

## DIALOGUE

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### **Muslims of Europe: An Italian Perspective (1)**

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The presence of Muslims in Western societies represents a big challenge to those liberal and democratic values that today are considered synonymous with the West: pluralism, tolerance, acceptance of difference. The "today" is important, and it deserves a brief comment: indeed, one should never forget that the above description of what constitutes "the West" is the product of a long, difficult, contrasted and often bloody process, one that is still far from being unchallenged by different *Western* trends and ideologies and far from being irreversible. This should give us pause and make us more modest when extolling the virtues of our own culture as well as more patient when judging other cultures and traditions.

There are perhaps two different ways of defining the subject matter: "Muslims in Europe" and "Muslims of Europe". When we say "Muslims in the West" we refer to a Muslim presence in Europe which can be defined in terms of immigrant communities, or in any case implies that Muslims are "guests" of Europe. If this is true in most cases (and it is especially so in the case of Italy, where most Muslims are rather recent immigrants), we should aim at moving beyond this description since reality (and here I refer to the situation in the UK) is also moving toward a situation in which it will be more correct to speak of "European Muslims" just as we speak of "American Catholics", also a "different" community, if compared to the dominant Protestant culture of the US, and also one that took shape relatively recently through immigration. In comparison to the US, Europe is a relatively recent newcomer to the test of diversity – and Italy, given to a long history of cultural and religious homogeneity, is the most recent of all. And yet Europe is well equipped to cope with that challenge.

In the first place, the European liberal tradition is one which, with reference to the well-known definitions by Isaiah Berlin (incidentally, also a British citizen "from somewhere else", culturally and geographically) has never been satisfied with mere "negative liberty" (freedom from), but has always sought the rules, the institution and the social ethic which could allow for "positive liberty" (freedom to). By this is meant that only participation, ie. positive liberty, can help one solve the dilemma on how to preserve difference while insuring common citizenship. The limits of the apparently humanistic goal of assimilation have been thoroughly exposed. In short, assimilation is only a theoretical recognition of common humanity of every individual, but it conceals a devastating premise: the fact that the definition of what that common humanity is remains firmly in the hands of the dominant, "host" community. In assimilationist ideology, the abstract citizen bears the clear marks of a specific culture setting the standards and the conditions for assimilation. Besides - and this is especially true for individuals identifying themselves with Islam - the fact is that some people just do not want to be assimilated, if that means adopting the culture, religion, spiritual orientation, lifestyles, family patterns of the dominant group. Today, however, criticizing assimilationism is too easy a task. It is more difficult, but just as necessary, to expose the underside of another, equally humanistic (in theory) ideology: that of differentialism, or, to use another, better known term, multiculturalism. The recognition of different communities, each self-regulated, socially and in part politically autarkic seems the most respectful, non-hegemonic way of addressing diversity. And yet, there are at least three powerful objections to this approach: the first is that the slogan of "separate but equal" hides an illusion, if not worse: separation tends to determine hierarchy, autonomy often conceals marginalization and exclusion. The ghetto or the Indian reservation are always looming behind the best intentions of multiculturalists.

The second objections refers to the constant danger that difference becomes conflict. Whenever one single identity - of the many that make up the reality of each individual - is idolatrically raised to an all-encompassing paradigm, then the Other is often turned into the Enemy, all the more so if the vertical dimension of difference (in social and economic terms) is described in terms of discrimination, exploitation, and our own groups' reality is described in terms of victimization. When disadvantage, that is, is presented in the light of unjust denial of rights and benefits perpetrated by some other group. In the third place, multiculturalism is centred on the recognition of rights to groups as such, thereby raising the danger (unacceptable for those who adhere to a liberal tradition) that nonconforming individuals might be repressed within their own communities.

The European answer to this dilemma is neither assimilationist nor differentialist, especially since both individual European countries and EU institutions have developed a system of differentiated, multi-level participation escaping both extremes. Europe can only be defined pluralistically: a plurality of identities of each citizen (from family to religion to local community to nation state to the Union) Europe, in other words, means rejecting both a monolithic and a scattered view of politics and human society. Europe, as an Italian philosopher as written, is neither a bloc-like landmass nor an island: it is, culturally and politically, an archipelago combining individuality and commonality. Muslims, with their culture and their religion, can be a legitimate part - and in many ways already are - a legitimate part of that archipelago.

Yet, in spite of these favourable premises, problems abound, so that in the minds of too many people Europe and Islam are seen as irreconcilable poles of an insoluble contrast, if not outright clash. Too many people, when addressing the question, seem to go back, fatalistically, to Kipling's famous "For East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" - forgetting that Christianity, if we consider its origins, is definitely not Western, and especially that, because of globalization, we are beyond the mere meeting of cultures and religions, and we are irreversibly intertwined and coexisting on the same territories.

The problem underlying the difficulty of accepting a reality in which we are already living is one: fear. What is significant, is that there is fear on both sides of the relationship: non-Muslim and Muslim Europeans. The former fear that diversity will entail (is already entailing) a loss of identity, and are haunted by reactionary nostalgias of a golden homogenous past. Muslims, on the other hand (many of them recent immigrants from less developed areas of the world and from societies strongly defined in terms of traditional norms) have difficulties coping with modernity, when not post-modernity, and also fear a loss of identity.

Resistance to the very reality in which both groups, Muslims and non-Muslims, are already living is grounded in the non-realistic hope that it is possible to "opt out" of history, of freezing one's way of living and also of interpreting respective religious messages. Both groups forget that change is not an option, that it can be steered, management; that it must not be accepted passively - and that our identities must be preserved through change, not against change. That, to quote a distinction that the Romans had very clear, we can - on an individual or collective basis - remain *ipse*, meaning an entity with the same identity, but not *idem*, meaning unchanged through time and history.

Moving beyond fear is therefore a task which must be performed by all actors, all individuals concerned, all groups. It will not be carried out by denying or minimizing problems, but definitely some preliminary work to get some facts straight, before confronting the political, ethical and spiritual issues, would be in order. The most urgent of all is overcoming the simplifications and distortions that characterize the image of Islam and Islamic culture that is unfortunately predominant in the West: Islam as a monolithic bloc, forgetting the wide range of religious orientations within Islam: not only the better known distinction between Sunni and Shi'a, but also the tradition of Sufism, the peculiarities of Alawite or Isma'ili, the profile of African Islam; Islam as a religion of extremists, taking at face value the preposterous claim of the most violent (inevitably the most visible) to represent the whole of the Muslim world; Islam as responsible for a range of evidently unacceptable phenomena such as genital mutilation (a regional, pre-Islamic custom) to terrorism (definitely not unknown in Christian areas), especially its suicidal brand (as if the Tamil Tigers were Muslim). Islam as a religion preaching holy war, forgetting both the holy wars of Christianity and the fact that *jihad* is not only, and not mainly, a bellicose precept, but one of self-improvement and spiritual struggle. Islam as the main ideology of hostility toward the West, forgetting the distinction between a religion and its ideological uses.

But Muslims will have to do a conceptually symmetrical, though different, work of clarification and deconstruction of myths and distortions. If it is true, indeed, that the West, especially after September 11, has been indulging in what could be called "sinister Orientalism" (Islam as only terrorism, intolerance, backwardness, oppression), Muslims have a lot of work to do in dismantling the pernicious distortions of their "Occidentalism", a negative mirror image of an imagined West made exclusively of imperialists, racists, materialists, soul-less hedonists. As is always the case, disarmament, in order to be effective, will have to be bilateral, and it will entail avoiding to address complex phenomena like those of cultural traditions and religious heritage in a simplified manner. And especially, it will entail stopping the vulgar practice of comparing the theoretical best of our own culture with the practical worst of the culture we are entering into contact.

There is a lot of intellectual and moral symmetry and reciprocity entailed here. Yet, we would be unfair if we were to turn that into overall symmetry. This cannot be the case, since the main burden for this necessary dialogue lies on those who have more power, those (certainly not Muslim) who are installed in the dominating heights of European society and culture. They will have to carry the main burden: increasing their present pitiful knowledge of Islam; avoiding to be or sound patronizing and attempting to impose

“Western values”. The only non-negotiable value is that of democracy and pluralism. The only thing we should not tolerate is intolerance, be it politically or religiously motivated.

What should be done is not to create self-contained, autonomous Muslim communities, but rather supply space, democratic and pluralistic space where not only Muslims will be able to live their own spiritual traditions, but where Islam - freed for the first time in history from the constraints of non-democratic political systems - will be able to grow, debate, develop its full spiritual and intellectual range, interact with other traditions, define itself vis-à-vis the challenges of the contemporary world. If we are able to carry out this process, then we may be justified in thinking that Europe and Islam, far from being antithetical, will turn out to be more compatible than commonly thought of. What is even more significant, both would benefit from this encounter.