

Non Muslims in Algeria

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By Jacob Thomas

I have often remarked that the Internet is drastically changing the culture of the Arab world. This fact was strongly impressed upon me in mid-July, 2009, when I watched a video clip posted on the Arabic language online *Elaph*. It was produced by the German Broadcasting System, [DW-TV | Deutsche Welle](#), and aired a lively discussion of the topic, “*Are the Arab bloggers offering an alternative over against the official Arab Information media?*”

المدونون العرب هل يقدمون صورة بديلة للاعلام العربي الرسمى؟

The moderator, an Arab lady, led the discussion with three Internet experts, two of them Arabs, and one German whose Arabic was perfect!

As I listened to their informative talk, I learned that around 50% to 60% of the population in the Arab world is made up of young people; and the number of Arabs with access to the Internet is around 30 million! There was a general consensus that many of these young Arabs are “blogging.” The internet has enabled these young people to partake in something they could never have dreamed of just short years ago – stating their ideas and opinions in a free marketplace of ideas. Internet readers can by-pass the print media, which in most Muslim countries is strictly controlled and express their views with considerable less fear and trembling or interference from the authorities.

And so it is becoming more and more apparent that subjects seldom treated in the print media, cannot be hushed up now that the Internet’s ubiquitous presence has been manifested. This is an entirely new phenomenon. One such “sensitive” subject is the plight of ethnic and religious minorities living between Morocco in the West, and the Gulf States in the East. The online daily, *Al-Awan*, recently began publishing a series of articles under the general title of, “*Minorities & Citizenship in the Arab World.*” As of 22 July, 2009, 31 articles have appeared in this series. Number 28, was posted on 16 July, and bore this provocative title: “*For Non-Muslims in Algeria: Either the Mosque, or the Prison!*”

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Here are excerpts from this article, followed by my analysis and comments.

“In late 2006, the Algerian Government promulgated a law regulating the religious practices of its non-Muslim citizens, which threatened with imprisonment any person who propagated non-Islamic beliefs. It also stipulated that non-Muslims would be required to obtain permission to hold meetings in government-designated places. In this

way, the authorities attempted to single out the followers of Jesus and treat them as if their very existence was a threat to the country. Their presence tended to pollute the Islamic environment of the land!

“Really now, have Christians been involved in the destruction of Algeria since 1991? Are they the ones to be held responsible for the murder of more than 200,000 Algerian Muslims? Not satisfied with issuing those stringent laws, the Algerian authorities “imported” Arab “experts” in Islam to teach its citizenry the principles of their faith. They tell them: ‘It is the duty of every Algerian who learns about someone who had embraced the Christian faith, immediately to inform the authorities about the matter.’ An Egyptian Muslim propagandist claimed, during his recent visit to Algeria, that there were around 580 websites operated by Christian converts that issued spurious *fatwas* in order to mislead Muslims!

“Even Arabic-language newspapers that claim independence and objectivity in their reporting claim that there exists ‘a missionary plot’ directed against the country. They publish rumors linking Christians to the troubles in the Kabyle part of Algeria. They keep repeating that those who converted to Christianity did so because they had received dollars or euros! According to them, every Algerian who is born a Muslim must die as a Muslim. They attributed the violent events that took place between the *Malikis** and the *Ibadis** to Jewish influence. Actually, the conflict between these two Islamic groups has deep roots in the history of Islam going back all the way to the 7th century A.D.

“On 9 July, 2008, an Algerian wrote to the newspaper *al-Akhbar*, wondering whether Christianity and Islam could both be considered right, since they proclaim the unity of Allah. The response came from *Mufti Abu Abdel-Salam* who simply quoted from the Qur’an, *Surat 3*, and *Ayats* 19 and 85, which proclaim the exclusive nature of Islam.

Inna’l Deena ‘Inda’l Allahi, al-Islam.

Surely the (true) religion with Allah is Islam. 19

Waman Yabtaghi ghair’l Islami Deenan, falan Yuqbala minhu, wahua fi’l-Akhirati mina’l Khasireen.

And whoever desires a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him, and in the hereafter he shall be one of the losers. 85

“What could be the motives for this sudden disapproval of the so-called illegal activities in Algeria? Twelve Protestant churches have abruptly been closed down, followed by a series of arrests of those charged with activities aimed at converting Muslims to the Christian faith. What would be the Muslims’ reaction should Christians reciprocate in their lands and treat Muslims in the same fashion? Surely, it would result in a great uproar among Muslims pointing to the ‘hate-filled West’ that shows no respect for religious freedom, and manifests animosity toward Islam!

“Dr. Michnan, a member of the *Council of the Muftis*, brags about freedom of belief in Algeria; but at the same time he considers people who embrace Christianity as mentally deficient. Recently, he advocated that ‘society should deal with them as failures and misfits.’ According to him, a non-Muslim doesn’t belong to Algerian society! In fact, he considers that any person born in Algeria is *de facto* a Muslim. The Vice-President of the *Muslim ‘Ulema Society*, declared that the Qur’an has spoken clearly about Muslims who embrace other beliefs, warning them about untold sufferings that await them. He went on referring to the *Sunna* that requires the inflicting of the death penalty upon unrepentant apostates.

“There is a concerted effort being waged to cover up the statistics regarding religious and philosophical beliefs in Algeria. While several independent sources estimate the number of Christians in Algeria to be around 100,000, the Ministry of Religious Affairs claims that their number is no more than 11,000! As to the number of Jews in Algeria, no statistics are available; the topic remains the taboo of taboos! The number of the *Bahais* remains a secret since they are regarded as a sect of *Kuffar*. And should anyone inquire about the presence of atheists and agnostics in the country, he would be regarded with utmost suspicion. How can anyone imagine that an Algerian, whether an Arab or an Amazigh, can ever be an unbeliever or an agnostic?

“Every now and then, we hear and read about the terrible consequences that would ensue should the Islamists manage to take over the reins of governments in the Arab world. But if the goal is to avert such an outcome, why do the Algerian authorities seem to adopt and apply the Islamists’ programs in Algeria? Isn’t this sudden ‘concern’ for the missionary campaigns that are supposedly going on in Algeria, a veiled attempt to portray the government as a protector of Islam, and thus defuse the Islamist propaganda that charges the authorities with a lack of concern for the religion of Allah?

“In the final analysis, what’s the use of bragging about freedom, democracy, and human rights, when Article II of the Algerian Constitution reads, “*the Religion of the State is Islam?!*” It is plainly untrue to claim that there is freedom of belief in a state where its official religion is Islam, whose sacred text affirms that anyone who embraces another faith ‘*will be among the losers, both in this life, and in the hereafter,*’”

Analysis

The author of the article disputes the claim that there is religious freedom in Algeria citing the actions of the government in restricting the activities of converts to Christianity, and in prosecuting any Algerian who dares to spread any faith other than Islam.

Comments

Thanks are due to the editors of *Al-Awan* for bringing to light in 30 well-researched reports, the plight of minorities throughout the vast Arab world.

The writer of Report Number 28, boldly asserted that the situation for non-Muslims living in Algeria is intolerable, bluntly stating: ***For Non-Muslims in Algeria: Either the Mosque, or the Prison!***”

His fine report, also posed an interesting question: ***“What would be the Muslims’ reaction should Christians reciprocate in their lands and treat Muslims in the same fashion? Surely, it would result in a great uproar among Muslims pointing to the ‘hate-filled West’ that shows no respect for religious freedom, and manifests animosity toward Islam!”***

Indeed this is a very relevant question, and one which has not received the attention it deserves. Thanks to friendly immigration policies in Western countries, the Muslim presence outside ***Daru’l Islam***, both in Europe and the Americas is growing. Prior to the 1950s, relatively few Muslims lived in the West. Now the situation has changed drastically. The need for workers in Western Europe attracted great numbers of Muslims from South East Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Both in Canada and the United States, immigration laws previously favoring European migration, have been changed to now accept thousands of Muslims from the Middle East and elsewhere who are migrating and settling in urban areas of North America.

Muslim communities throughout the West have not encountered any difficulties in building mosques and institutions of education. Neither have Muslim missionary endeavors been curtailed. Just go to Hyde Park in London on Sundays, and listen to the Muslim ***da’iyas*** boldly proclaiming and defending their faith. Why is such freedom to propagate the Islamic faith not reciprocated to people of other faiths who live in the Islamic countries from which these immigrants came? So tolerant is America that even some radical Islamists, like ***Hizb’ul Tahrir***, can speak out without fear of harassment. This group met recently at the Hilton Hotel in Chicago. Speeches were given which directed broadsides against the very foundations of American society and culture. But they met with no opposition from the authorities.

Such examples of “unbridled” license indicate that even extremist Islamic groups can have their views expressed. But when someone converts to Christianity from the Islamic faith, which happens to live most anywhere in the Islamic world, the prospects for him are often dire, if he is even allowed to live. While this total imbalance in international relations between Islam and the rest of the world is often glossed over by Western governments, Christian organizations keep the issue before the world, and other pro-active groups do so as well, speaking on behalf of these afflicted converts. And happily, more and more it is not going unnoticed by some reformist Arab intellectuals. The Internet has made possible the millions of websites and blogs now found in cyberspace. Readership is growing and knowledge is expanding and authoritarian governments are being frustrated in their inability to reign in this fascinating technology. Such authoritarian governments’ refusals to offer a ***quid pro quo*** tolerance to those among them who are not Muslims indicate the fear they must daily live in. Their only recourse is to physical abuse and worse to those among them who are not like-minded

It is my fervent hope, which I am sure is shared by most of the readers of this website that in our globalized world, freedom of belief and of expression, would be universally recognized and practiced. Muslim immigrants to Western countries are welcomed with all the benefits that free societies have to offer. Let us hope the day will soon arrive when Muslim countries will offer the same benefits. And may it soon be a thing of the past that in any country, such as this writer's example of Algeria today, the choice for "***Non-Muslims remains either the Mosque or the Prison!***"

Malikis and *Ibadis.** In Sunni Islam, there are four schools for the interpretation of the ***Shari'ah Law that are considered orthodox: ***Hanbali, Hanifi, Maliki, and Shafi'i.*** However, the ***Ibadis*** are not considered as a legitimate sect in Islam. They are the remnants of the ***Khawarej***, a violent group who assassinated Ali, the Fourth Caliph, in 661 A.D. Most of the ***Ibadis*** live in Oman, while some are found in several parts of North Africa, such as in the Ghardaia oasis in Algeria.