

Islam, the West and Modernity

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In the context of the dialogue between cultures, the relation between Islam and the West is fundamental. Islam is the common denominator through which the Muslim world is represented despite its diversity. This is a generic concept in which western historic imaginary makes a convergence of several unconscious allusions. This term indicates 'a society in which the State is the ruling authority and civil life is ruled by religious norms dictated by the Quran'.

Modernity is also a common denominator, pointing towards 'a society based on positive law and not just divine law, as well as on legal equality and equality of access to positions of political representation'. Much as Islam is a static representation of a wider differentiated and dynamic reality, modernity is the static abstraction of diversified changing realities. That is why modernity does not identify with the West and Europe of today. This is a project of societies developed in Europe during the Age of Enlightenment and that further developed during the period of Positivism. Its basic principles are crucial for the complexity of modern life, effecting changes in all structures that were seen as appropriate to ways of living in the past.

If on one hand the Islamic world is facing problems related to the absence of Modernity, in terms of individual rights and democracy, on the other hand the West is suffering from an excess of modernity. Rapidity, rationality, decentralisation of production, absence of solidarity, anomie of collective contexts, lack of a 'sense of life' in young people: these are the new problems of a society which defines itself as post-modern.

The problem of 'Islam and Modernity' does not lie in the opposition of two antagonists but encompasses three terms: 'Islam, the West and Modernity'. Two historical realities and a common critical area; a problematic situation where everyone sees the reflection of his own defects in the other's eye; a divided universe where the logic of the world capital makes the European West and the Mediterranean peripheral to the hubs of the government. When the issue is placed between two terms, it brings about a political opposition. When the same issue is placed between three terms, it calls for a policy of solidarity to advance together in a parallel evolution and in shared agreement towards a shared objective, even if the starting points and distances to the objective are different.

Countries of the Mediterranean, Europe and of Arab-Muslim culture have a vital interest of following a path, different from the one undertaken until now. One must not forget that the European civilization is greatly indebted to Islam. Western Europe owes much of its renaissance to Islamic civilization and time has come to pay back this debt. However, Modernity is not often offered to Islam in ways to promote its equality but rather through structures that aim at expressing its submission.

The challenge that awaits us is to build a 'coalition of shared values and interests', avoiding that modernity homologates and cancels different cultural identities: A big resource for Islam and the West alike.