

EDITORIAL

ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY

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To ask today if Islam is compatible with democracy means to confront a geo-political question before the theoretical one. If we think about incompatibility, we cannot refuse the theory of a “cultural struggle”. The option for compatibility contains, however, within itself another question. Is it legitimate to use force in order to favour democratic evolution in Islamic countries? We cannot negate that in the past years this idea had found many followers; its most significant expression is in the politics of Bush junior. Now, however, this trend has been put into crisis by the recent evolution of the international situation. The opinion, put forward by the Bush administration, according to which the diffusion of peace and democracy in the world depends above all on the consolidation of an international order, based on the protection of human rights, guaranteed by the USA (and not by UN, presented, often, as a disarmed prophet) is belied by the facts. A war for “peace and rights” could be declared and won by the United States at any time, but it is far more difficult that a military victory could succeed and guarantee a peaceful solution to the problems that trouble many areas all over the world. Italy believes this, especially after the end of the right-of-centre government. Today Italy is convinced that occupying itself concretely with the Mediterranean is its primary duty. This strategy doesn't imply necessarily a conflict with the USA, but it tends to create strong and autonomous political relationships with the governments of the countries in the area. It is necessary, for a useful dialogue between Islam and the West, to pay attention to the arguments of countries of the southern side of the Mediterranean. If however, many countries

of the Mediterranean area lack confidence in USA, it is right that Europe, and, particularly, Italy, should try to restore faith on a different basis instead of that preferred in the past years by the USA. This also means direct involvement by Europe in the battle against terrorism, considering that terrorism is not only a problem in the West, but also in the Islamic countries.

One thing is certain. In the history of these countries, the radical Islamic groups have never had so much importance. But today, the moderate sectors seem to be weak in the social consideration. The humanitarian action, decided by the USA, to take arms in order to defend the rights and the security of the West, has strengthened Islamic extremists. If this is true, the opinion of people who claim a central role of Europe in the Mediterranean area seems to be more persuasive. The cultural flexibility of the Europeans could allow them to open important channels of communication; it could make the dialogue between the West and Islam easier.

The conflict between the West and Islam derives from many complex reasons. It is not useful for anybody to deal with this subject through too obvious solutions. It is not true that the whole Islamic world supports terrorists. It is not useful to reduce a "human war" to a neo-imperialistic campaign. But the instinct towards auto-conservation should suggest the United States to avoid a political and military display. The problems of underdevelopment cannot be solved through the weapons, but thanks to economic and technological aid. It is a significant fact that the hardest critics of the "promotion of democracy" through weaponry come from the ultra-conservatives like Huntington and from "realpolitikers" with a long experience like Kissinger. On the other hand, it seems to be clear that the approach of the Bush Administration to the fight against dictatorship is partisan and instrumental. It is sufficient to remember, on one hand, the old friendships of the United States with military and totalitarian regimes, and, on the other hand, the manipulation of facts and documents to produce proof against the "rogue countries" individualised one by one. The idea of realizing an institutional order based on the American superpower is yet another demonstration of the political weakness of the Bush Administration. Military success was used to hide also some failures in domestic policy. In this context, Europe could play a key role to confront the problems that emanate from the conflict between Islam and the West.

The first thing to do is to promote a universal culture of human

rights. The most difficult obstacle in this field is the conflict between two antithetical ideas of universality. The West is used to thinking about its Law as the only worthy of universality: the universality of rights coincides with the universality of reason. The West considers itself to be the only true exponent of the universality of reason, as its scientific and technological progress demonstrates. To this, Islam opposes its universality of "Sharia", the Law of direct divine derivation. In this prospect, the "Koran" is used as an instrument for civilisation, as the realisation of the presence of God in history. The Jihad becomes almost a service to mankind, and not only to God. If that is indeed the case, the relationship between the West and the East can not be resolved in terms of pure multi-culturalism and tolerance. In other words, multi-culturalism and tolerance are the necessary conditions, but they are also not sufficient for the realization of a universal culture of rights.

The second thing to discuss is regarding the means to use in order to protect rights and democracy. If the Western idea about universality of rights is regarded as the only legitimate one, because it is founded on reason and progress, therefore we should agree to the idea of an imposition by military force of the liberal democracy and Human Rights. But this claim of the West is intolerable. In fact, it is within our own culture that there are not only doubts and aversion to Western cultural patterns, but also an opening towards "others", above all towards Islam. Dialogue and confrontation with others are essential parts of European culture. It therefore needs to take into account that in today's society it is not possible to establish an equivalence between "natural" rights of the West and universal rights. The imposition of one's own universality with force deprives our own claim of universality of its legal basis. We must not forget that, as Giuliano Amato observes, we are "the others for the others" or rather that it is our own culture of tolerance that forces us to confront others' claims of universality. We should not close our eyes to the profound differences between the West and the Islam; they are differences that derive from history. The Christian God became man with all the weaknesses that are peculiar to men, to become part of History; the Islamic God is pure will and absolute power. In Islam the relationship between man and his God is not thinkable in dialectic terms; that is to say, that God's word can not evolve or change, and, therefore, human nature is not crossed and guided by the processes of history. In Christianity, however, God's word becomes "flesh". It is,

therefore, history, evolution and progress. This means that man is substantially the protagonist of history: from this comes the building of concepts of laicism and democracy in a modern sense.

However, the recognition of such a difference does not legitimise the imposition of democracy nor the attempt to unify the world ideologically by the power of military arms. First of all, there is a significant convergence of the two religions concerning the central position of man, considered the masterpiece of creation. Secondly, as we have already said, in the West, democracy is a patient construction that moves above all by the achievement of an autonomous sphere of "politics" compared to the "religion", and of civil laws compared to religious law.

It is a question of understanding what should be the Islamic way for this process of secularization. The past demonstrates that in the Islamic context it is difficult to build a political structure in "lay" terms. Islamic regimes tend to give a literal interpretation (that is to say, not constitutional) of democracy, considered as the government of the majority. From here the paradoxical position expressed by Khatami - Iranian ex-president - and largely shared in the Islamic world, according to which in a country where the majority of people is Muslim, the construction of a religious State is legitimate. A position on which it is too easy to use irony, seeing that, according to principles already declared by the moderate Khatami, today a convinced fundamentalist such as Ahmadinejad is able to challenge the West as the legitimate representative of the Iranian people. The religious law (not the international law) guides Ahmadinejad. On the other hand, we should remember the experience of democracy-building in Afghanistan and Iraq, where constitutional strategies, that appear in some way connected to the European continental project - and particularly German - of the 1900s of the State as the protagonist of social integration processes, seem to be successful.

The interpretation of the State as an instrument for the realisation of extra political goals is incompatible with the supremacy of law and, in general, with constitutional culture. In this sense, the supremacy of Sharia is unacceptable. But the "active" State, or rather "protagonist" in social life based on a few essential values, if also open to criticism, is not extraneous to the constitutional tradition of the West. We could consider, however, as Bernard Lewis said in an interview (*Corriere della Sera*, 18 Sept, 2006), "the Islamic world has a traditional calling for a collegial decision together with

strong hostilities toward political centralism". With reference to this feature of the Islamic culture we should believe that it is possible to build an Islamic pattern for constitutionalism. If, in the West, one started by protesting at religious authoritarianism in order to arrive at political pluralism, why should not a contrary way verify itself in Islam? From this point of view, the constitutional experiment in Iraq seems to be interesting; there is a clear federalist option, and also the Islamic tradition is "one" of the sources of the law, and not the base of it. Meanwhile, there is also an important role of the State as factor of integration. If this line should have success, we could start to speak about an Islamic way toward constitutionalism. At this point, it is necessary to consider another problem. We cannot negate the existing link between Islam and underdevelopment. But the delay in the economic and technological development in Islamic countries is not only due to a religious question. Naturally the conflict of Islam with modernity has had a negative effect on development process. However, this conflict is in part understandable also as a reaction to the undisputed hegemony of a developmental model based on the centrality of the middle class. The Middle class turned out to be an important element for the capitalist transformation. In this way, we can understand why Islam, at this time, could become the point of reference for those who, with the end of communism, are against the undisputed dominion of the Liberal-capitalistic model, that, having produced enormous transformations especially in the last few years, with the globalisation processes, maintains intact its own hinges of ethics: individualism, profit as a value and the clear separation between the public and private sectors. It is also important not give Islam too static a representation. Islam, to use a geological metaphor, is an active volcano. It is a universe in continuous evolution. This dynamism can interconnect with the growing dynamism of Western culture, where today a few traditional values of modernity, such as laicism and secularization, tend to be criticized because of dogmatic connotations that have been assumed during the course of the 1900s.

Islam has already demonstrated its internal "realistic tendency" and ability to limit the weight of the written rule, in order to give more space to a law open to growing social innovations. As some scholars have observed, on the Islamic side there has been a subversive re-elaboration of various modern juridical western concepts. Experts in Islamic law have demonstrated an ability to question the bond of loyalty with Islamic tradition when it comes to submitting

the world to the will of the divine law, accepting behaviours condemned by the Koran (that does not permit the massacre of women and children by means of attempts on the civilian population) or to allow the Islamic people to live in the West and to proletariate by accepting the laws of their host countries.

We should try to see if today this ideological flexibility can be seen positively or if realism in the interpretation of the "Book" can be used to build an Islamic way for constitutionalism and democracy.

Besides, the unity of the Umma appears anachronistic in front of the exodus of millions of Muslims to live in the West, accepting its rules and life styles, and freeing themselves from the constraints set by the mythical people of the mosques. The crisis of the Umma, caused by the Muslims in the West, may bring about a change of mind regarding the same concept of an Islamic nation, traditionally founded on a religious element that prevails over the political one. It is through the breach of a monolithic system of the Umma that a true civil Islamic society can arise, as Turkish experience demonstrates.

Those Muslims who come to the West are not only searching for material well-being, but also for freedom and emancipation. If there is an integration in the circuits of our democracy, Islam of the West may have a certain influence on the evolution of Islam of the south of the Mediterranean. To build democracy means to engage the Western State to promote a democratic culture between Islamic people that live in our countries, trying to make them understand that "western" and "Christian" are two very different concepts. But, that at the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that Christian values permeate. We stern society and institutions. In other words, we should try to profit by past European experience, particularly in France and United Kingdom. Both "republican" and "communitarian" patterns have demonstrated their own limits. We could think, for example, about the revolt in the "Banlieue", the phenomenon of "Londonistan" and the attacks of the 7th of July. Also in this case, Italy is engaged in the search of innovative solutions, able to favour integration and the meeting between cultures, offering to the "other", at the same time, the best of the heritage of European civil and legal culture (important initiatives have been taken in order to guarantee social rights of immigrants).

Finally, the issue of the compatibility between Islam and democracy should be interpreted in a dynamic manner. We are not in front of

two unalterable entities on an historical and semantic level. The construction of an Islamic way for a constitutional democracy demands an effort not only to the Islamic world, that should rethink its own relationship with modernity, but also to the western culture, that should recover some elements of substantial democracy (based also on the solidarity) typical of the European tradition. In this context we should avoid the domination of the "Single point of view" on the neo-liberalist globalization following the end of the Cold War.