

Al-Azhar acts after Jews and Christians are branded 'infidels'

The Grand Imam Ahmed Al Tayeb has announced a new draft law to criminalize hate speech. This comes after an Egyptian preacher sparked a polemic by describing Jews and Christians as "infidels" on television. "La Croix" examines the issue.

Anne-Bénédicte Hoffner, *La Croix International*, 5 July 2017



Egyptian Muslims participate in evening prayer on the "Night of Destiny" on June 21, 2017 at the Al Azhar mosque in Cairo.

What is the Al-Azhar proposal?

The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar on Wednesday, June 21, announced that he will soon submit to Parliament "a draft law that will criminalize hate speech, particularly against any religious belief".

Sheikh Ahmed Al Tayeb made the proposal in the presence of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sissi at a celebration for the Laylat al-Qadr or "Night of Destiny" during the month of Ramadan.

In the view of Sheikh Al Tayeb, who is Egypt's highest religious authority, the draft law, which meets the demands of the president "to fight ideologies which do not represent Islam".

It also needs to punish "incitement to hate" as well as "violent crimes committed in the name of religion". The draft law should thus "contribute to promoting tolerance", reports the *Al Ahrām* newspaper.

It also proscribes "any act of discrimination among citizens" and encourages the national education system as well as the media "to promote a culture of fraternity and tolerance in regard to the religious doctrine of the other".

Speaking during the same ceremony, President Al Sissi also emphasized that "changing religious discourse is the key to defeating terrorism and extremism".

What is the context?

Al-Azhar is regularly accused by Egyptian President Al Sissi of contributing to interreligious violence through its teaching.

At the beginning of May, an Al-Azhar student, Salim Abdul Jalil, who had become a preacher and undersecretary at the Ministry of *Awaqf* (Ministry for Religious Endowments), launched a significant national debate.

During a televised program rebroadcast by the private channel Al Mehwar, he explained several Koran verses concerning non-Muslims, characterizing Christians and Jews as “infidels” to the extent that they refuse to follow the teachings of the Prophet Mohammad.

He also called on them “to convert to Islam before they die if they wish to avoid the divine punishment reserved to people after their earthly life”.

His proposals attracted many responses from Egyptians “and they greatly affected the Copts”, according to one Al-Azhar University student.

As a result, Naguib Gibrail, a lawyer and Coptic Christian militant, has launched an action for “defamation of religion”.

A statement by the Ministry of the Awqaf, Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa, prohibited Salim Abdul Jalil from preaching in mosques since 8 May. According to Al Arabiya, the satellite TV channel canceled the preacher’s program, ended his contract and offered an apology to his “Christian brothers”.

For its part, the Islamic Research Council, which includes experts from Al-Azhar, emphasized that Salim Abdul Jalil had only expressed “his personal opinion”, which was “in no sense the point of view of Al-Azhar”.

Several days later, Ahmed Al Tayeb created a committee led by his legal adviser Mohamed Abdel Salam and mandated him to prepare the “draft law aiming to fight hate and violence in the name of religion”.

Salim Abdul Jalil attempted to explain his position on several occasions and on various TV channels by retracting that Muslims regard Christianity and Judaism as “corrupt doctrines” but “that this does not mean that Islam is justified putting to death or discriminating against members of other religions”.

On his Facebook page, he apologized for his wording and said that it had been “badly interpreted”.

What future?

This kind of discourse concerns Egyptian authorities at a time when tensions between Muslims and Christians, who have been described as “sectarians” by the authorities, are continuing to harden.

Several attacks have taken place against churches in recent months, including Tanta and Alexandria in particular, which caused nearly fifty deaths and dozens of wounded.

On Saturday, June 24, the Egyptian authorities stopped six people who were allegedly planning a suicide attack on a church in Alexandria.