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Interview with Mahmoud Akkam, Syria

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On the Right to Freedom of Religion, Interfaith Work and Muslims in Europe

Encounters with Religious Leaders of the Syrian Arab Republic

a trans-disciplinary approach by

Patrick Huser, Tobias Schwerna and Marcel Stüssi

Damascus, Syria 2006
B. General Information

**Encounter with:**  
His Eminence Dr. Mahmoud Akkam, the Grand Mufti of Aleppo

**Place:**  
Private Residence of His Eminence Dr. Mahmoud Akkam in Aleppo – The Syrian Arab Republic

**Date:**  
2 October 2006

**Religious Group:**  
Sunni Muslim

**Main Theme:**  
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**Conversation Language:**  
Arabic

**Guests:**  
Patrick Huser, Tobias Schwerna und Marcel Stüssi

**Organizer:**  
Eng. Bassel Kasnasrallah, Consultant of Islamic-Christian Affairs of His Eminence the Grand Mufti of the Syrian Arab Republic

**Interpreter:**  
George Babian, Official Interpreter of His Eminence the Grand Mufti of the Syrian Arab Republic

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C. On the Right to Freedom of Religion in Syria

His Eminence:
I would like to welcome you warmly here in Aleppo. It is a great pleasure to be the host to young researchers who are serious about their subjects and come from varying disciplinary backgrounds. Particularly in the light of the fact that many times conflict arises between politics on the one hand, and interpretations and studies of divinity on the other. It is not always easy to live in harmony when it regards these disciplines. What we need in research is courage and braveness, and that scholars around the world are not led by ulterior motives. They must concentrate on their subjects only and search for the facts of life without prejudice. We have to be truthful. In fact, we must search for the way of truth.
I would like to let you know that I support in your endeavours which needs courage and knowledge.

Marcel Stüssi:
Thank you very much for the kind welcome words dear Eminence, they actually lead us perfectly well into our first question. Syria has found its own very unique way of truth as it regards the freedom of religion. What is the philosophical theory underlying this concept of pluralism?

His Eminence:
We rely on instinct. Our practices are based upon our instincts. We believe that humankind has an instinct for the good. This is a basic concept of human being which we have all in common. We accept it not by reason but by instinct. What politicians, however, try to do is to discredit our deepest feelings, thereby reducing what we share. We also experience a politization of religion which tries to minimize the commonalities all human beings have in common This is a real pity because human sentiments would make us grow closer.

Patrick Huser:
It seems as if here in Syria many varying religious groups and denominations life in harmony together. What was first a common interest for harmony, or an underlying structure?

His Eminence:
Firstly, it is the instinct that we are forced to live together. Secondly, our Lord gave a good will to human beings to live in security with each other. A secure environment I consider more important than food in the general sense. It leads us to live in security. However, wars pollute this good will in us and so I ask all politicians not to pollute us as we want to live in peace with our fellow men.

I would like to combine this concept with history so as to answer your question completely. There are two possible tests. The first refers to the living in a country to spiritual aspects and the second to material aspects. Material quantities you test in a technical laboratory whereas history is the place and laboratory for testing life. History provides you with quite the right answer as it reflects experiences of millions of people. So to sum up, instinct and the good will of human beings lead us to live in harmony. We have vetted both elements in the laboratory of history, and than captured the results from these examinations. Finally, these products became our laws and rules.

**Patrick Huser:**

In an laicistic System like Europe where the majority of the people secular there is arguably no such common instinct for the good. Secondly, European Muslims and European Christians do not share the same historical background, how can they still find their *modus vivendi*?

**His Eminence:**

The concept of instinct as explained does not apply to religious people only. I am a secular individual too, and I insist very much on this. God has put good will in everybody’s soul. This regards to secular individuals and even non-believing atheists. It is in everybody’s soul.

I am turning now my attention to your question about the history. I have not referred to inclosed history but meant the general history which we all share with the entire world. So the source for our examination is our humanitarian history.

Last year when I spent time in your country I said to your government officials that: “I blame you a lot. I do not blame you because the majority of the Swiss are secular people and the minority consist of religious Christians, Jews and Muslims. I blame you because the majority has a great responsibility towards minorities. You do not fulfil your duties.” I further addressed your Government by saying that: “Switzerland has for centuries been a good teacher of humanitarian rules based upon human instincts for the good, do not become bad students when it regards your own, fairly new situation.”
Let me refer to a specific anecdote. It is always the “Old Man” which should go to the “Young Child.” You should not ask a child to come to you but go to your children. Open your heart to accept them. In the case of Switzerland the secular Swiss are the “Old Man” and Muslim Swiss and migrants the “Young Child.” The figure on secular people who mistreat their fellow human beings is increasing. Any secular person who calls him scientific must study and respect one other’s culture.

In Syria most of the people follow their inner good will whether they are persons of power or not. We do not mislead Muslims towards Christians. Take the example of the Taxi driver who brought you here. George told me that he refused to take money from you when he knew the intention of your visit. People can judge on their own as they are in anyway led by intuition that is divine.

**Marcel Stüssi:**

In order to find “the good” and “the right”, how should we proportion the level of intuition and reason?

**His Eminence:**

Of course reason is needed, especially when it comes to overcome differences. What you need are divine rules which lead instinct and bring about a good structure. A purely rational approach must be overcome. Any rule should always be tested against the human instinct for the good. And where a rule is in contradiction with real divinity, it cannot be a divine rule. I would like to illustrate this further. To go back to the instinct way of understanding.

At school we had to study the Sharia. The school teacher read Qur’anic verses and praised an extract which stated that “we should be harsh to the others”. I raised my hand and said aloud: “You mislead us. This verse is contrary to the concept of mercy which regards all human beings.” Such a rule cannot be a divine rule. Are you sure about Quranic verses? As far as I remember the sheikh (school teacher) referred to a saying of Muhammad. Sayings of Muhammad can be found in the hadith not in the quran. We have to double check that.

**Marcel Stüssi:**

If a rule as the one stated by His Eminence cannot be of divine nature, how do we thus have to understand its kind?

**His Eminence:**
The quotation “be hard to others” cannot be of religious and divine nature. This is a reaction to an earlier action. I will explain it on the Danish publications of cartoons. The Artist who created the cartoons was not religious. He’s cartoons were not religious and divine because they were contradictory to the divine concepts I was referring earlier to. They were simply racism. The Muslim reaction which was based upon harshness was not of religious and divine nature either. It was a racist reaction. I insist once more, an action or reaction is divine and religious only if it is undertaken in a way that is for the good. Neither did the cartoonist represent Christianity nor did the rioting Muslims Islam.

**Patrick Huser:**

....???? If I remember correctly Patrick ask about the culture of mercy on the one hand and the different social reality on the other hand.

**His Eminence:**

Do not think that I am a traditional religious man. I am also a person of logic. I am not just a man of religion as in the old days. It is important to be logic.

Mercy is a conclusion. It contains that I am a civilized man. You have to accept me and when you do not do so you are not civilized.

But how should I be dealing with you? When we are together it is dialogue and when we talk we have a dialogue automatically. Logic is than the most important thing in dialogue. When you try to attack me as a consequence of this I will have to defend myself. I have to defend that is my logic. But when struggling how do I have to defend myself?

“It is better to be killed than being the killer.” This is real Islam. I am saying this as a real Muslim.

**Bassel Kasnasrallah:**

Europeans feel offended it may just be a reaction. Why is it in such an extreme kind of way? Muslim Minority in Europe feels offended by the majority, therefore we have an reaction that often goes in the wrong way...

**His Eminence:**

The French Actor Coulosh pictured the situation perfectly.
Assume that there is a man of about forty years and a small child of about five years. They fight against each other. Who do you want to protect? We automatically take subjective position for the innocent and young child. We want naturally to say why do you strong man quarrel with such a weak young child? And, if they answer was: “this young child tried to harm me,” would you accept?

I stated this anecdote in Switzerland last year. Your country should be like the watches it produces, telling always the exact nature and positive of time and event. We must more be seeking the truth.

**Tobias Schwerna:**
This is certainly a very nice and telling picture. Accepting the young child should be protected and treated differently, would you also say the picture implies that a young child needs some form of guidance and that the older people should participate in its education.

**His Eminence:**
I perfectly agree with you. However, the old man is expected to be more merciful still, and in fact, twice as merciful. Therefore you first have to stop the old man from harming the child, otherwise you cannot expect acceptance from the child. After reprimanding the old man that he should not quarrel but guide the young like if you were its uncle for instance, you have to educate the child from the beginning. With Islam a new child has been born in Europe. So after stopping the old man it is education for the child which you need. But rules are necessary.

**Bassel Kasnasrallah:**
Should European Christians seek the help from Arabic Muslims in questions regarding the treatment of their minority groups?

**His Eminence:**
Europe is Europe. But I told European Authorities that European Muslims are the foremost first of all European nationals and not only secondly followers of Islam and therefore should be closer to you than they are to me. I do not think we can use the same scale of measuring advantages and disadvantages we have here with advantages and disadvantages there. Swiss for instance are Swiss. They have their unique identity. Each country must address its inner difficulties by itself. But in general Europe had always been a good teacher of freedom and liberty and it should should not turn into a bad student (this sentence probably later).
Marcel Stüssi:
When having regard to your eloquent speech I draw the conclusion that it would be rather unwise if anyone thought that the Ottoman millet system as you have it here, could be imported into Switzerland?

His Eminence:
I recently met the French Ambassador. He was asking me about their problems with the veil. I told him that it would be a French problem and not problem of the Muslim world nor should a Syrian interfere with French domestic issues. I made it clear that we have no right to judge on their issues. They way France wants to treat their citizens is up to them not us. However, my advice is that Muslims who are not permanently living in France should be treated with utmost respect. We should finally start to learn from each other.

And still as a general advice for any legislator, when enacting new laws be merciful and fair to anyone who will be affected. All the divine laws of the Thora, Bible, and the Qu’ran are merciful. Look at the rules of the Bible and use the same justice and mercy for new laws. And for the judges, when judging you have to be merciful, and this even in special circumstances.

The Qu’ran orders Muslims to judge in any event with mercy. In the situation where the judge is hated by the person he must judge over, his verdict must even be merciful and fair against him.

Another divine rule is embedded in the following story. A man came to our Prophet Muhammad and confessed that he committed adultery. Back then the crime would normally be sanctioned with one hundred wipe lashes. But Muhammad inquired further, have you kissed her or have you had sexual intercourse? If you just kissed her this is no problem but if you slept with here than you must be punished for your crime. He asked the man to re-think about it and come back.

In today’s world there is a strong inclination towards judging people at first sight. However, we must not give any verdict without knowing the whole of the story. I have tried to illustrate this on the idea and concept of adultery in Islam. Whenever a person judges over another person he should be taking care of that person. In this way you have no extreme judgments.

When I was studying in Paris at the Sorbonne University I felt secure and rightly treated. But when I visited France last year I felt insecure and not at ease. My wife even asked me to cut
my beard and she felt very uncomfortable wearing a veil. The problem as I see it is that we have become less merciful. I am not saying that this statement refers to Christians, not at all, it includes all of us in the East and the West. Sometimes I think that I would rather live with wild animals than with human beings. To me it strikes me easier to turn a savage beast into a pet than a human being into a kind-hearted, loving person. We need more morals and I pray very much for this.

**Bassel Kasnasrallah:**
You mean for instance unlike Bin Laden or George Bush? Sure that is from him?

**His Eminence:**
I would be happier if Bin Laden came to his senses and turned to the way of truth, of love and the good for the people, than George Bush ever taking over Muslim faith!

**Guests:**
Let us hope that all the wild creatures get tamed soon enough! Thank you very much for this enriching encounter.