

**STATEMENT BY MR. CHIKH BOUAMRANE,
PRESIDENT OF THE HIGH ISLAMIC COUNCIL OF ALGERIA, AT
THE OSCE CHAIRMANSHIP CONFERENCE ON INTOLERANCE
AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIMS**

Cordoba, 9 and 10 October 2007

Why it is necessary to combat Islamophobia

The Council of Europe already recognized in 1991 that “Islam has [...] suffered and is still suffering from misrepresentation, for example through hostile or oriental stereotypes, and there is very little awareness in Europe either of the importance of Islam's past contribution or of Islam's potentially positive role in European society today. Historical errors, educational eclecticism and the over-simplified approach of the media are responsible for this situation.” Since 11 September the danger of Islamophobia has intensified considerably and there has been a spread of ill-intentioned words about Islam and its culture. They are to be found in books, newspaper articles and television programmes. The aim of these statements is not to provide information about Islam on the basis of its underlying texts, symbols and the relevant studies founded on credible documents, but rather to distort facts as much as possible and make serious accusations without backing them up with objective analysis and without providing exact references. The desired objective appears to be rather to cause harm to a respectable religion professed by more than 1.2 billion believers throughout the world.

At a time when dialogue between cultures and civilizations is being encouraged, this openly prejudiced or hostile attitude is astonishing; it reveals an intellectual short-sightedness unacceptable in terms of reason and concern for the truth. We should like to briefly mention some of these words and examine them, removed from sterile polemic, so as to inform the public, which risks being misinformed by persons who have no scruples about casting doubt in people's minds.

1. Systematic disparagement

The first thing to strike the impartial observer is the systematic disparagement in a large number of articles and statements that frequently attack Islam as a religion, its sacred texts and its Prophet (blessings be upon him). Recent publications include, for example, the book by Michel Houellebecq entitled *Plateforme* (Flammarion, Paris, 2001). In this novel one of the characters viciously attacks Islam, about which he knows practically nothing. The remonstrances by numerous Muslim organizations and believers prompted the publishers to issue an apology. But the author returned to the charge in a press interview, revealing himself to be openly aggressive to Islam, with the result that a suit has now been brought against him

in France. It remains to be seen whether the suit will give satisfaction to those who have decided to take this legal action.

A second publication shows a similar tendency. It is entitled *Aphorismes subversifs* and is written by Maurice Rajsfus (Paris-Méditerranée, 1999), who repudiates Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He claims that all three should be rejected, arguing that their texts are *apocryphal*! (page 138). He attacks Islam in particular, stating that the Prophet (blessings be upon him) dictated the Koran (page 68), in other words that it was not revealed to him!

The Prophet himself is the object of serious accusations (page 70). Finally, there is a third book, which is not openly hostile, by Anne-Marie Delcambre entitled *Mahomet, la parole d'Allah* (Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1999). It has annexes with extracts from various eighteenth century writers including Bayle, Diderot and Voltaire, mentioned to illustrate the extent to which Islam was misunderstood at the time.

L'Echo d'Oran published these extracts out of context, producing animated reactions in the region and provoking discussion with another daily newspaper in the city. The department of religious affairs in Oran has taken the matter in hand. For its part, the High Islamic Council faxed a rectification to the newspaper concerned, which published it in its entirety.

2. An attempt at a lay analysis by the television channel ARTE

The television channel ARTE devoted several programmes to the Prophet of Islam (blessings be upon him) entitled *Un home nommé Mahomet* ("A man named Mohammed") in January 2002. This series was designed to strike a balance between the legend and the critical history and included several contributions by experts, which sought to avoid apology or provocation. They took account of the fact that their audience was unfamiliar with Islam, its texts and its Prophet (blessings be upon him). ARTE also had recourse to testimony of varying degrees of reliability and even to storytellers!

Essentially, this channel took an anthropological approach, without referring exactly to the text of the Koran and the history of the Prophet as reported within the Muslim tradition. As one of the experts readily admitted: "We decided early on to discard the sacred history of the Prophet by allowing people to relate it." This is absurd. To justify his position, he explained that the Koran stated that the Prophet "is only a man". Taking this verse out of context, he claims to be interested more in the man, which obscures the divinely inspired prophetic mission. This approach obviously limited the scope of this series of programmes, which was otherwise well-intentioned. To be credible in the eyes of the believer, an endeavour of this nature should refer more to the spiritual message of Islam based essentially on the Koran, the Tradition of the Prophet (blessings be upon him) and recognized studies by the great scholars of Islam like Al-Tabari, Al-Ghazâli, Ibn Khaldoun, Abdou, Ibn Bâdîs and others.

Islamology as practised in the West would be better received by the Islamic faithful if it were to rid itself completely of its scientific presuppositions and move closer to the real Islam. The High Islamic Council rightly wishes to make our religion better known in those surroundings where it is foreign by pointing out the main concepts on which it rests and correcting the frequently heard errors in its regard, and by doing away with invective and sterile polemics. The method we have chosen is one of firmness and courtesy.

Europe could take effective measures to combat Islamophobia. The reports by the United Nations have analysed the problem sufficiently and there is no need to return to this in detail. In our opinion, there are two practical sets of measures that should be employed to combat this deliberate desire to distort Islam through ignorance and bad faith and by resorting to defamation and verbal or physical violence.

3. Persuasive measures

(a) The education system

This could dispel tenacious prejudices at an early age, the priority being to make the texts available to the young and offering an accurate image of Islam by top experts, which would involve verifying the textbooks used in the countries of Europe. Some universities have Islamology departments; such departments need to become more widespread to train qualified teachers who are firmly convinced of the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

(b) The press and audiovisual media

The State should intervene in this sector and provide journalists with documents that present Islam in an objective and informative light. Films and CDs would be useful in this regard. Culture in general plays an important role in educating the public and providing works and specialist magazines on Islam available at a reasonable price in libraries and bookshops. Well-known lecturers are invited regularly to appear on television, radio and in public arenas with a view to promoting intercultural dialogue while respecting differences.

4. Dissuasive measures

(a) Restrictive legislation should be drafted by the United Nations and European States with criminal penalties in the form of fines and even imprisonment for defamation or violence directed at Islam or its followers, so as to ensure that it is respected by law. The practice of tolerance, as is recommended in some instances, is clearly insufficient, as the term is associated more with condescension and paternalism. There is a need to insist on mutual respect of convictions and beliefs. Several States permit attacks on dignity, as well as caricature, defamation and disparagement under the pretext of freedom of expression. This freedom should not be an excuse for allowing disrespect or provoking hate and racism. Strict laws must be adopted to put an end to these practices.

(b) In several countries human rights are trampled on when it comes to Islam and Muslims. They are suspected without proof, persecuted and discriminated against. In daily life and when travelling they are regarded as would-be “terrorists” and subjected to arbitrary treatment. Human rights apply to all States and all peoples without exception, otherwise they lose all credit. While they are valid for Europeans, they scarcely apply to the Muslim minorities living on the continent. It is time to take firm legal action to put an end to this difficult situation. States are called upon to take a courageous stance against all forms of discrimination if they want really to institute justice, equality and peace among all. This is the price to be paid for the renewal of confidence and the effective establishment of fruitful dialogue. The last statement by Benedict XVI calling for sincere dialogue between Islam and

Christianity is a step in this direction, rectifying a little the contentious utterances in Regensburg in September 2006.

Short bibliography

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