

Freedom to convert is now the subject of daily debate in the Islamic world

Amin Elias, *Oasis*, Newsletter no. 1, 2013 (<http://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/node/6582>)

In the past October and November the Lebanese daily *an-Nahar* featured an open dialogue, launched by journalist Jihad Zeyn, around a number of issues, three of which particularly stand out: the relationships between Sunnites and Shiites, the Christian presence in the East, and freedom of conscience.

The debate was sparked by the publication of Zeyn's interview with the Sheikh al-Ahzar, Dr Ahmad at-Tayyeb, on 15 October 2010. In that interview, the Sheikh had stressed the relevance of studying the Islamic tradition to then confront three fundamental questions. On relationships between Sunnites and Shiites, the Sheikh had criticized the missionary activities of some young people in Egypt in favour of the Shia, whilst making accusations against the figure of Aisha and the Companions. On the other hand, the Sheikh rejected the practice of anathematizing Shiites by some satellite channels; according to him, there are people who operate towards unleashing a civil war in Muslim-inhabited Countries. With this consideration in mind, the Sheikh had not failed to underline the importance of, and the need for, unity within the Islamic umma, without which the Muslims could never stand up again.

About the Christian presence in the East, at-Tayyeb had expressed a vivid desire for Christians to stay. A flourishing Christian presence is part of the Eastern civilized tradition and shows that Islam is the religion of tolerance, [peaceful] cohabitation and acceptance of the other. In reply to affirmations about Middle-Eastern Christians contained in the Pope's *Instrumentum laboris*, at-Tayyeb had declared that Islam guarantees the freedom of worship as well as the freedom of conscience, quoting some verses from the Koran in support of his statement; one of them recites: «There should be no constraint in faith». This verse, according to at-Tayyeb, represents the best reply to the position of Islam on the subject of the freedom of conscience.

There were many and diverse reactions to this interview. One came from Muhammad al-Ja'fari, who published an article (21 October 2010) rejecting the Sheikh al-Azhar's use of the terms Sunnite and Shiite and declaring himself belonging «to Islam, not to a sect», whether Sunnite or Shiite. Conversely, the article the Sheikh Jaber al-Muslimani re-affirmed the position expressed by the Sheikh al-Azhar, in particular on the Christian presence in the East, considering it essential to the region's attraction. Muslimani's article was outstanding for the absence of any reference whatsoever to the question of the freedom of conscience.

The contribution of a Lebanese university lecturer, Saoud el-Mawla (23 October 2010), on the other hand, dealt with the Sunnite/Shiite issue. The professor recalled the experience of the 1980's and 90's and the attempts to improve relationships between Sunnite and Shiites as well as those between Iran and the Arab Countries, by blaming the failure on the Iranians. Finally, Mawla warned against the deterioration of the Sunnite/Shiite relationship as the prelude to imminent disaster.

In an article of 6 November 2010 Fr Basim ar-Ra'i observes that the Sheikh al-Azhar's answers were developed along a threefold path: the Other, pluralism, criticism. The Sheikh al-Azhar, according to ar-Ra'i, lingers halfway on the path towards acceptance of the other. In fact, he has acknowledged the other's presence as a partner in the civilization of the East, with a right to the freedom of conscience. His threefold path, however, could never be

completed unless fully expressed in a political society where the Other be adequately recognized within an objective system of rights positively dictated by a neutral reason. In it, the components of society collaborate mutually in order to make the earthly city into a fulfilling place where to live.

The article of another university lecturer, Dominique Avon (translated into Arabic from the original French by Amin Elias) goes straight to the heart of the debate on the “freedom of conscience”. In the text, published on 6 December 2010, Avon explains that the freedom “of conscience” is a modern concept fitting within the changing pattern of the relationship between religion and politics. Avon underlines that this belongs to the European heritage shaped by the confrontation between Protestantism and Catholicism. The “freedom of conscience” concept was introduced by liberal and rationalist philosophers. Avon then explains its refusal by the Church for being a «vain and false category». According to the Catholic Church, in fact, to adhere to error could never become a full-fledged right. This refusal persisted until the Second Vatican Council; from then on, the Church has been calling upon the respect of religious freedom. Then, Avon moves onto expounding how elements of the concept of freedom of conscience have filtered into the Muslim-majority Arabic-speaking world. This would have taken place through the “Lebanese corridor” (Butrus al-Bustani, Pierre Gemayel, Camille Chamoun, Charles Malik, Karim Azkoul).

The Muslim Countries, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, signed the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man postulating freedom of conscience. The application of the Declaration, however, was inconsistent with the principle it enunciated, as the Constitutions of the majority of these States do not tolerate abandoning Islam by their citizens.

In conclusion, Avon observes the great development of the debate on the freedom of conscience and the question of the “change of religion” in Countries with an Islamic majority. In the last decade this debate has become a daily occurrence.

* Amin Elias, PhD student in History – University of the Maine – Le Mans, France
12 December 2010

Aisha is one of Mohammed's wives. Daughter of Abu Bakr, held in great veneration by the Sunnites, was the arch-enemy of Ali, the central figure in the Shia. Mohammed's Companions are considered model believers by the Sunnites, while the Shiites would condemn several of them for having hindered Ali's rise to the caliphate. (Translator's note)