Synod: Christians and Islam demand religious freedom, to fight extremism

by Samir Khalil Samir, AsiaNews, 19 October 2010

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New strengths in mission emerge at the Synod for the Middle East: the scourge of extremism that suffocates Christians and Muslims, the need to recognize Christians as citizens with full rights in society, the right to the proclamation of the gospel. A summary of the week's proceedings by an expert at the synodal assembly.

Vatican City (AsiaNews) - A new factor that emerged forcefully during the Synod is that Christians are not called to fight against Islam. On the contrary, the interventions by Synod Fathers and Muslim guests expressed the need to work together to stop extremism and ensure full citizenship for Christians in Middle Eastern societies.

We can say that the central idea that emerged in the first week of the synod is the task of helping Christians to live in the East, where Christianity was born, but where it is now a minority.

1. Tolerance and discrimination

The biggest problem affecting all countries is that Christians - slowly or suddenly – are emigrating, firstly for political reasons, then economic reasons and more often for reasons specific to religious persecution. In some countries, the continuing discrimination against Christians also plays a role.

Discrimination is the result of the attitude of the Muslim majority that pertains to all countries in the region. This attitude on a national level relegates Christians to the role of second-class citizens.

Muslims always say that Islam is tolerant. In a sense, the statement is true: Christians and Jews are tolerated and have for centuries lived alongside Muslims, in the Muslim empire. But Christians no longer want to be tolerated; they want to be fully fledged citizens, period! Islam was structured in legal and organizational terms in the mid seventh to ninth century. At that time, the concept of total equality between religions was not conceived in the West or even among Christians. The *cuius regio eius religio* reigned in Europe until 1600. We must not therefore be surprised that the Muslim legal system, which came into being no later that the ninth century, did not give legal equality to Christians. This system considers Christians and Jews as protected by the Muslim power in exchange for their submission and becoming dhimmi. This system, for the time, was not bad: it was the most tolerant of the time and had already existed in the Greek and Persian world. Among the Greeks, for example, there were metochoi, those who live with us "in our house", those who share our country. But then it was an ethno-cultural policy. With Islam the same system is applied, but the method becomes religious. Muslims (Persians, Arabs, Turks, Africans ...) are (or should be) all the same, with the same rights, the non-Muslim believers (Jews and Christians) can live with Islam, but

under certain conditions, non-believers (corresponding to the barbarians of the Greek world), can not live with Muslims and should be banned from the city or have to convert.

This system remained in place until the end of 1800's. It's true that the Ottoman Sultan Abdul-Medjid inaugurated his reign with the famous paper, *hatt-i sciarif di Gulhane* proclaiming on November 3, 1839 the equality of all subjects of the empire, whatever their religion. It was one of the reforms (*Tanzimat*) to renew the empire. But the people did not accept it and it was not applied. The concept of citizen (with equal rights and duties) as it emerged in the West, has never been accepted. Even today in the Islamic system that governs everything is sharia which is applied to varying degrees.

2. The debate on secular society

In Egypt's Constitution of May 22, 1980, the principle of sharia was introduced in the second article, as the "main source" of legislation. This introduces elements which do not grant full citizenship to Christians.

What the Christians of the Middle East are asking is not only to be treated well, but to be recognized as citizens with equal rights, so that no religion has any privileges.

This is our concept of secular society.

In this regard, during the synod, several interventions criticized the expression "positive secularism" twice mentioned in the *Instrumentum Laboris* (IL), also referring to Benedict XVI. The original text of the IL was in Italian and French. The expression therefore indicates a corrective element to the concept of European secularism, particularly its neutrality without expressing hostility toward religion.

For Arabs, however, the word "secular" is unknown. It was translated for the first time in the 1800's, using the word '*almāniyyah*, which derives from the concept of "secularization." But for Muslims this concept evokes a reality similar to atheism. So when you use this translation of "secular", there are misunderstandings. We must explain that we are talking about a civil society that is neutral to, but not an enemy of religion, one which recognizes all religions. And this corresponds more to Eastern Christian and Muslim mentality: we do not want the marginalization of religion, the total separation between politics and religion, politics and ethics. This is what Muslims and Eastern Christians criticize of the West. As such the Synod Fathers, then, ask for a society of believers, but one where all faiths are equally recognized.

3. Religious freedom for all

Thus, during the first week of the synod, the principle of religious freedom was developed. The desire to ask the States of the Middle East to acknowledge the principle of total religious freedom. This includes: the right to renounce a religion to adhere to a religion or to change religion; the right to be atheist and the equal treatment of religions in accordance with the UN Human Rights Charter.

This does not mean the cancellation of religion, but giving it greater space so the religion does not come into conflict with other laws of the State. For example, if sharia goes against some state law, state law takes precedence. In the name of Sharia for example,you can not

force anyone to fast during Ramadan, as is the case today in all countries of the Arabian peninsula (Saudi, Arabia, Yemen, Gulf countries) and also in Algeria, Morocco, etc..

4. The right to proclaim one's faith

Another very important point in this debate is right practice and proclaim one's faith. The proclamation of the gospel is an obligation for Christians as it is for Muslims to proclaim Islam, but it is almost forbidden to Christians everywhere, even in countries that call themselves "secular," such as Turkey and Tunisia, where the state provides every means to spread Islam and to carry out Da'wah, ie Islamic propaganda. If you convert to Christianity in secret, they let it lie, but if one proclaims his new faith in public, they risk being expelled or killed. Beyond Lebanon - the only exception - in other Arab countries, those who convert will never find peace.

In Tunisia, an Egyptian priest was expelled for holding a cultural encounter with young people and was accused of proselytizing; preachers in Turkey were killed and the killers were half-heartedly pursued by police, and they are two "secular and moderate" countries. None of these governments order the killings, but they turn a blind eye to them. Sometimes, it is the very parents or relatives of the converts who carry out the murders.

Another new factor in the Synod is the realization that the Eastern Churches immersed in a stalled evangelization for centuries - have lost their sense of mission. Several synod fathers have said: "We must recapture the sense of mission."

The fact that Christians are emigrating because of Islamic pressure, has led the synod fathers to two conclusions: first, that Islam is intolerant in itself, that it carries the seeds of closure, and they have cited the appropriate Koranic verses to qualify this. But this line is supported by a small group. The majority of interventions however, pointed out that in Islam there is also a tolerant tendency. Many Muslims want to live in peace with Christians and therefore the problem of intolerance is common to Christians and Muslims. Extremism is fomented for reasons that are not religious, even if it manifests itself with religious aspects.

There are fanatics who strive for the emigration of Christians, condemning them as "Kafir" (infidel), but also condemning Muslims who do not follow the strict orthodoxy advocated by them.

The fathers stressed that Christians and Muslims must fight extremism that is based on religion. Muslims repeat that Islam is the religion of the right medium (*din al-Wasat*). Christians must work together with the Muslims to elevate the level of society, making it more human.

The task of Christians is to raise the level of awareness in society, a human, cultural but also religious commitment that emphasizes forgiveness, peace, etc.. searching the Koran and the Bible for everything which affirms this affinity of consciousness. Moreover, the principle of forgiveness is even in the Koran (albeit milder than in the Gospel).

5. The intervention by Muhammad al-Sammak

This commitment to raise the values in Arab societies was also the subject of an intervention by Lebanese Sunni Muslim, Muhammd al-Sammak. He said that thanks to Christians,

Muslim society has increased its cultural level to make positive progress. In his speech (delivered in Arabic), he said:

"Two negative points demonstrate the problem faced by Eastern Christians: The first point concerns the lack of respect for the rights of fully equal citizenship when faced with the law in certain countries. The second concerns the misunderstanding of the spirit of the Islamic teachings, especially the part relative with Christians... "For this, we are called upon, as Christians and Muslims, to work together to transform these two negative elements into positive elements: in the first place, through the respect for the bases and rules of citizenship which accomplishes equality first in rights and then in duties. In second place, in denouncing the culture of exaggeration and extremism in its refusal of others and in its wish to have the exclusive monopoly on an ultimate truth, and in working towards the promotion and spreading a culture of moderation, of charity and of forgiveness as the respect of the differences of religion and beliefs, of language, of culture, of color and of race, and as we are taught by the Holy Koran, we put ourselves at the judgment of God about our differences. Yes, the Christians in the Middle East are being tested, but they are not the only ones ".

He then points out that Christians and Muslims are in the same predicament regarding extremism. He adds:

"The Eastern Christian presence, which works and acts with Muslims, is a Christian as well as an Islamic need. This is a need not only for the East, but also for the entire world. The danger represented by the erosion of this presence on the qualitative and quantitative levels is a Christian as well as an Islamic concern, not only for Eastern Muslims, but for all Muslims all over the world".

6. Conclusion

Muhammad al-Sammak highlights a number of times that without the presence of Christians in the Middle East (and world) society regresses.

I think this way of thinking is a strong stand by the synod fathers: to propose, not so much a fight against Islam, but a collaboration between Christians and Muslims against Islamic extremism. This positive position is not merely a new way of "doing good", the fathers recognize that there is also an intolerant tendency in Islam, but they understand that in the Muslim world there is hope of development and change, though not as obvious and clear as in the Christian world.

What appears to be strong and clear is that the majority of the Synod Fathers are convinced that the only way forward is to constructively address the weaknesses of our society which finds itself in deep crisis, *together*, Muslims and Christians.