

ZE10101906 - 2010-10-19

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-30702?l=english>

CHRISTIAN EMIGRATION AN ISLAMIC CRISIS

Interview With Lebanese Political Adviser

By Tony Assaf and Robert Cheaib

ROME, OCT. 19, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- When Muhammad al-Sammak hears someone affirm that interreligious dialogue is useless, he counters: "What is the alternative?"

Al-Sammak, a Sunni Muslim who is secretary general of Lebanon's Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue, thus asserts that it is urgent to spread a culture of dialogue in all levels of society.

This scholar and advocate of interreligious coexistence, who is also an adviser to Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, addressed the synod of bishops on the Middle East last Thursday. The synod is under way at the Vatican through Sunday.

ZENIT spoke with the Lebanese leader about his address to the synod fathers, the particular mission of Lebanon for promoting peace, and what should be seen as a truly Islamic view of Christianity.

ZENIT: Does the content of your address at the synod represent the opinion of Sunni Muslims in the Middle East or is it only the view of a faction? As a Muslim, what do you expect from the synod?

Al-Sammak: The position I presented in the synodal intervention represents Islamic doctrine, and I am a committed Muslim who speaks, whether in the Vatican or in sacred Mecca. What I said is faithful to Islamic teaching, and I don't think that a true believing Muslim can distance himself from this position. Also in the preparatory phase of the speech I made a series of consultations with the Lebanese premier, the World Association of the Islamic Appeal, as well as the general council of King Abdullah's initiative for dialogue between cultures and religions, given that Saudi Arabia is the first point of reference in the Islamic world. Because of this, I think the text expresses the thinking of the Islamic world in general.

ZENIT: Continuing with your speech at the synod, you affirmed: "To ease emigration, this is forcing [Christians] to emigrate. To turn in on oneself, is to slowly suffocate." In your opinion, what should the synod do to prevent the emigration of Christians from the Middle East?

Al-Sammak: Clearly the text of my intervention is an invitation -- not only to encourage Christians to stay in their countries of origin, but also to help them to stay. And the help should not come only from references such as the Vatican or the synod of bishops; it should also come from the local political authorities and from the civil societies of which Christians form a part. There is a joint Muslim-Christian responsibility.

It seems to me that Christians should give up the idea of emigration from the Middle East. And, on the other side, Muslims should realize that Christian emigration constitutes in truth a catastrophe for them in the first place. Hence, it is a civic duty of Muslims to contribute so that the Christian presence in the Middle East will take up again its credibility and its role, and not remain only a mere presence, so that the Middle East will again be what it has been in the course of centuries: a cradle of religion, of culture and of civilization.

ZENIT: What position should Christians take as a social and political presence in Lebanon in regard to the internal divisions of Islam between Sunnis and Shiites? Is it enough to take a position of "positive neutrality" as suggested by Sateh Nour ed-Din, a Muslim political opinion maker, who affirms: "Christians should do nothing other than adopt a position of positive neutrality between Sunnis and Shiites." Isn't the neutrality suggested, rather, a negative, passive and marginal position?

Al-Sammak: Christians in Lebanon are not mere spectators, nor a foreign element to be reconciled with internal elements in the national structure as if they were external factors. Lebanon was born in response to the Christian need. And the constitution of the Lebanese nation came in 1920 as a response to such a particular need. The role of Christians in Lebanon cannot be reduced to reconciliation between political and religious forces. The Christian role is foundational and essential. Hence, it isn't possible to imagine Christians as passive spectators or advisers. The nation regards them in every aspect. And we must be very clear that a great part of the Christian suffering in the Middle East is due to the diminution of the Christian role in Lebanon, which is reflected negatively on the spirit of Christians in the rest of the region. The fostering of a Christian presence in the Middle East should start necessarily in Lebanon, which is the nation-message of civil coexistence between Muslims and Christians.

ZENIT: You state that the role of Christians in Lebanon is "foundational and essential," and during your intervention in the synod of bishops, you said: "I can live my Islam with all other Muslims from all states and from all ethnicities, but as a Middle Eastern Arab, I cannot live my being Arabic without the Middle Eastern Christian Arab." However, there are other views in Islam of the Middle East, which consider Christians as residues of the Crusades to be eliminated in any possible way, and regard Christians as allies and spies of the West, considered erroneously the political and religious kingdom of Christians! In face of this duplicity, Christians find themselves before a difficult crossroads. Which of these faces is the true Islam?

Al-Sammak: This argument requires a long discussion, which is not possible at this moment. But let us begin from historical data. Christianity is older than Islam in the East. There are churches that still subsist and that were built much earlier than the birth of the Prophet Mohammed and of the advent of Islam. I would like to report a documented episode that recounts the visit to the Prophet by a Christian tribe in Najran in the Arabian Peninsula. The embassy came to discover the new religion of which it had received news. The Prophet received it in his home, which is the second most sacred place of Islam, where the mosque of Medina is now erected. They stayed with the Prophet for a whole day, lunching and dining together, and when the hour of Vespers arrived, the Prophet invited them to pray in his house, but they preferred to pray outside. The success of the meeting is reflected in a document called "the pact of Najran." It concerns all Christians and commits Muslims religiously until the day of the resurrection. The duty of Muslims is to respect Christians and to protect and watch over their places of worship. The pact prohibits a Muslim from building a home or another mosque using stones used previously by Christian churches. There are also other interesting topics that I have inserted in a 15-point study, which concern every Muslim. Hence, when someone says that Christians are an added novelty in the Middle East, I ask: how can they be so, when they are older in the region of Muslims as documented by the sacred writings themselves of Islamic tradition?

Then it is said that Christians are a residue of the Crusades. But how can they be so, if in reality, they were themselves damaged by these Crusades, beginning with the sacking of Constantinople and extending to the Western coasts of the Mediterranean. These affirmations made by factions of Islam are mere suppositions based on an erroneous culture.

Then there is another problem: Some Muslims look at the West as if it were Christianity. This isn't true. I know well that the late Pope John Paul II invoked tenaciously the mention of the Christian roots

of Europe in the unified Constitution of the European Union. But the final text was issued without the least reference to these roots. Hence it isn't right to burden the shoulders of Christianity and of Christians with the choices of the West. It isn't right to aggravate Christians with responsibility for the conflict between Islam and the West.

These problems are unknown by so many Muslims who come to mistaken conclusions based on erroneous assumptions. Because of this, it is essential to spread the right culture that corrects these assumptions.

ZENIT: Speaking again of Christian emigration from the Middle East, we hear various Muslims affirm that it is a great loss in the first place for Muslims. What are you doing concretely to prevent, or put an end to, this phenomenon?

Al-Sammak: Within the limit of our capacity we seek to sensitize Muslims on the grave loss that the flight and emigration of Christians inflicts on the Middle East. Because of this exodus, the East loses its identity, its plurality, the spirit of tolerance and of mutual respect. Also at the level of religious practice, a Muslim has need of the Christian to practice the moral values of his faith, such as tolerance and respect. Therefore, emigration lacerates and enervates the rich fabric of the East, weakening our societies and leading them to a dangerous precipice.

Moreover, if Christians emigrate, the image we transmit is that Muslims are intolerant toward Christians in the Middle East. It will be natural for Westerners to deduce that Muslims don't know and cannot coexist with others, hence how can they coexist with us? This would reflect very negatively on the close to 500 million Muslims who live in non-Muslim societies. What will be their fate? Hence, it is an advantage for Muslims to preserve the Christian presence in the Middle East.

ZENIT: There has been talk in the synod of "positive secularity," and some prelates suggested modifying the terminology to be more consonant with contemporary Islamic sensibility, suggesting the expression "civil state." Is it dogmatically possible, in a religion such as Islam that considers itself at the same time "religion and state" (Din wa dunya), to arrive at an idea of a civil and pluralistic nation that constitutes the theocratic state?

Al-Sammak: This type of research isn't new in Islam. With us in Lebanon the late imam Mohammad Shams el-Din suggested to his time the project of the civil state, that is the idea of a believing nation

where the state respects the plurality of faiths, and also non-belief. Faith in fact is a question of conscience, it is the relationship between God and man, and God judges everyone. The Quran says: "There is no forcing in religion." This verse does not only mean "not to force anyone to believe," but also "there cannot be faith with constriction." On this principle we can build the concept of the civil state. The state must respect religion and religious rites, becoming at the same time a nation for all. So much has been said about this already in so many Muslim meetings, that's why it is a question that can be discussed.

ZENIT: Religious dialogue is a phenomenon that has been under way for several decades. Some, however, criticize this dialogue, affirming that it happens only among religious leaders and that it remains mere ink on paper, without being embodied in the daily life of ordinary people. What is your opinion as an active member of the path of Muslim-Christian dialogue? And what is the state of this dialogue today?

Al-Sammak: I believe, first of all, that there is no alternative to dialogue. When someone affirms "dialogue is useless," I counter: "What is the alternative?" This is an essential point of departure.

My theory on dialogue is the following: Dialogue is the art of finding the truth in the opinion of the other. I don't possess truth. Already the fact of beginning to dialogue with the other means that I admit to not having a monopoly on truth, but that I am in search of it. It also means that I will be able to find it in the opinion and view of the other; that is why I respect the other and respect his view. This concept of dialogue builds bridges of reciprocity, which is distinguished from mutual respect.

And dialogue for us is not only theoretic. We do not lose occasions to go to the people, through cultural centers, publications, television broadcasts, interviews, meetings. We also organize residential meetings where we bring together Christian and Muslim young people who spend from one to three weeks together, working together, listening to one another, seeing how each one prays and lives his life and faith. Attending these meetings are young people of several countries of the Middle East but also of Europe. In the thematic meetings we touch upon issues of current importance such as liberty of conscience, the right of citizenship, religious liberty. All this is not enough. The work must be wider, but this is what is in our power and we believe it is urgent to spread this culture in all levels of society.

[Translation from Arabic by ZENIT]