

Georges Nahas, vice-president of the University of Balamand

Orthodoxy and democracy, an Antiochian experience

Georges Nahas started his presentation by explaining that Orthodoxy has its local specificities, as the Orthodox Churches are autocephalous. The Antiochian patriarchate does not have the same geographic borders as the other confessions in the region. It is nevertheless limited by the historic border of the five first patriarchal sees of the Church: by the city of Antioch to the North, Iran to the East, the Mediterranean to the West, and Palestine and Jordan to the South. The Orthodox Christians living in this space are today spread all over the countries of the Near East. They are not the majority in any state level, but in some subdivisions of these states they are so. The peculiarity of the Orthodox community in all these countries is its continuous and indigenous presence. This means that the Orthodox have been inhabitants of these countries since the first centuries of Christianity. Different schisms have divided Christians into communities, but they can all be gathered under the term “Oriental Christianity”.

The following presentation will focus on the Orthodox community, which has been present for 20 centuries and has become a minority. It is difficult to understand the Orthodox without exploring the ground of Orthodox thought, even if it is not always visible. A very important issue is the problem of Liberty. This is a crucial subject in the Orthodox approach to life and especially to mankind. The liberty of the person is crucial from a theological point of view because it is this liberty that establishes man as a creature in the image of God. Orthodoxy’s position can only be understood if this idea is clearly underscored. The problem of the person’s liberty is at the base of the anthropological approach and it is reflected in two aspects. First, the multitude vis-à-vis the person. Do the free persons submit themselves, against their conscience to a democratic vote by a majority? What is the limit of their liberty then, and to what extent is liberty absolute? Second, for this approach the person is not alone. Human beings are only “persons” when they are in a communication; otherwise, they are individuals who do not have the dimension God intended to give them. This results in a permanent dialectic between the person and the community. The question becomes how this can be lived?

If we look at the actions of Orthodox in the Antiochian space, we see that they never wanted to have their own communitarian instance to speak for all Orthodox, as no Orthodox person gave anybody the right to speak in his or her name. The Orthodox keep the duty of being a critic of what is said, independent from who is saying it. This approach could get at odds with democracy, but Orthodox found a way to manage it. It is not true that they are not interested in the affairs of the City. But their “global interest” is a prophetic one. If there is a position taken, it comes from a general attitude referring to the Orthodox vision of the World and Mankind. It is not a discourse dealing with the particular, which is left to the liberty of everyone.

This is the reason why we see that many Orthodox individuals were very active in the foundation and work of several political movements, especially at the beginning of the 20th century. They also took part in the Arab renaissance. There is no obligation to be always of the same opinion, rather, the important thing, is to be present to the good and the comfort of the City. Orthodox do it without having necessarily any ecclesiastic instances to refer to. There are political theoreticians, thinkers, journalists, but there is no Orthodox party. Orthodox deputies, ministers and leaders can be found on the right as well as on the left. So Orthodox are present, but they participate on the level of the person which stays in a dialectic relationship with the community. The community is only asked to take prophetic stands. For the sake of liberty, the Orthodox Church owes it to herself to respect the individual differences and points of view.

To conclude, Georges Nahas suggested that the Orthodox have a problem with democracy the way it is defined in the Western world, because the liberty of the person is very important to them. This does not mean that they do not care about the life of the City; Romanian and Greek monks for example participated actively in the liberation of their countries and Metropolitan Makarios III, became the first President of the modern Cypriot Republic. But this does not prevent a certain malaise with democracy the way it is thought in the Western world. We would like to think of a democracy in which the person and the multitude can enter into a more constructive dialectic relationship

Boutros Labaki, former professor for social history at the Lebanese University, currently at Université Saint-Joseph

Oriental Christianity and Democracy

Boutros Labaki started his lecture by pointing to the fact that the different presentations of the seminar are on a different scale, as Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism are religions grouping hundreds of millions of people whereas the Christian Churches of the Middle East do not exceed 10 million faithful. Five groups of churches exist in the Middle East: First the Greek-Orthodox, divided into the Patriarchate of Antiochia (Syria, Lebanon, Turkey etc.) and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem (Palestine and Jordan). Second the Assyrian Church (also called Nestorian), present in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the United States. Third the monophysite oriental Churches, among them are the Egyptian Copts, the Gregorian Armenians and the Syriac Orthodox. Fourth the Catholic Oriental Church with the Maronites, mainly based in Lebanon, and the Latin Church especially in Palestine. To this group belong also the Uniate Churches such as the Greek Catholic, the Armenian Catholic, the Syriac Catholic and the Chaldean Church. Except from the last one rooted mainly in Iraq, the other churches can mostly be found in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan. Fifth there are different protestant Churches present in all countries of the Near East. Christians represent in all the countries of the region a minority and do not exceed 5 to 12 %, except from Lebanon where they account for 27% of the population. In the following presentation, the churches of the Armenians and those present mainly in Iraq and Turkey are left out. It is important to understand that the Oriental Christians are gathered in community churches, which means that they are not only clergy organizations, but possess different institutions, media, schools, their own personal status law and represent intermarriage networks.

Boutros Labaki announced that his presentation would look at the history during the past two centuries and at the role democracy played in it. All Oriental Christians belonged to the Ottoman Empire until 1918. All of them had their own personal status law which distinguished them from other citizens. Their communities were agricultural, agro-pastoral or urban. Especially in the cities, they received in the 19th century the echoes of the French Revolution and the European expansion. The Ottoman reforms (*Tanzimat*) claimed a theoretical unity of the status among the subjects of the Empire. The first representative

institutions and the beginnings of the parliament in Istanbul let ideas of democracy come through. Christians participated in this process on different levels, for example in the elections of municipal councils. At this period, there was no political equality among people belonging to different religions; the “people of the book” did not have the same rights as Muslims. Different strategies were used to fight this. In certain Churches, the majority opted for nationalism, such as the national movements of the Armenians and the Assyrians. Others promoted egalitarian movements hoping to participate in power with the Arab liberation movement. Finally, there was the hope to attain liberty gradually which was mainly the choice of Lebanese Christians.

At the end of the 18th century, the Maronite Church played a non negligible role in the peasant revolt, with the Christians of the Druze Mountain being strongly involved in the peasants’ movement. These movements responded positively to the first elections and were at the same time reactions to these reforms that had improved the democratic participation. At the end of the 19th century, many Orthodox and protestant Christians joined the nationalist Arab or Syrian movements; at the head was the Presbyterian mission of Beirut. They supported also liberal and socialist movements, especially in Cairo and Alexandria. Another nationalist movement was the Lebanese one claiming a Lebanese state in its actual borders. World War I brought the establishment of the mandatory states. Many Christian intellectuals participated in the creation of the states in Jordan and Iraq. The communist movement in Egypt recruited part of its members among the Armenian and Maronite workers, and in Lebanon, Maronites and Greek-Orthodox joined the communist party. The nationalist Syrian movement and the nationalist Lebanese movement had many Christian members; best known is the Kataeb movement founded by Pierre Gemayel in 1936. Christians participated in parliamentary alliances for the independence of Lebanon and Palestine as well as in trade unionist movements. To sum up, the mandatory period brought the foundation of many movements inspired by the West.

After World World II and the first Israeli-Arab war, new movements came up whereas the communist party in Russia lost power. Two Christians founded new movements, Michel Aflaq the Baas Party and George Habbash the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Between 1955 and 1975, the changes accelerated. More military bases were created and Arab socialism with its nationalization measures was established. The late 1960s brought the defeat of the Yemeni republicans and the Arab defeat against Israel; the growing Palestinian

resistance movement comprised many Christians. In Lebanon, political agitation heightened among Palestinians, Christians and Shiites. A national peculiarity can be seen in the political movements of Christian students. The Churches also underwent changes with Vatican II for the Catholic side and a strong modernisation in the Orthodox and Copt Church. Since the late 1970s and the Islamic revolution in Iran, we observe a retreat of the Christians as the Islamists gained influence.

Nevertheless, some Christian intellectuals have played an important role for the last 15 years. In Palestine, there is a new vague of civil resistance in which Patriarch Michel Sabbagh, Hanna Nasser, the former President of Birzeit University and the deputy Azmi Bishara participated. In Jordan, Christians play an important role on the government level. In Lebanon, Christian parties like the Kataeb are quite influential. Here the Churches (especially the Maronite one) and General Aoun's movement have since 1990 led a struggle for democracy and against Syrian occupation. Lebanon is also different from other Arab countries in the sense that it is the only country where resistance against Israel was successful. It is certainly a Shiite resistance today, but the first fighters were Communists and Christians. It is remarkable to see that it is the less non-democratic country in the region that allowed this resistance.

Boutros Labaki concluded by asking if Christians, when they engage for democracy, do this on an individual level or if the whole Church promotes this engagement. Theological problems are no longer to be found in this respect, as the traditional engagement for people in inferior status can be seen as an engagement for democracy. Another question is if the struggle for democracy happens on the level of the Church or of the society. Most Churches do not practice internal democracy. Nevertheless, if the motivations for the ongoing struggle for democracy among Christians in the Near East are different, they stay compatible with the teachings of the Churches.

Discussion

The two presentations by Georges Nahas and Boutros Labaki were discussed together. Participants criticized that there was no mention of the obstacles Christian communities had posed to the establishment of democracy, rule of law and deconfessionalisation. Both speakers agreed to the existence of such obstacles. Georges Nahas stated that with more openness and less chauvinism, the Christians could have played a bigger role in the City life

of many Arab countries. They tended to support the people in power and payed the price when the regime changed. Christians did not defy all the regimes that came up and should have played a more positive role in the establishment of the rule of law. They could have made an effort for the deconfessionalisation some years ago, as the discourse was more tolerant then and things got much more difficult now. Boutros Labaki precised that the Maronite Church is against the establishment of secularism, but the other communities are as well. He claimed that a society can only be integrated if there is intermarriage. When Lebanese President Elias Hraoui wanted to introduce optional civil marriage, Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri refused to sign with the support of the Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir.

One participant judged the lecture by Georges Nahas as being an inside, non-critical discourse that claims the Orthodox affiliation of persons who did not care about being Orthodox, such as Antoun Saade, the founder of the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party. The Maronites would claim the same way a Maronite essence, they also do not have one party. In his response, Georges Nahas made clear that he was not talking as a speaker for the Orthodox community and that many coreligionnaires would have a different opinion. Prophetic positions have been taken already with the Byzantines, before the arrival of Islam. The Church cannot go further, because the Orthodox sense of liberty says that liberty is not what we have in the political world, but that we have been created in the image of God. Therefore, nobody has the right to impose political ideas to anybody, everyone is free to make his political choice. Antoun Saade and Michel Aflaq did not consider themselves as Orthodox, they were mentioned to show that the spirit of liberty in the Orthodox Church of Antioch could bring about such liberties. This is not meant to deprive them of their right not to be Orthodox, but to say that they lived in this milieu where no one has the right to use the adjective Orthodox and to give it to a political party. When there were efforts made to create an organization like the Maronite League, the community refused.

To the suggestion that there was a strategy behind the Orthodox stand not to have a political party, but rather to stay in all positions and to be accepted by all sides, Georges Nahas responded negatively. But he stated that because the Lebanese Orthodox were spread in all the regions and based mainly in the cities, they were more in contact with the other communities and did not leave during the war. It is only with a second emigration wave that many Orthodox leave the country today.

The debate then evolved around the critique that if democracy means the regime of the majority, power should not be held by a minority as is the case in Lebanon. Georges Nahas answered that he is happy that the majority is not always right and the minority wrong. He finds it difficult to accept that in a country, a part governs all because it has 1 % more votes. From an ethical point of view, this seems unacceptable to him. For the sake of legitimacy, majority should take into account the minority. In multiconfessional countries, it is a duty to think about structures that are more structures for debate than for vote. There is a difference between democracy and republican values which go much further than democracy. In the Lebanese communities, one must look rather for the republican values than for democracy through a simple vote.

Theodor Hanf stated that in the history of political each movement, we can find a rational choice. Those who are not in a situation where they have a chance to succeed are more open to democracy – therefore, the Serbs in Kosovo are more open to democracy than the Serbs in Serbia. In Lebanon, an Orthodox living in Ras Beirut during the civil war certainly had another strategy than an Orthodox in Ashrafieh. The question is what kind of democracy is wanted and if rights of minorities and a system of checks and balances are guaranteed. Many Lebanese intellectuals know the French and American societies and are perplex that the Lebanese society does not function the same way. But one must look at the price paid: in the United States, the indigenous were eliminated and those who went there had to leave a big part of their identity behind. In France, centrality was gained through religious homogenisation. In Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, Catholics and Protestants have tried to eliminate each other, and only when they did not succeed, they installed parity. In Alsace, Protestants and Catholics appeared as two ethnic groups until very recently. The intermarriage among Christian communities in Lebanon is quite recent, interreligious marriages are still rare. The Lebanese have an interest in having a safeguard which is parity and veto. A minority that can bloc is an advantage for democracy. Boutros Labaki explained that the equilibrium among the communities favours democracy, contrarily to the massacres done to Protestants in France on St Bartholomew's Day or in Turkey to the Armenians and Greeks.

Participants mentioned the freedom of the press in Lebanon as a cornerstone for political liberties. Christians had a major role in bringing the printing press and establishing a first political newspaper. Boutros Labaki said that the liberty of the press was one of the reasons

for the war in 1975. Georges Nahas specified that the journalists played a big role, not the religious communities. He is not sure if the communities appreciate the liberty of the press. Even inside the communities, and even in the Orthodox community, this liberty is defended publicly, but not very well tolerated interiorly. The media freedom is a republican value that needs to be defended by everybody. But it should be a responsible freedom that wants to respect the other. The audiovisual media (not only in its political, but also in its ethical and youth educating aspects) must be studied as a vector for democracy.