

Religious Freedom

By Bishop George Khodr

The mystery of freedom lies in that God has created the human being in a way different from the mechanism and the performance of the animal, since God wanted to create the human being in God's image. The image of God for some of our Fathers implies God's freedom. Thus, the human race, with its own will, does not entail the animal nature. Absolute adherence to instinct is not of the human world; rather instinct is directed, controlled or guided. If we consent that human beings are particular kind [or family of species] on their own, which first is characterized by freedom of choice, we dare to say that this entails the freedom of the human being to choose his/[her] religion, namely to accept it or repudiate it, and this in turn entails our respect to this decision, whether of acceptance or repudiation. This is what we call religious freedom, which involves evangelization and calling.

Your freedom to hold your father's religion or reject it is the result of your love of truth, and no one else has the right to impose upon you his/[her] perception of truth. It is not possible for any rational creature to tell others that he/[she] thinks for them. God has not authorize anyone to control the conscience of people, namely to enter into their minds as if their choice is not of their own mind.

I understand that one of the rulers of this world might think that his/[her] religion is true, however, I do not understand that he/[she] imposes that religion on the people. Since then he/[she] will be breaking into the people's minds, namely he/[she] will be invalidating the people's decision to embrace a different religion. "There is no compulsion in religion". [*Sura Al-Baqara*, (The Cow), 256] I accept this as an eternal and final word, which no other consideration can abolish it. It is an antecedent statement to all other statements which resemble it, whether they were issued by the modern legislative statements of the United Nations, or by the philosophers of Enlightenment, or all the ensuing revolutions.

The political philosophy which emerged from these revolutions, or by their own credence, brought to us the notion of religious freedom, as they teach nowadays. Though the first to legislate religious freedom was the emperor Constantine the Great, and after his conversion to Christianity he did not invalidate the freedom of heathenism which was widespread in the Roman Empire. However, the position I am defending here is not founded on the political philosophy.

It is possible that religious freedom has emerged in the modern era, as the Evangelicals (the Protestants) defended through it their existence in the Catholic countries, and later the philosophers and those who enact the laws, in the civilized countries, have apprehended it. My defense [however] is not for constitutions. Rather it is obedience to God. I might have borrowed images from Christian

thought in order to transmit a Qur'anic expression: "There is no compulsion in religion". Christian thought, in this concern, is based upon the full unity between what the heart believes and what the tongue confesses, and no one controls or has dominion over your heart, since God alone is its owner. And whenever there is no duality between the heart and the tongue, and you believe within the depth of your existence that God utters in your heart, you cannot repeal your heart so that your tongue may lie and say whatever the strong one [who has authority upon you] wants, who prevents the bond between your inner [reality] and outer [expression].

You cannot silence the tongues, whenever they tell you that they are merely expressing whatever the hearts have transmitted to them. And you cannot subjugate the hearts to your heart, since you do not have a decisive proof that the word of God is in your heart and not in another's. Your Lord, and not you, beholds the hearts. Thus, you have to accept their resolution.

This makes religious pluralism imperative. Thus, there are mistaken religious dispositions, which God alone rectifies them, and the [religious or missionary] calling either rectifies or harms them. However, mistakes with conviction are better than compulsion, since mistakes are human, while compulsion is not.

Where is the government [the governmental regime] in all this? My answer is that the religious domain does not interfere in the regime, which by its nature is compulsory, and compulsion is tyranny. The government does not govern the hearts. The state might intervene whenever a religion, because of its politicization, harms security or stability, or it was the cause of collision among the followers of religions. However, the government's way is not self alignment with a religion, but maintaining security. Only then, the government would remain within the scope of politics.

The state cannot be religious. Religion is about people or it is within people, while the state is watching over them. I do not discuss the religions which claim that they determine the worldly matters. This is an opinion and the opinion of one differs from another's. Scholars of religions might argue. This is their question, and there is no harm in this whenever the pen and the tongue are preserved from revile and denouncement. There is an academic method for discussion and this expands the knowledge and contributes for the immersion of a theology upon another, and makes dialogue possible, and dialogue enable you to cite the other's words and also to respond courteously.

There is discussion in dialogue; however, it should not necessarily be a distressing rivalry, or denying peace. I know that there is no such fusion among religions. However, communities are not required to be fused at every aspect. There are many elements that unite the communities, such as water, bread, electricity, medical care and livelihood. All these criteria are acknowledged by the modern mind and are agreed upon. Whenever these are available, this would

satisfy the state. And you pray according to your own way and another according to his/[her]. The day might come when the person realizes that his/[her] way does not astound him/[her] as it used to do in the past. This is his/[her] question with his/[her] Lord, namely this is about inducing the conscience, and you cannot suspend another's conscience. Whenever you force anyone you would be saying that only your conscience is true, and thus you would be eliminating the Other, and become a tyrant which exposes you to the use of violence.

You have to make a choice between violence and total freedom, in a way that if you choose violence you would be not only silencing the tongues and the pens but also preventing the hearts to feel as their Lord wanted them to feel. God allows (and does not order) that you feel wrong in order that human dignity might be complete.