

Two Muslims, two perspectives on Middle East

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 14, 2010 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Rome

Diversity in the Muslim world was on display in Rome on Thursday, as an Iranian Ayatollah said that he sees "no problems, no difficulties" in Christian/Muslim relations in the Middle East, while a Lebanese counselor to his country's Grand Mufti said that there are indeed problems which must be faced "bravely and objectively."

The Iranian ayatollah also asserted that problems of religious fundamentalism in the Middle East originate with Israel, and that fundamentalist currents in the Islamic world are a "reflex" of perceived Israeli attitudes.

Mohammed al-Sammak, a Sunni, and Ayatollah Sayed Mostafa Mohaghegh Ahmadabadi, a Shi'ite, met the press this afternoon ahead of their speeches to the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East.

Read NCR's full coverage of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East: [Index of stories from the Synod](#) [1].

Both men are no strangers to Catholic/Muslim relations. Sammak is a longtime veteran of dialogue with the Vatican, as well as a regular at inter-religious meetings sponsored by the Community of Sant'Egidio. Ahmadabadi earned a Ph.D. in law from the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium in 1996.

In general, Sammak represents a progressive form of Islam deeply committed to dialogue, while Ahmadabadi would be seen as a moderate struggling to reconcile traditional Islamic values with the realities of a pluralistic world.

I asked the two men to respond to what many observers of the Muslim world regard as the central question vis-à-vis religious freedom: If a Muslim wants to convert to Christianity, should that person's right to do so be protected by law, insulating them from any adverse social consequences?

Sammak said that "belief is a matter of conscience," but that in Islamic history, there has been confusion between "changing religions" and "changing sides," meaning committing an "act of treason" against the state.

Sammak said the "Golden Rule" in Islam is that there must be no compulsion in religion, but that the distinction between religious conversion and political betrayal still has to be worked out in Islamic thought and legal practice.

Ahmadabadi, on the other hand, said that while "you are completely free in your heart," that "propaganda against a society is a political mission." A "change of heart," he said, is not a problem, but that must be distinguished from "attacking Islam."

The suggestion seemed to be that while private conversion would be acceptable, public proclamation of one's

new religious identity could be problematic.

Asked about the testimony of Christians who have fled the Middle East saying they're afraid they may not have a future there, Ahmadabadi said "this fear is only in the minds of some people."

"From an Islamic point of view, there is no fear," he said. "We have no permission to bother any Christians or Jews, insofar as they are Christians or Jews. If they commit crimes, for example, that's something else."

Sammak struck a different note.

"Objectively, there is a problem," he said. "The immigration of Christians from the Middle East is an expression of this problem."

The lack of democracy and religious freedom in some countries, as well as the conflict between Arab nations and Israel, has "negative consequences for the whole region," he said.

"We cannot pretend that there is no problem, that everything is fine," Sammak said.

Several participants in the Synod of Bishops have argued for a "positive secularism" in the Middle East, meaning a democratic society with a strong distinction between religion and politics. Ahmadabadi expressed some doubt about that project, arguing that in the vast majority of Islamic societies, Islamic law has some role to play in shaping public policy.

On the other hand, he said, if by "secularism" one means democratic elections, that's no problem.

"In Iran, the election of the leader is in the hands of the people," he said "making no reference to charges that the recent re-election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was in some way rigged.

"The leader is not appointed by God," he said.

Asked about growing Sunni/Shi'ite tensions across the Middle East, Sammak conceded that "Christians are suffering from this new conflict."

"That conflict is especially clear in post-war Iraq, where Sammak said Christians "are not part of the conflict between Sunnis and Shi'ites, or between Arabs and Kurds, but they are caught in the middle and paying the price."

"Moreover, Sammak said, Iraqi Christians "had nothing to do with the American invasion. They didn't call for the Americans to come to their country, and they didn't ask for American protection." Yet, he said, they are "treated as if they are part of the American invasion."

"The case of Iraq, he said, illustrates the need to "disengage the rights of Christians as citizens and believers from political struggles."

"On the matter of freedom of conscience, Sammak said that "our societies lack democracy," and that Christians in some countries suffer from the absence of basic "rights of citizenship."

Ahadabadi said that one "cannot deny" there are conflicts in the Middle East, but they are essentially political struggles among various groups that use Islam and Christianity as "cover."

"They do not relate to the religion," he said.

tAhmadabadi argued that the Qur'an, the Islamic holy book, shows Muhammad living in peace with Jews and Christians in Medina with no problems, no difficulties, no struggles between Islam and Christianity.

tIn the past, Ahmadabadi said, there may have been some struggles, some wars, but in recent times everything has changed. Nowadays, he said, relations between Islam and Christianity are marked by dialogue, with Muslims, Christians and Jews sitting side-by-side as citizens, with the same rights as others.

tAhmadabadi asserted that Iran is the best example of this harmony among all Islamic countries.

tSammak argued that while problems must be faced honestly, there is also a case for hope. He pointed to the Gulf States, where it used to be prohibited to build Christian churches, but where there are now fourteen such churches most, he said, built on land donated by the rulers of those states.

tIn Kuwait, for example, Sammak said a church was erected as far back as 1975.

tPressed to comment on the situation in Saudi Arabia, which has the largest concentration of new Christians in the Middle East, mostly guest workers from Asia and Africa, but where overt practice of any religion other than Islam is still legally prohibited, both Sammak and Ahmadabadi declined comment.

tOn the subject of religious extremism, Sammak said that it's a problem across the board not just in the Islamic world, but also within Israel and in certain Christian circles in the United States, and that it's not just Christians who are suffering from it.

Ahmadabadi, meanwhile, argued that there were no fundamentalist currents in Islamic nations prior to the emergence of fundamentalism in Israel, among some of them. In that sense, he argued, Islamic fundamentalism is a reflex of developments in Israel.

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