

The document on human fraternity: a weapon to combat fundamentalism Islamic scholar hopes landmark document will educate a new generation of Muslims in the Middle East

Mélinée Le Priol, *La Croix International*, 3 March 2020



(SOURCE: MOHAMED SALEH)

Mohamed Mahmoud Abdel Salam is the secretary general of the Higher Committee for Human Fraternity, a body that was created after Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar issued the Document on Human Fraternity last year in Abu Dhabi.

The secretary general, who is also a former adviser to the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, tells *La Croix's* Mélinée Le Priol about the new committee's goals and functions.

La Croix: What is the role of the High Committee to the Human Fraternity, of which you are a member, and how does it function?

Mohamed Mahmoud Abdel Salam: Created at the end of last summer, our High Committee aims to implement and concretize the document on human fraternity, signed on Feb. 4, 2019 in the United Arab Emirates by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Al Tayeb.

We were nine members at the beginning, and a tenth joined us during the year: Leymah Gbowee, a Liberian who won the Nobel Peace Prize 2011. We have already met six times: first with the pope, then with the UN secretary general, then with the rector of Al-Azhar. According to our statutes, a two-thirds majority is required for any decision, but we prefer unanimity.

We must first be able to apply human fraternity among ourselves, before seeking to do so for the world! There is a family spirit among us. At each meeting, one of the members, a rabbi, arrives with gifts for my children.

What has the high committee done so far?

Our first major project is the construction of an Abrahamic House, which is expected to open in 2022 in Abu Dhabi. It will bring together a mosque, a church and a synagogue: a first in the Middle East!

We have also established an international prize for human fraternity that will be awarded every February 4 for an initiative that promotes greater fraternity. For the first year, the prize was awarded to the pope and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar.

You are a judge of the Egyptian Council of State, but also a former adviser to the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. Will this university be influenced by the document signed last year by Ahmed Al Tayeb?

The general principles of the document on human fraternity (pluralism, peace, equality between men and women, etc.) are now taught to all the students of Al-Azhar, i.e. 2 million people across all courses of study. This is the first time that the name of a pope has been included in the program of this university.

Since the signing of the document, Al-Azhar has increased the number of female teachers and faculty directors. For the first time, the head of the 40,000 foreign students is a woman, for example, and a woman is also on the board of the Islamic Research Academy - a key pole of the institution.

Since becoming president of the Al-Azhar Institute in 2010, Ahmed Al Tayeb has more than doubled the number of women teaching at Al-Azhar, and he is still working to strengthen the role of women, especially after signing this document with Pope Francis.

What effect could this document have on students at Al-Azhar?

We will only see them in a few years... I hope that it will create a new generation of Muslims who consider that, whatever our differences, we are all brothers and sisters in humanity. This document, which says terrorism is not the result of the sacred texts but of their misinterpretation, is an instrument against fundamentalism.

Even before the document was signed, Al-Azhar had made great efforts to reform Sunni discourse. The main challenge of this university is to restrict fundamentalist ideas circulating in the world, which can be very fast in the age of social networks.

In 2015, an observatory to correct interpretations considered deviant had been created within Al-Azhar. It now operates in thirteen languages. The president of the French Senate, when he visited it, said that it was in his view the place in the Middle East most likely to counter Daesh (Islamic State).