

Presentation

on

Christian-Muslim Relations

“The Algerian-Augustinian Experience and Beyond”

Merrimack College
North Andover, Massachusetts

October 28, 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am particularly honored to be among you this evening to celebrate and strengthen Christian-Muslim understanding and I would like to seize this opportunity to express my thanks and gratitude to the President of Merrimack College, Dr. Ronald Champagne and his colleagues for hosting this event and for inviting me to address you tonight.

Roger Garaudy, a great Christian Muslim figure said, some thirty-five years ago, there will be true dialogue only when everyone is convinced at the outset that we all have something to learn from one another. I would submit that there will be true dialogue among religions and civilizations only if everyone is imbued with the conviction that the other is what he is missing in order to be a complete human being.

In this regard, and as far as the Christian-Muslim dialogue is concerned, I must reckon that while we are moving closer to that true dialogue, we are not there yet. For this dialogue to make sense and bear fruit, there are, from my point of view, some prerequisites which must be met.

As Muslims, in order to have a meaningful dialogue with other religions and civilizations, we need to engage in a serious dialogue with ourselves and inside our societies, based on the lessons learned from our mistakes and shortcomings, a dialogue that would aim at reconciling Muslims with such important values of freedom, tolerance and progress that are at the core of our religion as revealed to Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) and as has been practiced for centuries.

We must also, in an unequivocal fashion, reject the Manichean division of the world into the “realm of Islam” and the “realm of war”, denounce all forms of extremism, fanaticism and violence that alter the true meaning of the Divine message and stop demonizing the West and its supposedly corrupt values.

Christians should once and for all abandon their traditional condescending clichés regarding Islam and the stereotypes that have recently flourished equating our religion and our civilization with violence, terrorism and fanaticism.

They must as well recognize that there is no pure or superior civilization but that each civilization is a river with other civilizations as its tributaries and thus it must be open to the universal, otherwise it is doomed to fall into obsolescence. In this context, the alleged opposition between the so-called Judeo-Christian culture and the Islamic culture ignores the harmonious coexistence and interaction between the three great religions of the Book in Andalusia, for instance, where they gave birth to a highly civilized and tolerant society.

Western civilization today is no less Islamo-Christian than it is Judeo-Christian if one takes into account the great contributions made by so many Muslim thinkers and scholars in the emergence of Western societies from the darkness of the Middle Ages and, later, in the blossoming of the Renaissance.

Finally, I believe that this dialogue should be seen as a therapy of choice. It must acknowledge, accept and respect differences and not aim at abolishing them. It should not be a question of falling into a kind of insipid cosmopolitanism by sacrificing fundamental elements in each religion or civilization.

The ultimate goal should be “know the other” in order to accept them the way they are, because, at the end of the day, this dialogue could be seen as a dialogue between the individual and the universal.

In fact, greater significance is given to this in the Koran when God, addressing men, tells them: “O Men! We created you males and females and we made made peoples and tribes so that you may know each other!”.

By transcending the mix of these national and tribal groupings, the Koran has a specific purpose and reason for man to recognize man. To the motto on the Temple of Delphi, “Know yourself”, we should add “by knowing the other” or recognizing the particular identity of the other. Cultures, religions and civilizations, like individuals, can recognize their identities and originality only when compared to other cultures, religions and civilizations.

Mr. President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Algeria is an ancient nation whose roots extend through a rich and glorious prehistory, as shown by the frescoes and rock drawings of Tassili which depict the way of life of the first women and men who populated our country. Located at the crossroads of major religions and civilizations, at a point where Europe and Africa meet and as an integral part of the Mediterranean world, Algeria has constantly interacted – sometimes harshly, sometimes amiably – with the major civilizations of the Mediterranean Basin, in particular the Greek, the Phoenician, the Roman, the Byzantine, the Arabo-Islamic, the Ottoman and the sub-Saharan African civilizations and eventually with that of the modern Western world, as well as with the three religions of the Book.

From St. Augustine to Emir Abdelkader, Algeria's contributions over the years to the development of universal spirituality and tolerance have made us more attuned to contemporary problems and more desirous to work towards their resolution and to promote a new kind of humanism, one that is based on the diversity of cultures and religions and on the unity of mankind. If I mentioned St. Augustine and Emir Abdelkader, it is not only because they are two great Algerian thinkers who enriched the universal spirituality and created bridges between the north and the south of the Mediterranean when the Mediterranean was the center of the world, but because both of them were, for some time, victims in their country, of obscure forces who criticized the Emir for making peace with the French Army after a fifteen-year heroic resistance- when he did so to preserve tens of thousands of lives – and who could not comprehend and accept that Muslim Algeria could have given birth to the greatest Christian thinker.

I must point out, in this context, that after we regained our independence from France in 1962, when the issue of the Algerian identity was raised and debated, the view that prevailed was to put more emphasis on our Arab Islamic heritage than on our pre-Islamic roots. It is President Abdelaziz Bouteflika who had the courage to recognize that we needed to reappropriate and embrace this largely ignored glorious past. And it is President Bouteflika again who broke the taboo when he accepted to host and address the First International Colloquium on the Algerian Philosopher Augustine (Algiers, April 2001) whom he compared in his speech to Plato, Confucius,

Averroes and Gandhi for the decisive and powerful influence he exerted on human thinking.

As a Muslim, I believe that the fact that St. Augustine lived and reflected in times before the Holy Koran was revealed could in no way disqualify his works from being a foundation and inspiration to the shared thinking of humanity, for the message revealed to our Prophet Mohamed (P.B.U.H) was within the continuum of those preached by Abraham, Moses and Jesus. To the Muslims, the Holy Koran said: “And do not argue with the People of the Book otherwise than in a most kindly manner. Say: “We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you. Our God is your God. He is one and the same and it is unto Him that we shall all surrender ourselves”.

Another verse also says to the Muslims: “And say: “We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob, and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed to Moses and Jesus, and that which has been vouchsafed to all the [other] prophets by their Sustainer: we make no distinction between any of them. And it is unto Him that we surrender ourselves”.

As an Algerian, I am certainly very proud of Saint Augustine, as well as of his friend and first biographer, Possidius, born in Calama, or Guelma as my hometown is now known. President Bouteflika was equally proud when he addressed the International Colloquium on the “Confessions” of Saint Augustine (Rome, May 2002).

Let me read to you some excerpts from President Bouteflika’s address:

Quote:

“I am also delighted and happy to see that one man, African and Algerian, through scriptural achievements and his contributions to the course of History, succeeded beyond the chasms of time to be and to appear, similar to a Deus ex Machina, within the universal dialectic of our civilizational ethics. Indeed, through his very existence and his philosophy, Saint Augustine dared to challenge as untrue the narcissistic judgments and values held throughout the history of empires and ideologies. His astounding legacy is still reflected in the soul of humanity, like a distant but growing

acknowledgment of conscience that man, in his brilliance, could have made as he confessed his past acts and deeds.

Saint Augustine, sheer product of mixed cultures and civilizations, Algerian by his Numidian blood and universal by the genius of his vocation, challenged and disputed through his extraordinary example numerous scales of values perceived through the hubris of imperial certainties as unshakable axioms. One is born neither slave nor barbarian. One may, however, be turned into slave or barbarian, for, on this earth, no one is master of others, his fellow men, and even then, everyone is master and everyone is slave”.

Let me now turn to Emir Abdelkader who is now fully accepted as the Founding Father of the Algerian modern state and a great spiritual figure, who gave us, in the second half of the 19th century, another example of tolerance and humanity.

Who does not know the Emir? Even in this country, a small city in Iowa, Elkader bears his name as a tribute to his noble soul and his chivalry. The French poet Arthur Rimbaud in his youth celebrated the Emir in a poem titled “Abdelkader: Grand Son of Jugurtha”.

In 1880, while he lived in Damascus, Emir Abdelkader placed under his protection and that of his companions in exile twelve thousand Christians threatened with certain death by some Muslims who were infuriated after a Turkish imperial decree granted some privileges to the Christian population of the empire.

As he had provided shelter in his own home and in those of his numerous companions to hundreds of Christians, Abdelkader heard enraged throngs asking him: “O you, who fought the Christians in the past, why are you so opposed to our avenging their insults to us? Hand over to us those you hid in your home.

Abdelkader said to them: “What you are doing is a culpable act and contrary to God’s Law. As to me, I have not fought against Christians but against conquerors who called themselves Christians”.

Leading his men in arms, he crisscrossed the city for several days and several nights looking for frightened Christians, saving thousands of them, and placing under his personal protection the Consuls accredited to Damascus.

The great powers from Russia to Prussia, and from France to the Vatican expressed their gratitude and their admiration to Emir Abdelkader and sent him messages of thanks and their highest awards, while England presented him with a double-barreled gun with gold inlay and America sent him a pair of pistols with gold inlay as well.

When Monsignor Pavie, the Archbishop of Algiers, wrote to him a letter full of praise and gratitude, Emir Abdelkader replied in these words: “What good we did for the Christians, we had to do out of faithfulness to our Muslim faith and out of respect for the rights of humanity”.

Mr. President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I started this address by quoting a great Mediterranean thinker and I want to end it by quoting another Mediterranean thinker: Federico Mayor. The former Director General of UNESCO, said that “no country is so large that it can do without others and no country is so small that it has nothing to contribute to others”.

I do not believe either that there are good or bad civilizations and good or bad religions, that some are superior to others, or that others have congenital flaws, whereas some can be predominant and held up as the single model to follow. Rather, I am of the view that all civilizations and religions alike are complementary, that they nourish each other and that they converge towards universal values that are shared by the whole of humanity.