

In the Horizons of Christian-Islamic Dialogue Manifestations in the Theology and Thought of Bishop George Khodr

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Bishop George Khodr, born in Tripoli in 1923, embarked on a journey into theology and philosophy. He devoted himself to dialogue, making it a way of life and interaction. Since 1970, he has been the Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon for the Greek Orthodox Church. His deep understanding of religion and theology brought him closer to the poet's conception of God and existence. Therefore, his writings are characterized by a pure poetic tone that blends heavenly metaphors with the modern Arabic language.

Bishop Khodr is not a historian but a reader of history and a critic. He is a preacher with a multifaceted culture. He is well-versed in the wounds of the East, a region that has witnessed many conflicts and tensions, from wars to conflicts among followers of different religions, affecting those within his church.

Bishop Khodr believes in the necessity of interfaith dialogue and dialogue among different cultures. He sees it as inevitable and uses history to encourage Christians to understand that they are «not against Muslims but with Muslims»[1].

Bishop Khodr has consistently advocated for open dialogue. He believes Christians should recognize prophecy outside the Church, stating

that «nothing prevents us from recognizing prophecy outside the ecclesial institution [...] Nothing in the New Testament suggests that Christ closed the door to prophecy in the world»[2]. Bishop Khodr consistently reiterated that «Christianity is the religion of the Logos - the Word - who became human, and any rejection of dialogue is a rejection of the Word».

The Christian-Muslim dialogue is often associated with the figure of bishop George Khodr. This axis of encounter between Christians and Muslims revolves around mutual affection and coexistence within a shared social and political framework and a joint determination to shape a unified human destiny.

Who is bishop George Khodr, the theologian, priest, and Islamic dialogue figure? What is his perspective on Christian-Islamic dialogue in the Middle East today? And what role did he play as an advocate for reform in the Arab world?

This article will explore the manifestations of bishop George Khodr's thoughts and experiences in the Christian witness among Arabic-speaking Christians and Muslims. Bishop Khodr emphasized the spiritual values within Islam and their intersection with Christian values in his statements. It's important to note that

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Khodr delved into Islamic civilization, taught it, and addressed Muslims using the language of the Quran, frequently citing Quranic verses in his writings related to Islamic-Christian dialogues and topics.

The Gospel of Christians and their Witness in the Middle East

The central theme of bishop George Khodr's reflections during the Lebanese Civil War was the testimony of Christians. From the beginning of the war, bishop Khodr rejected the idea of Christians being a unified entity against Muslims, saying, «Christians are a community of love, not a sectarian bloc. Among us, the followers of Jesus, there is only a covenant of permanence that has no connection with temporal power». He believed that «the covenant of love among us is our only opportunity to pave the way for the Muslim, creating him as a beautiful creature»[3]. He also refused any political Christian bloc based on sectarianism, stating, We affirm that Christian unity is not in nomenclature or sectarian collectivity but in the crystallization of individuals and their evangelism»[4].

Bishop George Khodr firmly rejected the idea of Christianity being confined within sectarian boundaries that separate the children of the Church from others in the creation of a single entity and a common human destiny. He stated in this context, «The policy of the Gospel is washing feet, and this assumes that the issue of Eastern Christians should be the issue of the oppressed Arab human, the issue of deprived

freedom, and the misery and ignorance of both Muslims and Christians»[5].

Continuing the genuine Christian witness in the East was Khodr's sole concern. The commitment to coexistence among Christians is rooted in their life experiences in different environments and circumstances. Khodr's call for coexistence was not just a theory but a life experience he fondly remembered from his childhood spent in the old Islamic neighborhoods of Tripoli in northern Lebanon. He considered it a departure from the «Christian neighborhood» (HARAT EL NASARAH) to embrace a common life with Muslims and engage in the collective national effort. In his book «And If I Recounted the Paths of Childhood,» Khodr stated, «We left the Christian neighborhood where my grandfather lived. We believed in the Muslims and went to them. When I returned from school in the afternoon, I would see crowds of worshippers bowing and standing in the neighborhood mosque»[6].

Bishop George Khodr once said on Palm Sunday: «Today, Jesus comes to abolish the Christian neighborhood, to tear down every wall, just as He abolished the Jewish neighborhood with His death, the Jewish ghetto. Christians are not responsible for establishing their neighborhoods»[7]. In another article, Khodr criticized the existence of the «Christian neighborhood» under the discriminatory term of dhimmi» and argued that «the struggle of Christian nationalists is not to remain confined within a «Christian neighborhood» in the world

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of Islam but to become equal citizens in their countries, ensuring that no one has superiority over another in existence and freedom»[8].

Khodr refused to engage in debates about who should govern Lebanon, whether it be a Christian or a Muslim. He believed true Christian testimony exists regardless of who controls Lebanon, and no one can suppress it. In an article titled «Christian Effectiveness,» he stated, «A Christian in the Arab world does not gain a deeper knowledge of Christ or enhance his contribution to his country's politics simply because Christians or a faction of them occupy positions of power in Lebanon»[9].

In the same context, bishop George Khodr emphasized that he and the Orthodox community in Lebanon, in general, strategically adopt a secular stance while coexisting within the current sectarian system. They participate without ill will or bias because it represents the current face of the state. He further stated, «Historically and theologically, the Orthodox cannot become a political party deriving direction and worldly commitments from bishops or those delegated by them. We do not forget that we are only a religious community, and as such, we have a presence in politics. It is a presence for all and with all, driven by our faith»[10].

From this perspective, we can affirm that bishop Khodr's position regarding the state simultaneously reflects a deep sense of religious devotion and patriotism. He believed in the possibility of dialogue on both the national and

human levels, particularly concerning Christian-Muslim relations and the country's identity that embraces diversity in Lebanon and other Arab countries where Christians have a notable and longstanding presence.

The message delivered by the Antiochian Orthodox Synod to the Orthodox, headed by the late Patriarch Ignatius IV (Hazim) at the beginning of the Lebanese civil war, reflects the historical stance reminding of the role of Christians and their testimony in the Arab East. In this message, the Synod, including bishop George Khodr of Mount Lebanon, calls upon their children to struggle for the abolition of sectarianism and to assign state positions based on competence rather than sectarianism. It also emphasizes the importance of coexistence between Christians and Muslims, rejecting the principle of division and sectarian cantons and refusing «any Christian separatism and any Christian entity for Lebanon»[11].

Bishop Khodr sees himself in Lebanon as a bishop for the Greek Orthodox, Maronites, Muslims, and Druze, serving to the best of his ability and considering himself spiritually responsible for the entire population. This commitment led him to advocate for Christian-Muslim dialogue, especially since he studied Islamic religious figures as part of Arab civilization at the Lebanese University in the mid-1960s. He believes dialogue is essential for mutual understanding and coexistence, stating, «We progressed in dialogue, and it became evident that these two communities must get to know each other and converge. Dialogue

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involves intellectual discussion about the faith of the other. This dialogue continues as long as the other party is receptive». As for the solution, Khodr insists on secularism, saying, «I, as a bishop, profit from secularism,» and explaining that secularism helps eliminate narrow interests and beneficiaries from the Church. He believes that although it will take time, salvation from the current crisis and peace in the region will eventually prevail.

Real Dialogue is the Dialogue of Life

Bishop George Khodr distinguishes between the historical context of the Church, its circumstances at that time, and the Church of the Saints as it manifests itself today and in the future. He states: «Perfection is not found in the Church in its passing historical state. The fullness is in the Lord who sent it into the world through the Word, water, spirit, and blood so that it may bear witness to Him. The fullness is what the Church will become on the last day when it becomes the gathering of the saints from every nation and people»[12].

Bishop George Khodr's view of the Church is rooted in the teachings of the Fathers, including Saint Justin the Martyr, who said: «The divine Word speaks before His incarnation through sown words, meaning the truths sown here and there»[13]. This perspective extends to all religions, both before and after Christ, and revolves around perceiving the face of Jesus Christ. According to Archbishop Khodr, «Christ is not merely a name, system, or institution but rather a value, an action, and a transformation of

hearts towards tenderness, humility, simplicity, and the greatest struggle for the sake of the afflicted»[14]. He emphasizes that Christ is present in every divine revelation, and this view underscores the idea that Christ is present in every aspect of divine revelation.

In his writings, he expresses» that God can reveal Himself to the martyrs of His love from all directions or to those who establish prayer, give alms, and seek the beloved's face at the House of God»[15]. He highlights that «the difference between people is that Christians call their Savior by His name, while others may not. Nevertheless, in both cases, there is one Savior. This perspective emphasizes the universal and inclusive nature of Christ's presence and salvation».

Bishop George Khodr's perspective on Christian-Muslim dialogue centers on the concept that genuine dialogue is a dialogue of life. In his view, authentic dialogue transcends intellectual discussions and becomes a way of life. He emphasizes the idea of the «Cosmic Christ,» which entails seeking the presence of Christ in every grace poured out by the Almighty upon all believers. This means recognizing the presence of the Lord in Muslims during their prostrations, fasting, and devotion, as he puts it: «To see, O Christ, the presence of the blessed Lord in the Muslim during his bowing, fasting, and striving»[16].

Bishop Khodr reminds us that those referred to as «Nasara» (Christians) since the days of pre-Islamic Arabia were not strangers

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to the Arab people, whether they belonged to the «Ahl Taghlib» or the «Ahl Ghassan.» He also consistently pointed out that those whom the Quran referred to as «People of the Book» were bearers of a sacred Gospel, and the Quran itself describes their scripture «as containing guidance and light»[17].

Indeed, bishop George Khodr's citations from the Quran aim to promote goodwill and dialogue between Muslims and Christians. He references verses like «Argue not with the People of the Book except in the fairest manner» (Surah, Al-Ankabut, 46) and « and you will indeed find that of all people they who say: ‹We are Christians,› are closest to feeling affection for those who believe. This is because there are worshipful priests and monks among them and because they are not arrogant» (Surah, Al-Ma'idah, 82).

Bishop Khodr intended not to use the Quran and Islam to highlight points of conflict between his Christianity and Islam. Instead, he engaged in discussions and dialogues with the monotheistic faith to find common ground. He assumed mutual knowledge and respect, aiming for a better life in one homeland with his partner, who, in this context, is the Muslim community. His approach emphasizes the importance of understanding, mutual respect, and collaboration between Christians and Muslims to improve society and coexistence.

It's important to emphasize that among bishop Khodr's readers were a significant number of Muslims. Therefore, he directed his

message towards them through the Quran and its verses to remind them of the significance of Christians in the Quran and the importance of engaging in dialogue with them while ensuring freedom of belief. Two of the key verses he highlighted were from the story of Cain and Abel: «If you should raise your hand against me to kill me - I shall not raise my hand against you to kill you. Indeed, I fear Allah, Lord of the worlds» (Surah, Al-Ma'idah, 28) and the verse: «Whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or corruption [done] in the land - it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one - it is as if he had saved mankind entirely» (Surah, Al-Ma'idah, 32). These verses underscore the sanctity of human life and the imperative of peaceful coexistence.

Building upon these verses, Khodr reminds us that «every human being is the brother of every other human being, regardless of their faith. We all come from Adam.» This perspective, articulated by bishop George Khodr and rooted in Christian thought and the teachings of the Fathers, serves as a path for Lebanese brothers and sisters, both Christians and Muslims, to take to foster genuine coexistence and reap its tangible benefits in their shared life.

Conclusion

As religious fundamentalism continues to rise and occupy the minds and hearts of people, Muslims and Christians find themselves trapped by the discourse of radicalization and incitement, as well as the address of hatred that combats any enlightened thought speaking

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about religious diversity in the Middle East. This dominant discourse is binary, allowing only two colours: white or black, faith or disbelief, the righteous nation or the deviant one.

Against this emerging despair and the Christian and Islamic concerns, Arab Christians and Muslims must begin anew to forge an Arab pact founded on citizenship, freedom, equality, and democracy. The Christian is a full partner to the Muslim in building the future. This pact should be a priority within the framework of the Arab Christian-Muslim dialogue, aimed at shaping a common Christian and Islamic vision that anticipates prospects for eradicating the spirit of bigotry and sectarianism. Any action in the realm of Christian-Muslim dialogue and relations should emanate from the reality we experience in our Arab societies.

Bishop George Khodr cites the Quranic verse: «He is Allah, other than whom there is no deity, the Sovereign, the Pure, the Perfection, the Bestower of Faith, the Overseer, the Exalted in Might, the Compeller, the Superior. Exalted is Allah above whatever they associate with Him.» (Surah, Al-Hashr, 23). In a related Christian reference, he begins one of his articles by reminding us that «Christ is our peace» (Ephesians 2:14). This is an invitation to the Lebanese to work for peace. It serves as a reminder to Christians and Muslims through their respective scriptures that God does not desire war but calls for peace.

The Christian-Muslim dialogue in our East today remains a necessary obligation. Instead

of each party striving to score points against the other, collaboration and solidarity should be pursued to achieve the promised benefits for believers. Thus, competition among believers in the one God becomes praiseworthy.

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