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Muslim scholars say Mideast needs Christians

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VATICAN CITY -- Two Muslim scholars, a Sunni and a Shiite, told the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East that Islam promotes respect for Christians and Jews and that the entire Middle East will suffer if Christians vanish from the region.

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

Pope Benedict XVI invited two Muslim religious scholars to address the synod Oct. 14: the Sunni, Muhammad al-Sammak, adviser to the chief mufti of Lebanon and secretary general of Lebanon's Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue; and the Shiite, Ayatollah Seyed Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad Ahmadabadi, a professor at Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran.

Al-Sammak told the synod that Christians are not the only people suffering in the Middle East and they are not the only segment of the population tempted to emigrate.

"We share our sufferings. We live them in our social and political delays, in our economic and developmental regression, in our religious and confessional tension," he said.

At the same time, the Lebanese told the synod, the "new and accidental phenomenon" of Christians being targeted because of their faith is dangerous, and not just for Christians.

By attacking Christians, he said, misguided, fundamentalist, politically manipulated Muslims are tearing apart the fabric of Middle Eastern societies where Jews, Christians and Muslims lived side by side for centuries.

They also are showing "Islam in a different light than the one it truly reflects" and working against one of the fundamental teachings of Islam: the teaching that differences among people are the result of God's design and part of God's will for humanity, al-Sammak said.

The emigration of Christians makes it difficult for the rest of the region's Arabs to live their identity fully, he said.

"They (Christians) are an integral part of the cultural, literary and scientific formation of Islamic civilization. They are also the pioneers of modern Arabic renaissance and have safeguarded its language, the language of the holy Quran," he added.

Al-Sammak told the bishops he hoped the synod would be "something more than the cry of Christian suffering which echoes in this valley of pain," which is the Middle East.

He said he hoped the synod would mark the beginning of "Islamic-Christian cooperation that can protect

Christians and watch over Islamic-Christian relations, so that the East -- the place of divine revelation -- remains worthy of raising the banner of faith, charity and peace for itself and for the entire world."

Ayatollah Mohaghegh Damad told the synod that the Quran's view of Christian-Muslim relations is one of "friendship, respect and mutual understanding," even though there have been "dark moments" in the relationship over the past 1,400 years.

However, he said, the "illegitimate acts of certain individuals and groups" should not be attributed to the religion to which they belong, whether it's blaming Christianity for the action of Christians or blaming Islam for the actions of Muslims.

In Iran and most other Muslim countries, he said, "Christians live side by side and in peace with their Muslim brothers. They enjoy all the legal rights like other citizens and perform their religious practices freely."

He told the synod that leaders of all religions must recognize that their people no longer live cut off from believers of other faiths, and religious leaders have an obligation to help their faithful understand the respect that is due the other.

The ideal, he said, "would be the state where believers of any faith freely and without any apprehension, fear and obligation could live according to the basic principles and modes of their own customs and traditions. This right, which is universally recognized, should in fact be practiced by states and communities."

Meeting reporters before speaking at the synod, the two Muslim scholars responded to several questions regarding freedom of worship and conscience in Muslim-majority countries.

Al-Sammak said the ancient Muslim practice of inflicting harsh punishment on Muslims who converted is a legacy from a time "when changing religions meant joining the enemy; it was punished as an act of treason."

While some Muslims today think converts should be punished, al-Sammak said the "golden rule" of Islam is that "there is no compulsion in religion, that's what the Quran says."

The ayatollah said, "You are free to choose any religion in your heart, because religion is a very, very private matter for everybody, but conversion means something else."

When journalists tried to push him to clarify, he said publicly announcing that you are no longer a member of your original faith group is an act of unacceptable "propaganda."

Al-Sammak also told reporters that the emigration of Christians from the Middle East is an expression of a "lack of democracy, a lack of freedom" in the region and not the result of religiously motivated pressure from Muslims.

As for the dire situation of Christians in Iraq, al-Sammak said they unwittingly were caught in the middle of a struggle for power that has pitted Sunni Muslims against Shiite Muslims.

"Christians of Iraq are not -- and I underline not -- part of that conflict," he said, but "they are caught in the middle of the conflict and they are paying the price for it."

In addition, he said, while "Christians of Iraq had nothing to do with the invasion, they didn't call for the Americans to come to Iraq, they didn't ask for American protection, and yet they are sometimes treated as if they are part of the American invasion of Iraq."

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