Adnane Mokrani

HEALING OF MEMORIES
FIRST GATHERING BETWEEN MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN YOUNG PEOPLE IN POST WAR LEBANON

Adnane Mokrani *

L ebanon is a small country (10,400 sq km). It is located along the east shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Between independence in 1943 and the middle 1970s it was one of the wealthiest states in the region, had a freer and more open society, and a long history of inter-faith tolerance, peaceful coexistence and cooperation between Christians and Muslims. Despite of this relative success, prosperity brought its contradictions. Then Lebanon experienced a civil war that apparently seemed as Guerre de religions for fifteen years. However, in my opinion, the real causes of this internal conflict were more complex and profane rather than religious, with foreign interferences, both at regional and international levels. The psychological, social, economic and political effects were many, especially with displacements of entire communities. As a result, an entire generation of children of the combatants grew up completely deprived of knowing the other, without prejudice. In order to reverse the effects of the war, Lebanon needs national reconciliation.

National reconciliation is not achievable by any political effort. Rather, it is only possible by social and educational endeavors, which demand deliberate and unrelenting work so that the effects of the war can be reversed for the generation of war babies. Fortunately, there are many different organizations working in the field. Many are of an academic nature while others are social or/and cultural. The challenges of the first encounters between former enemies were many. After the civil war, as reported by Dr. Tariq Mitri, there had to be an “intentional and organized effort,” in order to reconnect people so as to change the profoundly rooted false images they had formed with regard to the other who are not of their group.

“Those who did not know Lebanon well, as we knew it before the war, had a need for a conscious, intentional and organized effort in order to have a sincere, quiet, objective and balanced knowledge of Islam and Muslims… For example, the young Christian generation that grew to adolescence during the eighties and the nineties do not know Muslims except as enemies, or at least as complete strangers… After the Ta’if Accord and the end of the civil war in 1990, there were organized trips which took Christian students to visit Muslim areas and the main tourist sites. This enabled an encounter between the former enemies and led to people discovering the similarities between
themselves and the other; it was as if they were visiting another country for the first time!"

It is said, lightheartedly, that the Christian children while visiting the Muslim areas for the first time wondered at the strange looking Churches; it was the first time they saw Mosques. A friend once recounted a telling story that took place at a dinner table that included both Muslims and Christians. One of the Muslim children posed the question to his father, “Is this meat Halal;” at which point one of the Christian children asked the meaning of the word “Halal.” Such questions did not take place before the war.

Perhaps the more violent consequence of the war was inflicted upon the young militia. How difficult it was to incorporate them once again into the ranks of normal society! They knew not a “trade” besides the use of firearms. Violence was part of their formation; in fact, violence was second nature to them. This gave a unique accent to the “training of a trade” sponsored by the organization for the “Development and Formation of Dialogue,” in the south of Lebanon, in 1989. Fr. Salim Ghazal comments on the experience,

“As we began our training sessions with those who carried arms since their youth and came to us in al-Mukhallis Monastery with no trade or anything else . . . they did not leave their militia. They left their arms at their posts and came to us for the training. They were very difficult to deal with; they were breaking even the tables they worked on! We had to bring in a social worker to install in them better human manners and civil behavior before we could teach them a trade. In the evening, they returned to their posts and check points or the barriers assigned to them.”

Beirut’s City Center, the symbolic meeting point between Muslims and Christians, was destroyed during the war, and to date it has not recovered its previous function, in spite of its grandiose and luxurious new construction. Miss. Juliette Haddad describes the tragic circumstances:

“The heart of the city was destroyed; before the war we went to the market, which was mixed. Now, there exists no market that would be a meeting place for the inhabitants of different neighborhoods. Each neighborhood has its own market. Very few young people from the East side of the city come to the movies in the West side . . . what they have built in the City Center, as in buildings and markets, are all very luxurious.

There is nothing for the common people. This means any person who wishes to meat the other has to take a deliberate step.”

The following remarks provide some samples of the atmosphere of the actual meetings that took place in the first encounters between the young, Muslims and Christians, who had been born and grew up during the civil war. These meetings were limited and far between, perhaps even insufficient. However, they served as “laboratories,” indeed a courageous first step that one can emulate and improve upon, if the necessary good-intentioned people were to be available.
Miss Juliette Haddad of the Institute of Islamic and Christian Studies (Institut d'études islamо-chrétiennes, IEIC) is one of the pioneers in this field of group of reconciliation. She shared in initiating the first of the encounters between the young Muslims and young Christians, who had not carried arms but grew up during the war. This initiative was in the context of an IEIC seminar entitled, “For a Better Living Together,” that took place in Bekfaya and Sidon between 1995-1997. Is it possible to consider these encounters a type of psychological healing of the effects of the civil war? This experiment attempted by way of controlled “release” to exorcise the demons of divisions, expressed in unqualified generalizations, projections, prejudgments and fear. “I am not a psychologist, although I read extensively in the field, so cannot say that I follow a certain line.” Miss Juliette Haddad continues, “The role of the leader of the group is not to interfere in the flow of the conversation of the participants while they are expressing themselves. Rather, his role is to facilitate and motivate the free expression of idea and feelings. The first step for us was for each to express what goes on inside his head e.g. not living together, the experience in refusing to live together. I give you one telling example. It was expressed by a Christian young man who was responsible for a youth camp that was held in Jbail, which is a Christian area, with some nearby Muslim villages that remained through the war. This episode took place during that time. The average age of the youth of that camp was between 14-15 years old. The man responsible for the camp said that during the ‘Muslim call to prayer,’ the Christian youth used to laugh, mockingly. He told that story as an example of a lack of respect. The participants of the seminar recounted similar experiences. We began to analyze these experiences to see what happened. ‘Why did they laugh? What motivated the mockery?’ were the questions the entire group considered. There exists a lack of understanding to the importance of the call to prayer and its meaning. It is an invitation to prayer like the bell of the Church. There existed projection and prejudice. Sometimes the Muslim call to prayer becomes (even thought it is not like Egypt with grand amplifiers in the minarets of the mosques) a conquest of space. With your voice, you assert your presence and wish to conquer the place, which in turn provokes a refusal for my part. We did some analyzing until we reached an important point, namely that “unqualified generalization is harmful for inter-human relations.” If a conflict took place with a certain person, this person does not present all Muslims or all Christians; each person presents a unique self. This we experienced among ourselves several times. I said to them, ‘notice your own words. When one of you gives a harsh remark, the other says, they are all like this; they always say this.’ I said to them, ‘what does the word they mean when you talk to the person in front of you?’ We used some text that talked about generalizations to help us think and reflect. Generalization means denying the other in his individuality, and
at the same time, denying myself. Hence, in my generalization about other people, I deny myself. The second concept that we dealt with was projection. This they experienced through the examples they gave. We reflected on the preconceived ideas that we project on the others . . . finally, we understood that the primary dynamic working in us was great fear. I noticed that the participants came out of the seminar with new points of view, with new common projects that they wished to accomplish together . . . they formed among themselves, Muslims and Christians, spontaneous friendships because they learned how to act with each other . . .”

This was the same experience, Rita Ayoub tells about in relating the results of this and similar seminars, “I thought that all the Muslims are trying to force Lebanon under the Islamic system of governance, and this I refuse. There existed a conviction that Muslims are not Lebanese, in the real sense of the word. They are dependent on Saudi Arabia or Iran or Iraq, as they are Sunnis, or Shi’a. Their target is to turn this country into a Muslim country or to kick us out of it. For me, Lebanon was the only country in the Arabic world without an official religion. It had 17 distinct religious communities, and after the war, they became 19, able to live together . . .

Another issue connected with fear is the concept of Arabism and the concept of Islam as if they were synonyms. Unfortunately, this is the common understanding in the world community, especially the western democracies. Personally, I am one of those who refuse to mix the two. I am an Arab Christian. I refuse to be a Western Christian. My Eastern, Arabic Christianity means a great deal to me . . .

Some Muslims, in Lebanon, consider the Christians as automatically connected to Israel and Zionism, and the antagonistic Western Christians. Thus, I understood why there was a refusal as well as the prejudice present in the Muslim community towards the Christian . . .

The conversations in the IEIC seminar gave the context that allowed me to be conscious of all the questions stirred within me. This, in spite of the fact that we sometimes quarreled with each other, raising our voices . . . IEIC is a space that allows people to meet, get to know each other and express themselves freely, without prejudice or legal persecution. This helps to elevate the masks, so we can see each other for who we really are.”

Miss Haddad describes the experience of one-day encounters, outside the IEIC in Sidon and Bekfaya. These encounters included young adults from within and outside the institute. This addition of “guests,” helped the dialogue to move forward. “In the Sidon encounter we invited young Christians and Muslims. They were from different areas, and they did not know each other before the encounter. Three young men were studying Islamic theology. They came with the desire
to attack. What I have witnessed by the evening was hard to believe. Each of them came stiff and afraid, but by the end of the day, they were relaxed and having fun. In fact, illusions are dangerous. In the minds of these youths, there were preconceived notions and illusions about the other. They had never encountered this other before them in flesh and blood. Rancorous disputations and verbal attacks were prohibited in the context of our seminar encounters. There was an atmosphere of respect and desire to know one another. Twice, I noticed this change by the end of the day. There were no estrangements or animosities among the group. They recognized they were different, but close. Each one said, ‘strange that I thought the way I did.’ This pains my heart. The majority of participants, when you invite them to the encounter, are afraid. You have to spend a great effort to drag them into participating openly, but as soon as they experience the encounter, the monster disappears. You have a person before you, and you are there. I witnessed this every time.”

These “healthy” quarrels and clashes were not without formal study and group research as recounted by Miss Marie Raghib through her experience of the process during a seminar of research in 1998-2001, “I became familiar with the Muslim young man and how he thinks. I found two sorts. One type is the fundamentalist, and it is difficult to reach an understanding with him . . . I think they belong to fundamentalists groups. There also exists another type who holds fast to his faith, but at the same time fixable, able to dialogue with the other . . . not that we did no fight over ideas, but with some there was an encounter, and with some not all.”

One of the interesting things that took place during these encounters was a kind of self-assertion that aroused sensitivities e.g. a Christian young lady who insisted on wearing a short skirt to the meetings, especially in the presence of religious Muslim young men or in a trip to the Muslim areas in the southern part of Beirut. Here, we pose the issue of personal freedom and respect for the sensitivity of the other. Miss Samia Tabet comments, “To go, for example, to Southern Beirut to a conservative Shi’a area, wearing a short or a body (décolleté); this is provocation to the other . . . Some young ladies said, ‘I am free; I wish to behave freely.’ I say to them, ‘You provoke the other. Your faith demands that you do not provoke the other. It is not acceptable!”

The Center for Christian-Muslim Studies (CCMS) is part of the Balamand University. Through an experience of a summer program, similar results were achieved. Fr. Georges Massouh describes the atmosphere of the program encounters between Christians and Muslims. “We gathered students and professors together . . . taking one subject to be discussed, by both Christians and Muslims, in the course of ten days. They all lived together; they ate together, and they slept in the same dorm. Hence, their activities were not limited to the lectures. This way personal experience of the other accompanied the formal scientific study. This is what we wished
to accomplish from these sessions, namely that the individual would not hear only the theory but also learn by their personal experience of the other. This had many positive results. Some have discovered in the other a real brother, a kindred spirit and a friend. All the psychological barriers and preconceived notions, complex and ready images vanished.

Most of the participants were less than 18 when the war ended. They became adults and entered the university soon after the war. Hence, there existed the memories of their childhood; their families handed on a ready-made set of memories to them. One of the participants said to me, ‘I discovered that a Muslim is not like I was told—not like what my father and mother said to me. He jokes, tells stories, laughs, eats and drinks just like I do.’ The picture changed completely. This young man did not live the war; he was a child... none of them had carried firearms. In this sense, their experience was different...

In reality, we work to facilitate a suitable atmosphere for an encounter, without a psychologist among us, or even a trained spiritual director. We noticed that as soon as you place people together in an atmosphere of common living, e.g. in the evening social gatherings that they themselves enliven, the barriers fall. We did not prepare something in advance... outside the formal program of study, the Christian and Muslim participants go on outings together to a restaurant, a café or any respectable club that respects their religious sensitivities. This mere experience of entertainment together breaks barriers and allows them to look at one another as normal people. This breaking of barriers is not a medical action; it is rather a natural and ordinary event, no more and no less, even without spiritual lectures on loving and accepting the other. Even if we did not do all this, their mere presence as one with the other in telling stories and jokes and smoking a Middle Eastern pipe, is a natural way as if one were at home with a guest.”

These encounters did not lack provocation, especially in the beginning, as told by Miss Catherine Srour:

“From a psychological point, I believe the atmosphere was charged and intense sometimes, but after some sharp conflicts, it began to clear up, and the conflicting parties began to come closer”

Dr. Georges Nahas says:

“Naturally, there were attempts to sabotage the activities of the center from some fundamentalists who wished to cut off all efforts at dialogue. We hope to be able to overcome such attempts. Sometimes among the participants, there were fundamentalist Muslims. The study sessions were almost turned into advertisements of ideologies, and this affected the atmosphere of some meetings.

In such ambiance—and it is natural in its context—the responsible leader works on postponing the more important issues of the discussion to the end of the session; at which time the feelings would have been calmed after the
participants get a chance to know each other and their hearts come closer.”

These examples are important, but the number of seminar group meetings are still very limited and need to be emulated and held more often, for the issue of religious group reconciliation in Lebanon is still in need of a much greater effort. Obviously, the issue is far more complex than meets the eye, with many different political and economic components that also need attention. “Is it not true that in a very short time Lebanon will become productive ground, so productive you might take it for a forest?” (Isaiah, 29:17).

Notes


2 Dr. Tariq Mitri, a Lebanese Greek Orthodox born in Tripoli, in 1950, is the responsible of relations with Muslims in “the World Council of Churches” (WCC), Geneva, and a Professor in Balamand University, Lebanon. He is as well the co-founder of the Center of Christian-Muslim Studies, active member in several groups and organizations concerning Muslim-Christian
dialogue in Middle East and over the world.

3 Auxiliary Bishop Salim Ghazal B.S., Greek-catholic monk, was born in Western Bekaa Valley in 1931. The founder of “Dialogue and Development Circle” (Cercle de Dialogue et de développement CDD) in Sidon in 1990 and several other social and humanitarian associations in South Lebanon.

4 Dr. Juliette Nasri Haddad, a consecrated maronite, was born in Beirut in 1931. She is a Professor and Research Fellow at the Institute of Muslim-Christian Studies, Saint-Joseph University in Beirut.

5 Founded in 1977, the Institute of Muslim-Christian Studies at the Saint-Joseph University of Beirut was the first institute of its kind in the Middle East and has a strong reputation for its teaching method, which is the presence of a Muslim and Christian professor at the same course. The founders are Fr. Augustin Dupré La Tour SJ; Fr. André Scrima, a Romanian Greek-orthodox monk; Pr. Hisham Nashabeh and Pr. Yussuf Ibish, both Sunni Muslims.

6 Rita Ayoub was born in Mont-Lebanon in 1963, Maronite, a social activist in several organizations, Professor in the Institute of Muslim-Christian Studies, Saint-Joseph University, her alma mater, in Beirut.

7 Marie Raghib, a maronite, was born in Mont-Lebanon in 1969. She is a teacher in a Catholic high-school, former student of the Institute of Muslim-Christian Studies, Saint-Joseph University, Beirut.

8 Samia Tabet was born in 1959 in Bhamdoun, a consecrated maronite, the Director of a female dormitory “Foyer de la Jeune Fille Libanaise”, former student of the IEIC.

9 A Muslim-Christian committee founded the Center of Christian-Muslim Studies in Balamand University in 1995. Balamand University occurs to be the first Greek-orthodox University in Lebanon, created in 1988. It was the first initiative ever taken by Greek-orthodox for the creation of a such Institute.

10 Father Dr Georges Massouh was born in 1962; he is a Greek orthodox priest and a university Professor in Balamand University. He is the executive secretary of the CCMS at the same university.

11 Catherine Srour, a Lebanese Greek orthodox, was born in Tripoli in 1972. She has been interviewed while she was the secretary of the Center of Christian-Muslim Studies, in Balamand University.

12 Dr Georges Nahas, a Lebanese Greek-orthodox, was born in Tripoli. He is the Vice-Dean of Balamand University and co-founder of the Center of Christian-Muslim Studies.

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