faith, and this leads us to rethink it constantly from the perspective of Islam. I thank Muslims for their criticisms, so long as they make them as reflection and not as controversy. I would say the same for Christians' questions.

Our vocation, that of us Christians of the East, is to live with Muslims, whether we like it or not. It is a mission! It is difficult, but we must live together. Because of this, I would say that it falls to Muslims to defend the Christian presence, and to Christians to defend the Muslim presence. It is not up to each one of us, in fact, to defend ourselves, as this would lead to confrontation.

Therefore, I hope that the synod on the Middle East , which will take place Oct. 10-24, will help us Christians of the West and the East, but that it might also help Muslims, to rethink the meaning of the divine plan that we must rediscover in friendship and at times in confrontation: why are we together in this land of the Middle East, which is the land of Jesus -- certainly -- but also the land of Moses and Mohammed? This land must truly come to be "Holy Land."

[Translation by ZENIT]

|

[More](#)

© Innovative Media, Inc.

Reprinting ZENIT's articles requires written permission from the [editor](#).