The Religious Coexistence in Lebanon: Messages and Lessons

Ziad Fahed, D.Th.
Associate Professor, Faculty of Humanities,
Notre Dame University, Lebanon

The Lebanese society is structured according to religious confessions. In a country of 10,452 km², Lebanon has 18 religious confessions officially recognized by the Constitution. Some of these religious groups came to Lebanon searching in its mountainous landscape for a safe and peaceful refuge away from persecutions. In other words, it was the arduous landscape that has attracted all those who sought to freely live their political and religious beliefs. They preferred the harsh life in the mountains, over the comfort of city life, just to preserve and defend their religious beliefs and their cherished freedom. Over the years, and due to the religious diversity that developed in this country, Lebanon has become a "mosaic of religions": But any mosaic is fragile by definition. Salah Stetie[1] wrote "this land of mountain and high plateau has always attracted rebels: those who refuse to bend to the ideas of the current reigning and dominating ideology. Here, sheltered by the magnificent rocks and the narrow valleys… you can say "No" to those trying to make you say "Yes" when you do not wish to".

Confessionalism has been the main feature of the Lebanese culture throughout the ages. Political functions are distributed among the different confessions. In the democratic political system that Lebanon enjoys, main political parties – key elements in Lebanese politics, are also formed around confessional lines. The Ottoman rule respected the existing confessional distribution of the population, and accorded Mount Lebanon – mostly inhabited by Christians, a certain level of autonomy. This confessional distribution of function has been, at first, "temporarily" introduced into the Constitution of 1926, and then became *de facto* consecrated in the National Pact of 1943. This pact is currently acclaimed as the "moral pact" which is based on confessional power-sharing. This pact is also supposed to help establishing a consensual confessional democracy *(dimocratia tawafoukia)* of a permanent and final Lebanese nation-state *(watan niha i)* with a special mission: the inter-confessional living (co-existence-convivialite - *al-aysh al mushtarak)*. This "moral pact" has been written in the Ta'ef Agreement 1989.

The present form of the State of Lebanon could not do away with the confessional political practices of the 19th century, which became the core of the political representation, and an essential part of the fabric of the "modern" state. Accordingly, while the Lebanese President is Christian (Maronite – and it the unique Arab country with a Christian President) the Prime minister is Muslim Sunni and the President of the Parliament is Muslim Shiite. Most official positions, governmental administration and even syndicates leadership are based on

[1] Salah Stetie, Towns and Legends.

religious distribution. Confessional group, disguised through political parties, are for Lebanon what some political parties are in the west and the Lebanese politic is driven by these different communities.

Who are these different religious groups and how are they interacting? What are the Messages and lessons that we should face and overcome in order to continue building on an overall positive experience in a country proud to be a "mosaic of religious cultures" in the Middle East?

Who are the different religious Lebanese groups?

The last OFFICIAL census (performed in 1932) indicated that the Christians were 52 % and Muslims were 48 %. Since that time, and in order to avoid destabilizing the fragile Lebanese society, there has been no official comprehensive census in Lebanon. But what's known is that in the last decades of the twentieth century we have witnessed a regression in the percentage of the Christians community due to:

1) The war and its impact leading to a significant Emigration of the Lebanese population that is affecting predominantly the Christian community due to the high level of insecurity concerning their future in a country surrounded by a majority of Muslim states.
2) Christians and Sunnis –mostly city dwellers- had an average of 2 children per family. Shiites, however, predominantly living in rural areas, had a much higher average birth rate per family.

Here are the latest non-official statistics of the different religious groups that make up the present Lebanese population[2].

A total of 4 855 000 citizens

(Latest NON-OFFICIAL census Newspaper An-Nahar, Nov. 13, 2006)

Islam		**64 %**
Shii'a	1.410 830	29 %
Sunni	1.410 213	29 %
Druze	261 028	
Alawites	39 165	
Christians		**35 %**
Catholics		
Maronite	945 000	19 %
Melkite Catholics	220 751	4 %
Syrian Catholics		
Armenian Catholics	24 850	
Roman Catholics (Latin)		

[2] An-Nahar, Nov. 13, 2006

Chaldean Catholics		
Orthodox Church		
Greek Orthodox	332 453	6 %
Syrian Orthodox		
Armenian Orthodox	110 255	
Nestorian Church (Assyrians)		
Protestant	22 772	
Minorities (Jewish etc.)	59 100	

The above table illustrates data representing in a certain way the Lebanese religious diversity. Looking beyond these data, one would ask what are the opportunities, what are the messages and the lessons of that religious coexistence for Lebanon and for the world?

I- The Lebanese religious coexistence lessons for nowadays!

1.1 The Lebanese Religious coexistence is

Similar to any social interaction, the coexistence of the different Lebanese religious communities depends on tolerance and on mutual acceptance. It is also affected by the social and regional environment. Therefore we may imply (mean) that the Lebanese coexistence is dynamic and not static.

Over the years, various types of interactions may be observed in Lebanon:

- A **negative coexistence** where violence and wars nullified the Lebanese social contract and jeopardized communal living. It was the case in 1840 and 1860 between Christians (Maronites) and Druzes in the South of Lebanon. And lately during the Lebanese civil war especially 1975 – 1976 were the Lebanese were divided into what we can call "confessional militias". The regional interferences in this civil war complicated the situation and the different religious communities were again divided in their vision to Lebanon.
- **A passive coexistence** followed by very little communal interaction. This situation was one of the consequences of the war that brought the segregation of religious communities in separate geographic areas. Schools and companies are increasingly following confessional lines. Moreover, various attempts by groups to establish contact and dialogue with others from different religious backgrounds are intercepted by those who want to avoid raising "hot topics" related to religious matters by fear of heightening tensions.
- And finally a **positive coexistence** where relationships are characterized by a positive recognition of religious diversity, followed by respecting and valuing differences, peaceful living among various communities; sharing the responsibility of promoting and consolidating coexistence, while actively preserving cultural differences; securing equal access to resources, opportunities, and equity in all aspects of life. That's the ultimate

objective we would like to achieve, though it still is beyond our reach, because such coexistence must be improved everyday through positive experiences and common actions. And political interference and regional and locals interests do not contribute positively regarding this issue. Moreover the result of any positive experience might take years before bringing tangible results and getting noticed.

It is also important to remember that during troubles the memories of negative coexistence appears immediately even if it has been followed by year and generations of positive or passive coexistence.

1.2 Autonomy of the different religious groups

Over the centuries, the "***being together"*** the Lebanese way has transmitted a message of coexistence by adopting a consensual confessional democracy and by allowing Lebanese communities to live together while respecting each others' differences. The Lebanese system allows each confession to manage its private matters according to its own religious laws in its own courts. Such cases are marriage, divorce, inheritance, and adoption. This is a great example of respect of religious diversity.

It is of major importance to notice that for all these important matters citizens have no other option. Civil marriage is not an option within Lebanon; therefore couples from different religious backgrounds that are considering civil marriage don't have the option of getting married in Lebanon. Therefore an increasing number of civil marriage candidates have to travel abroad. What is interesting here is that, though Lebanese courts do not administer civil marriages, they do acknowledge the validity of such marriage contracts.

It is also important to mention that Lebanon is the only country in the Middle East where anyone is allowed, if he/she so desires, to change his/her religion. The Lebanese law guarantees this freedom. But unfortunately citizens don't have the option not to adhere, at least formally, to one of the specific communities mentioned above (It is only recently that the Lebanese identity card no longer mentions the confession). Religion in such context is a way of belonging to a particular community and not necessary reflecting a personal religious belief. Therefore even an atheist person is obliged to adhere to one of the different religious confessions officially accepted in Lebanon, and will have to choose being either a Christian or a Muslim atheist.

1.3 The Emigration and its impacts on the different religious communities

According to the Lebanese Emigration Research Center at Notre Dame University, Lebanon, between 4 and 6 million people of Lebanese descent are spread around the world, especially in Brazil, USA, Australia, Europe and Africa. The recent war (1975-1976) on Lebanese soil, with the various military interventions from outside, drove many thousands of Lebanese, especially Christians, to emigrate with the intention of finding a home and making a living in some peaceful place abroad.

While in the past the majority of those who emigrated were Christian, non-Christians (Shiite and Sunni Muslims and Druze) have in the past 10 years outnumbered Christian emigrants. But still the biggest number of the emigrant is actually among the Christian community. According to a "Christian Emigration Report: Lebanon and Syria" done in January

2002, 10.8 %[3] of those who emigrate left Lebanon considered their emigration related to political or security problems. . In addition to the insecurity, this fact is related to the economical situations and lack of opportunities that the people of the region are facing. Religious minorities are demographically affected by emigration more than the religious majorities in Lebanon and all the Middle East.

It is almost impossible to find a Lebanese family that has not been affected by emigration and there is hardly a country in the world where Lebanese emigrants and their descendants are not to be found. While from a certain point of view this is a drawback for Lebanon, it is also a certain economic advantage. During the major crises that Lebanon has endured, the country's economy would have folded up had it not been for the remittances sent by Lebanese abroad to their families or relatives in their homeland. In fact Lebanon was already participating in the global village experience long before the term was adopted worldwide. Are the Lebanese following in the footsteps of their sea-faring ancestors, the Phoenicians? Apparently so!

This is to say that if the small religious community continues leaving the country and emigrating, Lebanon will be missing a part of its important active communities and its religious diversity and this has started affecting the fragile balance of the country based on confessional system. One of the debates that are appearing as a consequence of this is whether to grant the Lebanese nationality to those of Lebanese origin and allow them to vote which will help to give stronger representation to some communities that are losing their influence and create stronger ties between the emigrated population and their home country.

1.4 Political manipulation

In fact the Lebanese atypical confessional system, which makes the different religious groups more powerful than the state, has protected in certain ways the Lebanese religious pluralism. Why? Because no one of the different communities can impose its opinion on the others, and the state is in no position to control everybody, therefore each community, even faction, is able to survive among a general balance of forces in the country. But isn't Lebanon going to pay the price and be destroyed by the forces that he has protected and encouraged?

Given the large number of communities in Lebanon, any decision would require a consensus, which often proves to be a very challenging task, especially that each religious community is entitled to have its own political affiliation. In such a setting, reaching a common and acceptable solution becomes almost impossible. And this is actually one of the crises that the country is going through since more than a year when one main Lebanese religious community has withdrawn its minister from the government and therefore started to consider it illegal because it is lacking a representation of the different Lebanese in addition to boycotting the Presidential election and since more than 2 months Lebanon don't have a President.

[3] 10.8% political or security problems, 8.5% willing to live abroad, 4.7% unavailability of education for children, 4% economic situation in Lebanon, 3.3% not precise, 1.4% absence of law, 1% all points mentioned above.

The challenge today is to avoid the manipulation exercised by politicians in the name of religion. The Majority of the political parties today are representing one community: (Future=Sunni, Amal and Hezbollah= Shiite, Kataeb and Lebanese forces= Christians). We have witnessed several occasions where parties justify their presence and *raison d'etre* by building on a situation of fear or feeling of injustice, thus rendering their role indispensable for the defense of their community. (Many slogans used by these groups during the last civil war are great examples of this: The safety of the Christian society is above everything- OR the party of the deprived "*al mahroumin*" (Shiites)…)

There is an excess of political groups in Lebanon, some of them do have members from different communities and agendas promoting the national interest and cause without any particular confessional bias. Unfortunately the only ones that have a real weight in politics are the ones that are sectarian based political parties.

"Fateh al Islam" is the latest example of a group using a religious denomination with the objective of destabilizing the country and achieving their own political agenda. They represent such an extreme terrorist case that automatically most religious and political leaders renounced them, condemned their actions, and denied them any claim to Islam. However in most cases where such organizations may help promoting the interests of a given political or religious leaders, they would be tolerated and even encouraged.

The Lebanese Constitution gives the right for different religious based parties to exist. But will these different religious communities and related parties give priority to the national interest on their agenda? And would they cooperate enough in order to let this young consensual democracy develop and establish itself? Or is this society condemned to live as hostage to the different community leaders?

II- The Messages behind the Lebanese religious coexistence?

Religion plays a very important role in people's life. The traveler Ibn Battuta[4] wrote in the fourteenth century while he went towards Lebanon that there are "many people devoted entirely to the cult of the Very High God, individuals who have renounced the goods of this world, or who were saintly man. It is renowned for all this; and I myself saw quite a lot of pious people, who had retreated there to worship God". Moreover, due to many disappointments on the part of political leaders, people today have more and more recourse to respective religious leaders even on political matters. And therefore, religious leaders are very involved in the politics of the country, and are forced to consider themselves, *de facto*, as the spokespersons of their respective communities, not only in spiritual matters but also in all political and social matters as well. Could religious leaders succeed where politicians have failed? And could they contribute to bring people closer together, and build a united country? What are some of the contributions they could make?

[4] Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Battuta (1304 death in 1368 or 1377) was a Berber Sunni Islamic scholar and jurisprudent born in Morocco.

2.1 Culture of peace counter acting the culture of fear

The Lebanese religious pluralism is designed to engage the local religious community in an honest encounter and a genuine dialogue in order to promote greater understanding, mutual respect, and cooperative action aiming at serving members of different communities. Such project represents an invitation to deliver a message counteracting the culture of fear that is finding its way today between the different religious groups. Today we are witnessing higher level of awareness and a more active role-played by religious leaders aiming at easing tensions among the different communities, promoting a sustainable peace as a common value to all religious cultures, and promoting communal living as the prime mission of Lebanon. Whenever incidents with religious implications take place, religious leaders rush to condemn them and take stern measures that would eliminate any religious sensibility, and reinforce the social bonds.

The resurgence of a global "culture of war" and clash of civilizations that we are witnessing today, in the Middle East and in so many countries of the world, underline the importance and the necessity of a culture of peace. The message delivered by the millenary inter-religious coexistence in the Lebanese society in particular, should serve as an invitation, addressed not only to the Middle East, but to the whole world, to abdicate the 'culture of war' and to uphold a 'culture of peace'. The recent civil war that took place in Lebanon was a clear message to allow all the Lebanese to understand that war was not a solution to the problems that confronted their communities and their groups. They also understood historically that war has rarely provided a definitive or stable solution to problems between or within different communities and different countries.

2.2 Dialogue of life

The dialogue of life is the dialogue that is taking place on a day-to-day basis, between men and women of different beliefs, on the streets, at work, or in universities. It is there that they share their pain and their joy, and that they discover their solidarity in situations of social conflict, war, persecution, unemployment, poverty, illness, and old age. Pierre Claverie wrote "Learning to live together and to go out beyond oneself allows those who share intensive experiences, to give the weight of flesh, the weight of their experience, to the words they use. In order that the words may express the same things, it is necessary to live together, to share an experience, the experience of human life with birth, living, suffering, love and death. Giving words the weight of flesh, for me, that's dialogue"[5].

In such context a real ***dialogue of life*** goes on in all situations of religious diversity. Christians, Muslims, Druzes, and other people belonging to different religious beliefs, live and work together sharing a common life facing together the same challenges. Even though these dialogues go unnoticed and are not necessarily religious, we should recognize their importance in the building up of human relationships. Any genuine experience common to people of different religious beliefs could help in creating bonds that are not limited to the persons involved in such project but they even help creating strong bonds between their respective religious communities. This may lead not only to dynamic solidarity and genuine sharing… but also, and unfortunately, to negative experiences such as conflicts, betrayal, murders etc…

[5] Pierre Claverie Evêque d'Oran, La Vie Spirituelle, n° 721, octobre 1997.

In Lebanon we are proud of the fact that we get to know the different religious cultures by sharing and interacting with them. But is this enough? Shouldn't the study of the different religious cultures existing in Lebanon be an integral part of the educational system in order to allow people to get a better understanding of each other's religious beliefs, and thus reduce the fear which results from ignorance?

Moreover, the dialogue of Life, like any other dialogue, if it were to be genuine, should be independent of any tension and pressure, and even of the charisma of the leaders of the community in question. And this is easily said but not so easily done. Accordingly, a real dialogue of life is fragile, and despite its positive aspect and the opportunities it may promise, in terms of allowing and facilitating the religious pluralism, it can be easily manipulated if it's not based on solid foundations.

2.3 Promotion of moral values

The different religious communities must join their forces and work together for the promotion of moral values and fight for justice, peace and human dignity**.** They should join forces in offering the nation and the world at large a model of tolerance and openness toward the other groups. The struggle against terrorism is a priority in this regard.

The search for peace implies respecting human rights, including the right to religious liberty, the right to be different, the respect of women, protecting natural resources, fighting against all forms of discrimination, offering the same opportunities to all the citizens… "In the face of the repeated violations of human rights, the sons of Abraham have a historical vocation that consists in reminding the world that the radical foundation of human rights is not only the dignity of each human being but the creation of man in the image of God, the common heritage of the three monotheistic religions."[6]

III- How to reinforce the Lebanese religious coexistence?

3.1 Purification of memory

The purification of memory in such context aims at liberating the personal and collective conscience from all forms of resentment and violence caused by wars and conflicts which, at occasions, were partial legacy of the past, through a renewed historical and theological evaluation of such events. "This should lead – if done correctly – to a corresponding recognition of guilt and contribute to the path of reconciliation. Such a process can have a significant effect on the present, precisely because the consequences of past still make themselves felt and can persist as tensions in the present. The purification of memory is thus 'an act of courage and humility in recognizing the wrongs done…"[7]

[6] Claude Geffré (2001, July). *For a Theology of Difference. Identity, otherness, dialogue*: "Given the rise of diverse forms of intolerance, nationalism, racism and fanaticism, it is necessary to call for recourse to forgiveness, to welcoming of strangers, as well as to the Muslim duty of hospitality and to the Christian spirit of the Beatitudes".

[7] Cardinal Ratzinger (1999, December).

The purification of memory allows a new pact of solidarity and coexistence. It will minimize the chances of new conflicts. Through this purification of memory each one, individuals and leaders alike, would recognize his part of responsibility in what happened, and would feel invited to forgive the others for their part of responsibility. This purification of memory should lead to a new social contract based on re-adopting the communal living.

3.2 The action of civil society

In the aftermath of the war, people became more aware that religious tensions could be fatal to the existence of Lebanon and all of its citizens. Everyone has so much to lose but nothing to win. Therefore in the past few years and following some of the tensions that started reappearing in Lebanon, a large number of the public started a very active role by launching awareness campaigns such as **"ouaa" = Beware and be aware,** Organized by a large number of civil group, **Kafa = enough**, mobilizing the population: schools, mothers of war victims, war handicapped, all sectors of the population alerting against the risk of a new civil war. **05 amam** (= forward) is one of the civil society organization working on fighting sectarianism by creating a massive civil awareness campaign by using media (stop sectarianism before it stop us).

These social organizations are acting against any kind of discrimination and intolerance by creating awareness, and by building bridges connecting the different parts of the society. One of the challenges of today is to have the courage to replace the religious sense belonging by a national one. And if the actual system, based on Confessionalism and feudalism and "blindly-follow-the-leader"ism (*al taba3ia*) failed to guarantee stability to the country, could secularity (and not secularism as clarified by the Late JPII) offer the possibility to build a new system that implement the Rule of Law for all citizens and can offer them the same dignity and the same chances, and instill in them a genuine religious faith?

Conclusion

While some countries are discovering the meaning of the religious coexistence on their lands Lebanon is celebrating hundreds and hundreds of years of a real religious coexistence. In fact the history of Lebanon is a genuine synthesis of the history of the different religious groups that are present in this country: they lived together for centuries, they suffered together and all of this created a feeling of belonging to this small land. For better or for worse they are united. Despite all the challenges of living together, they believe that Lebanon is more than a country but a message of coexistence (as JP II has said) and power sharing, of love and of peace.

Religions have much in common and should mobilize their efforts for the cause of national interest and moral values (human rights, dignity, better society…). Together they can contribute to the purification of memory in order to prepare for a better future free from violence and avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Without losing its religious identity and its distinguished traditions, could Lebanon implement a Lebanese Secularity model which respects religions and is able to guarantee the equal rights to all its citizens? Could the civil society group start gaining power and mobilize the population or at least the young generations to create a national sense of identity instead of the current confessionalism?

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