**Christian Muslim relations**

**in the Middle Eastern region**

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I have been asked to address briefly, in this presentation, the three following questions:

I - What is your experience living in a predominantly Islamic region?

II - What are the current challenges facing Christians in the region?

1. How could the Churches together address those challenges?

**I - My experience living in a predominantly Muslim context**

The experience with Islam is not uniform; it varies from one country to another, from one Islamic school to another, and sometimes from one Imam to another. Despite this lack of uniformity I will talk about my experience in three different contexts in general:

1. My experience with Islam in the Arab world
2. My experience with Islam as a Lebanese citizen
3. My recent experience with militant Islam

a - My Experience with Islam in the Arab world

Christians and Muslims have been living together in the Arab countries for 1400 years; though with some difficulties at times. At the present time the number of Christians in the region has diminished mainly because of security reasons, as well as economic and social reasons. In all Arab countries, with the exception of Lebanon, Islam is the religion of the State and the source of legislation, and Islam on the whole does not separate Religion and State. The Christian living under Islamic rule has to abide by Islamic law and, as a result, religious freedom is curtailed to an extent that may vary slightly between one country and another. The teaching of the Christian religion in the public schools in general is not permitted. Freedom of worship is allowed in most countries but within very strict limits. Freedom of conscience, the possibility to convert from Islam to another religion, is not allowed anywhere in that region except in Lebanon. Equality of rights of citizenship is denied when the State is governed by one particular religion, because people belonging to other religions are treated as second class citizens.

1. My experience with Islam as a Lebanese citizen

In Lebanon the situation is radically different; in accordance with “The National Pact”; an oral understanding between Christians and Muslims in which they pledged to live together, sharing power on equal basis, and respecting each other’s religious identity. The total freedom and respect for each religion is guaranteed by the Constitution, mainly in Article 9, which reads as follows:

**There shall be absolute freedom of conscience. The state, in rendering homage to Almighty God, shall respect all religions and creeds, and shall guarantee, under its protection, the free exercise of all religious rites, provided that public order is not disturbed. It shall also guarantee that the personal status and religious interests of the population, to whatever religious sect they belong, shall be respected.**

Lebanon is a secular State, and it is the only Arab country which separates Religion and State. However secularism in Lebanon is radically different from secularism Western style; the basic difference is that in the West they separated Religion and State and separated God totally from society. In the Lebanese Constitution “homage is rendered to Almighty God” and each religion is allowed the freedom to manage matters related to its special status; matters concerning marriage, inheritance, family laws and other special religious practices, in accordance with the requirements of each faith. So the Lebanese formula keeps a clear place for God in the public arena.

In Lebanon Christians and Muslims lived together for centuries and built a unique culture together, a culture of moderation, openness, respect for differences, acceptance of diversity in unity and total equality among citizenship. Not without problems admittedly, but there are problems in every country where there is racial, ethnic, linguistic and other types of diversity. This is why Saint John Paul II said that “LEBANON IS MORE THAN A COUNTRY, IT IS A MESSAGE”, It is a message of freedom and dialogue, and an example of pluralism for East and West.”

1. My experience with radical Islam in the region

This experience with radical Islam is now a universal phenomenon, but it is still more intense in the Middle Eastern region, and it is associated with violence and terrorism. This is a type of Islam which demonizes anyone who disagrees with its beliefs, independently of his or her religious affiliation, and seeks to eliminate them. It imposes Islamic law in its strictest form, which excludes the other who is different and denies him/her even the right to exist.

Particularly since 9/11, and up the to the present time, militant Islam in its various shades and forms ( AL KAEDA, IS, ISIS, ISIL, DAESH, AL NOSRA) and others, has acted in an extremely violent fashion and has succeeded in provoking a violent reaction from others. It was able also to instill fear in the minds and hearts of millions of people throughout the world. Those terrorists have affected radically the style of life of people everywhere and pushed many governments into setting up surveillance systems which resulted often in a clear invasion of people’s privacy. It has resulted also in a multibillion dollar security industry built up under the umbrella of “Security Services”.

An anti-terror rhetoric, anti-terror legislations, and anti-terror intelligence, alongside violence, are resulting in a growing sense of alienation for some young Muslims; They are being radicalized because of an atmosphere of suspicion created around them which fails to distinguish between a genuinely devout Muslim, and a religiously inclined one motivated by a radical stand and embarking on a violent track. Unfortunately anyone who speaks a particular language in many Western countries, and has a dark skin is often looked upon with a suspicion, and the body language of people is usually very telling. Thus all sorts of “phobias” are developed. It ought to be mentioned that nowadays internal sectarian Islamic conflicts, namely between Sunni and Shia, are complicating the situation greatly, and making things much worse.

**II- Current challenges faced by Christians in the region**

1. ***The Armed Conflict in the Region, and outside interference***

When the Arab Spring started high hopes were built and positive changes in governments throughout the region were expected. Suddenly the movement was high jacked by fundamentalists and then the spring was turned into a nightmare of violence. The height of that experience is being lived nowadays in Syria. There you have radicalized armed factions or mercenaries from over 85 countries, including people from practically all European and Western countries, with varied numbers. Unfortunately some of those fighters are returning to their original countries, for various reasons, and carrying the violence back with them as we have been witnessing.

The invasion of Iraq, in search of weapons of mass destruction which were never to be found, resulted in the dislocation of the security services, as well as civil infrastructure without any kind of replacement. That caused a total vacuum, and left the whole country in danger of disintegration, and wide open for all sorts of terrorist factions, and groups of armed forces roamed freely all over the country. Divisions along religious and sectarian lines turned violent and made the whole country quite ungovernable. This new reality gravely endangered the lives of all Iraqis and put the future of the whole country in jeopardy. However, because Christians and other religious or ethnic minorities represent the smallest and weakest faction of Iraqi society, they were naturally among the principal victims. This situation has been unfolding under the very eyes of the international community without a finger being lifted to remedy to it. A million and a half Christians were either killed or compelled to leave the country and thousands of others have been internally displaced. In the end, the invading armies, both Eastern and Western, had to admit that no arms of mass destruction were found, and left it at that at the time, as if all the damage inflicted was considered simply as “co-lateral” and no questions were to be asked, nor was anyone held responsible. Recently enquiries were held in some countries, conclusions drawn and some politicians blamed, but no action was taken to impose sanctions or demand compensation for innocent lives lost, for all the damage and destruction done, and the great misery caused by the whole operation!

Egypt has had to go through a new revolution, ultimately seeking again the support of the army to reestablish peace and to govern the country, with perhaps a slight improvement on the previous Mubarak regime for the lives of minorities.

Libya is another victim of this outside and mainly Western interference which high jacked the internal revolution, destroying the country, and leaving it in total chaos, without any significant plan for the replacement of the toppled government!

Is the same fate to be imposed on Syria, in the name of democracy, without any legal international mandate, toppling an elected leader, dictator or not, and killing the country in the process?!

**2. *Freedom of Religion and freedom of Conscience***

In the Muslim countries of the Middle East, freedom of conscience, i.e., the freedom to change one's religion in accordance with one’s convictions and one’s conscience simply does not exist. Generally speaking, religion in the Middle East, particularly Islam, is a social and even a national choice, and not an individual free and conscious option. To change religion is usually perceived as some kind of betrayal of one’s, society, culture and nation. Conversion from Islam to Christianity or any other religion, if discovered, exposes the convert to persecution, and killing him or her becomes a very real threat, if not a certainty, and which would go practically unpunished. But converting to Islam is fully legal and very much encouraged. This is why so many of those who convert to Christianity in the Arab countries end up seeking refuge in Lebanon.

As for religious practice, it is allowed with limited freedom in most of the Arab countries, but in some it remains officially prohibited.

**3. *Christians and Developments of extreme currents in Islam***

In one of their Pastoral Letters, the Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East wrote: "The rise of political Islam, from the 1970's onwards, is a prominent phenomenon which affects the region and the situation of Christians in the Arab world. This political Islam includes different religious currents which seek to impose an Islamic way of life in Islamic countries of the Middle East and Turkey, and on all people living there, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. For them, the cause of all ills is the neglect of authentic Islam, hence the slogan: 'Islam is the solution'... In pursuit of this goal, some do not hesitate to resort to violence."

This attitude is bound to create some anxiety in the minds and hearts of Christians, and to have a negative impact on the Christian presence as a whole. These extremist currents are clearly a threat to everyone who disagrees with them. In Iraq and Syria Christians have been targeted by IS and other Islamic factions because of their faith, and many of them were killed. Some churches also were burnt down or bombed. The largest and most dramatic cleansing of Christians and other minorities is the one that took place a couple of years ago in the Mosul region, a region that the Iraqi army, supported by other forces, are preparing, at the present time, to liberate from the hands of the so called Islamic State.

***4. Economic challenges***

The security situation, the discrimination against Christians and other minorities as well as the threat caused by the rise in extreme Islamic currents, are all likely to create instability. This makes it all the more difficult for businesses to carry on as usual, for people to keep stable jobs, be able to earn a decent living and secure a reasonably comfortable future for their children.

Such a situation is very likely to create an environment of insecurity and instability which sets up the right atmosphere conducive to emigration. In fact this phenomenon has become one of the biggest challenges for Christianity and for the 2000 years old Christian presence in the region. That presence which tries to create a culture impacted by the values of human rights, freedom, equality, openness, the respect for the other as different and the acceptance of unity in diversity, is gravely endangered. Due to its special importance, this challenge will be addressed separately, by a different speaker, in this Symposium.

**III- How do Christians working together ecumenically respond to the challenges.**

The credibility of Christian witness hinges first and foremost on their unity. This is a fundamental Christian and ecumenical truth. Because the number of Christians in the Middle Eastern region has now greatly diminished, the Christians, more than ever before, are called upon to work together for their witness to be credible, and their efforts to have the best possible chance of success. This is particularly true when they are addressing themselves to other social or religious groups. So, in all circumstances, and now more than ever before, it is imperative that Christians should approach together all the challenges facing them.

But because Christians and moderate Muslims are, at the present time, facing a common threat, they are required to address the problem together. The following are some suggestions as to how to deal with it:

1. Engage together in dialogue on fundamental sociopolitical topics such as:
2. The creation of a civil State and the separation of religion and State
3. The acceptance of equality in citizenship within the multiplicity of beliefs
4. Religious freedom, freedom of worship and freedom of conscience.
5. Engage in social projects together and develop educational programs emphasizing common social values of tolerance, moderation and basic human rights.
6. Refrain from taking stands based purely on religious identity as this cannot lead to the building of co-living or a common future. They should insist, on the contrary, on building together a society capable of embracing values of diversity and acceptance of the other as different.
7. Build networks outside the official circles, especially with individuals within the civil society, both Christians and Muslims, who think freely and are able to make a difference in their social circles.
8. Living peacefully together, Christians and Muslims, in the East ought to be able to help the Western society to deal with Islam more successfully.

It is important for Christians and Muslims to cooperate on those issues but that is not sufficient. Western nations ought to work with Islam to encourage moderation. They should help with the implementation of the sociopolitical orientations mentioned above, and encourage the access of moderate and enlightened Muslims into leadership government positions. The alliances or cooperation of some Western Nations with Middle Eastern States, sponsoring terrorist groups and far from being a model in democratic government, are difficult to understand and impossible to justify.

As a result of the activities of militant Islam, and the destruction of countries such as Iraq, Libya and now Syria, a colossal refugee problem has been created. Syria alone has 11 million refugees and internally displaced people. Lebanon, a country of 4 million inhabitants, has had to welcome at least one and a half million Syrian refugees, over and above half a million Palestinian refugees who have been there since 1948! The refugees in their hundreds of thousands have reached Europe also and are creating the crisis that we are all aware of. The other danger Europe and the West are facing is the return of militant Muslims from Syria and other regions of conflict.

The obvious solution is to find a way to stop the war. The supply of arms and dispatching of mercenaries and militant fighters into Syria and other war zones, ought to be stopped immediately, otherwise the spiral of violence will continue to spread into the whole of the Middle Eastern region and way beyond, into Europe and other regions of the world.

Once the war is stopped those countries ought to be helped to hold elections and choose their own leaders. It is absolutely vital to do so in order to avoid the disastrous Iraqi experience where a vacuum was created after the toppling of the regime of Saddam Housain, which resulted in the consequences we are witnessing at the moment there. It should be pointed out again that democracy western style could not possibly be applied in Muslim societies, especially when Islam is the religion of the State.

It is worth repeating that the obvious solution for all those problems is the immediate stopping of the war, and everyone knows that it can be done if those who are financing it and backing it politically are serious about putting an end to it.

Allow me to remind this very distinguished ecumenical gathering that if those wars in the Middle Eastern countries continue for much longer, your Christian brothers and sisters in that region will no longer be able to witness nor to engage into ecumenical dialogue, simply because they will be no more!