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"OBSTACLES AGAINST MOSLEM-CHRISTIAN
DIALOGUE IN LEBANON AND THE APPROACHES
THAT FAVOR THE DIALOGUE"

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Obstacles against Moslem-Christian dialogue in Lebanon and the approaches that favour the dialogue

By Boutros Labaki

- 1- Short presentation of Lebanon
- 2- Spirituality and identity in Lebanon: their meaning
- 3- Why Christian – Moslem dialogue is not a dialogue of civilization?
- 4- Short modern history of Christian – Moslem dialogue in Lebanon
- 5- Obstacles against dialogue in Lebanon
- 6- Factors and approach favoring dialogue in Lebanon

1) Short presentation of Lebanon:

Passing from India to Lebanon, is passing from macro-level to micro-level: India has 1,1 billion inhabitants, whereas Lebanon has 4 million, (with 4,5 million Lebanese leaving abroad). The resident population of India is 275-fold the resident population of Lebanon.

The total area of India is 3,287 million sq. kms., 328 fold the area of Lebanon (10400 sq.kms.)

Lebanon is situated on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Its direct neighbors are Syria to the north and the east, Israel to the south.

Average per capita GDP of Lebanon is 4000 US\$, more than double the figure for India.

Arabic is the national spoken language of Lebanon. French is also widely spoken, and taught in around 75% of the schools. The use of English is growing quickly. Armenian is also spoken by around 5% of the Lebanese population.

Lebanon is a mountainous country: mountains and hills cover around 70% of the country. This is also why it has been a shelter to a number of persecuted Christian and Moslem communities in the Middle East. As a result, the Lebanese population comprises 18 religious groups (12 Christian communities, 5 communities of Islamic origin and a Jewish community). Christians account for around 44% of the resident population (including Palestinians living outside refugee camps and Syrian residents), whereas Muslims account for 56% of the resident population. The Lebanese are also socially organized along strong extended family ties.

These Lebanese communities are structured social groups, living together and sharing power in the political system, in a way I will describe later.

The Lebanese economy is a mainly service economy (65% of GDP are generated by services activities). This economy relies to a large extent on the export of goods, services and labour mainly to the Arab Gulf countries.

Lebanon was part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire during four centuries (1516 – 1918), and was under French Mandate from 1918 to 1943. Lebanon experienced a relatively flourishing period in the economic, cultural and political domains, from 1943 until 1975, with the exception of 4 months of civil strife in 1958, as a result of the conflict between the Arab nationalist movement led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of Egypt and the pro-British regimes of Iraq and Jordan. In spite of this short period of trouble, Lebanon was, in the Middle East, the only democratic regime for all its population. Unlike Israel, which is democratic for its Jewish population; excluding Arabs living in Israel from democracy. Lebanon was also the cultural and intellectual center of the Arab East, and the main center of banking, commerce, tourism, and other services in the same area. It also had the second biggest manufacturing sector in the Arab World (after Egypt) in the early 1970s.

This situation changed drastically in the 1970s. Lebanon suffered from a long series of wars on its territory between 1975 and 1990. These wars were mainly an offshoot of the Arab-Israeli conflict: regional powers (mainly PLO, Syria, Israel, Iraq and Iran) used Lebanon as a battlefield for their conflicts, through their own armed forces, and through Lebanese proxies, to whom they were providing weapons, finance and giving political and media support. International powers also intervened, mainly in the framework of the Cold War and some times to ease a settlement (USA, USSR, France, Italy, the Vatican, multinational forces in 1982-1983, UN forces since 1978).

The wars inside Lebanon stopped in 1990, with the end of the Cold War and as a preparation for the Second Gulf War. A national agreement among Lebanese parliamentarians was reached in Taïef (Saudi Arabia), with the support of US, Saudi Arabia, France, the Vatican, the Arab League and other powers. This agreement is supposed to be the basis of the national life in Lebanon and is called the "Taïef Agreement". This agreement is now part of the Lebanese Constitution. And since October 1990, the Syrian army has been controlling the Lebanese state.

In spite of all that, the Lebanese-Israeli boundary is the only non-peaceful Arab-Israeli boundary, witnessing tension and occasional fighting. That is because in the meantime: Egypt signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1981, Jordan did the same in 1994, and Syria already signed a cease-fire agreement with Israel in 1974, which is respected by both parties.

This situation means that the Lebanese wars were and are mainly non-civil regional wars.

2) Spirituality and identity in Lebanon : what do they mean ?

In Lebanon as in some other countries, spirituality and identity do not coincide. On the one hand we have in Lebanon, three main spiritual families: Christianity, Islam and Judaism, we have also non-religious believers (atheists and agnostics).

On the other hand as far as identity is concerned, we have 12 Christian churches, five Islamic communities, and also a Jewish Community.

Non-religious believers have to be registered in one of the 18 communities mentioned above.

Every one of these 18 religious communities has its own identity and structure. These communities are quasi-ethnic groups, mainly endogamous; they have their own religious organization with endowments, and special relations with their spiritual centers abroad. Each community has its own personal status law and courts. They are represented in the parliament, in the cabinet, in the public administration. They have frequently their political parties and movements,

youth movements, NGOs, schools, universities, hospitals, dispensaries, press, radios and TV stations, areas of housing concentration (especially during and after the 1975/1990 wars that resulted in massive population displacements on a religious basis).

In Lebanon all the religious communities (except Moslem Kurds and, Turkmens, and Christian Armenians, which number all in all less than 10% of the population) belong to the Arab culture and civilization. As a matter of fact there were Arab Christians in Lebanon and the Middle East before Islam. So the language, the literature, the cultural production, the social and family structure (with the exception of less than 1% Moslem Lebanese polygams), the social customs are mainly the same. Some specific cultural differences exist and are related to religion: some holidays, women dresses in traditional environments and in revivalist Islamic circles, prohibition of pork and alcohol consumption in several Moslem circles.

We have to mention that Christian and Moslems have a long tradition of conviviality and of sharing economic, social, political and cultural life. For all these reasons we can affirm that:

3) Christian – Moslem dialogue in Lebanon is not a dialogue of civilizations in the full sense of the word, as it is mainly understood nowadays. This is because the great majority of the elements composing the Lebanese culture are common to all Lebanese, whatever is their communal religious belonging.

The Lebanese inter-communal dialogue is a dialogue between communities sharing practically the same culture, including some religious elements: Moslems consider all the prophets of the Bible as prophets, they include Jesus among them, Jesus is considered as being from the spirit of God and Mary as a virgin. Muslims respect also several Christian saints. We have to add that politically and juridically early Islam in the Omeyyad period, adopted cesaropapism, and culturally, the architecture of Byzantine churches and various aspects of early oriental Christian religious practices.

4) Short modern history of the Christian Moslem dialogue in Lebanon

We will deal here only with the Christian-Moslem dialogue in Lebanon during the last century and half.

Since the Middle of the nineteenth century several Lebanese intellectuals mainly belonging to Christian Churches, tried to promote Christian-Moslem relations on the basis of the Arab culture common to Christians and Moslems, and on the basis of the common destiny of Christians and Moslems in the Arab East; whatever were their religious affiliations.

These intellectuals were influenced by the intercommunal conflicts of the mid-19th century, and by the nationalist ideas coming from the West, and they were also witnessing the decay of the Ottoman multinational Empire. We can mention among them Ibrahim Al-Yazigi, Boutros Al-Boustani since the mid-19th century, later in the early 20th century appeared Najib Azuri, Georges Antonios, Antoun Saadeh, and others in the first half of the 20th century. They tried to promote the idea of a common fatherland, and the modernization of culture and society. Their efforts contributed to Lebanese, Syrian and Arab Nationalism.

During the 1930s and the early 1940s, political dialogue between Christian and Muslim political leaders paved the way for the National Pact of 1943, which was the basis of the internal consensus that contributed to independence, and served as a frame work for the national life in Lebanon until the outbreak of the wars in 1975.

We have to mention that Moslem-Christian dialogue at the international level started in 1954 in the Lebanese town of Bhamdun, in a conference regrouping religious leaders from Asia, Europe, Africa and America, and published, the first inter-religious document calling interallia for peace and justice in Palestine, Algeria and Cyprus.

During this period several Lebanese intellectuals started working on Christian-Muslim dialogue (we can mention Michel Hayek, Youakim Moubarak, Sayyed Moussa Sadr, Soubhi Saleh, Georges Khodre, Mohamed El Sommak, Mohamed Hassan Al Amin, Samir Khalyl, and others). They operate frequently in the framework of the "Cenacle Libanais" an intellectual forum very active in Beirut as a think tank and a space for dialogue.

The circumstances were favorable to dialogue: the population was relatively mixed by internal migrations, the enthusiasm of independence and decolonization was still there, intercommunal, private, civil society and public institutions were developing as agencies of socialization and mixing people from different communities. Secular political parties were growing in parallel with communal parties.

Even during the war period in Lebanon (1975-1990), whenever fighting stopped for sometime, intercommunal contacts and dialogue resumed, common platforms were achieved, after discussion of common political, social and economic problems. Trade-unions were very active. NGOs were created for dialogue. Conferences were held, mainly outside Lebanon to protect the freedom of speech and the security of the participants. "Spiritual summits" were held regrouping the religious leaders of the diverse communities. At the end of the war in the early 1990's, a "Permanent Committee for Moslem-Christian Dialogue" was established grouping official lay representatives of the various Christian Churches and Moslem communities.

This committee holds regular meetings, and publishes statements occasionally on problems of national interest.

All these forums of dialogue, and the fact that the Lebanese were exhausted by wars and occupation, facilitated the progressive resuming of relatively acceptable degree of common life, in spite of foreign occupations and their divisive tactics and strategies.

5) Obstacles against dialogue in Lebanon

- a) One of the main obstacles is the reciprocal ignorance of Moslems concerning Christianity, and Christians concerning Islam. This ignorance covers also the ignorance of the social and day-to-day situation of the various communities. This is also mainly because communal schools are developing at the expense of public schools, the same for NGOs, and political parties. Areas of communally mixed housing have been diminishing partly as a result of massive population displacement along religious lines.
- b) Communalism is politicized: belonging to a community gives privileges or provokes discrimination.
- c) Sometimes communal (religious) cleavages correspond to a certain extent to economic and social cleavages.
All these factors are obstacles to dialogue.

6) Factors and approaches favoring Christian-Moslem dialogue in Lebanon:

A good strategy for favoring intercommunal dialogue in Lebanon should have two major parallel components:

a) First component:

- Dialogue around common objectives: social objectives, economic objectives, and political objectives

The fact that many objectives in these fields are common between Christians and Moslems facilitate the starting of dialogue.

- Implement common actions to reach these objectives.

- Establish structures for dialogue at all levels, national, regional, local, sectoral.

b) Second component:

Inform and teach each community of the religion, rituals, socio-cultural reality of the other communities. Through formal education, through adult education, through media programs, etc...

- Favor a gradual development of links and exchanges in schools, NGOs, trade unions, cultural and leisure activities, neighborhoods, etc...

Boutros Labaki

(Boutros Labaki a development economist, professor and researcher in Lebanon as well as in European universities. He was a frontline player in working out a peace process and reconciliation between communities at war, during the years 75 to 90. He worked out strategies to build unity over there. During the years 1991 to 2000, he was the senior vice-president of the Council for development in the reconstruction of post-war Lebanon. He is the chairman of a Lebanese NGO – ILDES – working for the resettling of Lebanese internal war refugees to their places of origin, in order to rebuild the pluralistic solid structures of Lebanon.)