



Rachid Benzine, Luca Sebastiani

The new paths of modern Islam

The type of violence seen after the publication of the Mohammed cartoons is a result of a literal, essentialist reading of the Koran, says Rachid Benzine. But rather than a "modern" reading of the Koran, he advocates a new reading using the instruments of the social sciences.

Beginning quietly, the crisis of the Mohammed caricatures suddenly exploded. Scandinavian and European diplomatic delegations were attacked and burned in some Arab–Muslim countries, and in Western countries we have seen radical declarations on the part of some politicians and intellectuals. In short, if we listen to the media that have represented it, the cartoon controversy is none other than the latest chapter in the story of the "clash of civilizations".

But are we really destined to this "clash"? Are we really so unyielding? Many would think and hope the contrary, would believe that what is going on is more a conflict of disrespect and mutual ignorance.

On this topic, we spoke with Rachid Benzine. Considered one of the new generation of Muslim intellectuals, he teaches hermeneutics of the Koran in the Political Science Department in Aix en Provence; his most recent publication is *The new thinkers of Islam*.

Luca Sebastiani: The Mohammed caricatures triggered anger among Muslims in some countries. Could such a violent reaction have been predicted?

Rachid Benzine: I don't think that one can understand the anger of certain Muslims — an anger that was expressed at times with violence, for example, with the European and Danish ambassadors and diplomatic delegations — without introducing a reflection on the role of the image in Muslim tradition.

In effect, all representations of a living being are considered to be an attempt to mimic the act of God the Creator. Contrary to Catholicism, which sees in an image a means of reaching the divine, Islam, like Protestantism or Judaism, is silent about representation, never having thought of refusing it. This continues to be so even in an era in which societies are more and more modified by the influence of images. The absence of representation is meant to signify the limits of man, whose task is neither to contain, nor to explain, nor to completely understand the divine. In this sense, any representation is a sort of false idol. It is therefore very likely that viewing images of the Prophet — for the most part satirical — is seen by Muslims as a sort of violence that dispossesses them.

The crisis that we are seeing today could, however, reveal itself as productive. It could lead to the unforeseen possibility for these religious traditions to launch an ethical and theological overhaul of the question of representation.

LS: Doesn't a reaction this violent risk legitimizing the distorted version that the caricaturists have of Islam?

RB: It would appear so if one sticks to a very simplified vision of the events, a vision that sets the rigid defenders of freedom of expression in opposition to the "intolerant devotees" and reactionaries. But the situation is much more complex, and in order to understand it, one must call as much on geopolitical and religious factors as on philosophical and epistemological ones.

LS: What is the relationship between the sacred and violence in contemporary Islam?

RB: To respond to that, I would refer to the anthropological triangle defined by Mohamed Arkoun, founded on the links between the sacred, truth, and violence. Arkoun reminds us that all societies, in the course of their development, undertake processes of sacralization that sanctify certain principles, values, and prohibitions, which then become closed to any further questioning. The sacralized freedom of some, which establishes their historical, moral, and ethical truth, clashes with the sacralized figure of the others. At this point, strong defence is not possible without violence.

Because in this crisis two rigid dogmatisms are opposed — freedom of expression, on one side, and respect for beliefs, on the other — no one has hesitated in using violence, whether it be symbolic or physical, to defend their sacred perimeter.

LS: In the West, freedom of expression is in place by law. What is the relationship between Islamic law and freedom of expression?

RB: To me, it seems to be an error to ask the question in this way because freedom of expression, a historically recent notion, is not a part of the Islamic agenda. You cannot apply notions acquired through recent social conflict to a religion born in the seventh century. On the contrary, if freedom of expression is still for the most part too restricted in many countries said to be Arab-Muslim, it is because it represents a point of dispute and opposition that threatens the equilibrium and the legitimacy of the forces in power. Therefore, it is not necessary to attribute the limitation and absence of freedom of expression in certain countries to religious factors.

LS: It seems that, in the cartoon controversy, we have once again witnessed a confrontation between the West and Islam, between absolute freedom of expression and implacable religious orthodoxy: are we facing the notorious "clash of civilizations"?

RB: The method in which these things are analyzed and explained tends effectively to give us the impression of an opposition between two cultural entities, two worlds that are hopelessly inflexible to one another. When one side assumes the freedom of expression as a fundamental right, the other limits it in the name of respect for beliefs. When one — non-religious or secularized — does not feel offended by anti-religious satire, the other gets fired up about it.

But thinking this way means putting two universes of comprehension in opposition, it means considering the two groups of society profoundly separated by a "non-sharing" of "fundamental values". The difference, instead, probably lies "solely" in the method of hierarchizing the values of freedom of

expression and respect of religious beliefs.

One must remember that societies of today said to be Arab–Muslim have not known the same historical paths of thought said to be Western, particularly when it comes to questions of the sacred. They cannot imagine — in any case, not for the moment — freedom of expression beyond a picture that does not protect faith. And this all the more so, now that the identifying function of faith has been fed by the geopolitical evolutions of recent years.

LS: One has the feeling that it is the dogmatists of every kind that profit from this kind of situation. How can we permit the moderate voices to make themselves heard in a way that can prevent the gap between Islam and the West from growing?

RB: In the Arab–Muslim world there exists a certain number of Muslim thinkers who incorporate themselves into the umma by rereading the classical, traditional patrimony using the methodologies of the social sciences. Their objective is not to reform Islam and even less is it to modernize it: their only ambition is to allow new readings of Islam so that an Islamic modernity for the near future can finally be realized. The problem is that the West is too eager to recognize these voices, be they religious or political, in order to give them the responsibility of emancipating their people from ideological oppression of every kind. Now, when the West is the intermediary of their work or opens the spaces of freedom of expression that they lack, it can be a healthy thing. But that the West sees them as worthy disciples of "Western values" is something else, something quite harmful, because it separates them definitively from their compatriots, who at that point consider them to be followers of a derelict West. These moderate thinkers, instead, need first to convince their own compatriots in order to avoid breaking the dialogue with them.

LS: What reading of the Koran can legitimize the kind of violence we have seen?

RB: The Koran is the source of Muslim religious identity. For its believers, it frames the "word of God", *ipsima verba*. Muslim tradition has progressively fixed, and sacralized, all the interpretations of the text that then founded Muslim jurisprudence, philosophy, mysticism, and theology. This sacralization led to an impasse and abolished all critical distance — something which is necessary when approaching such a text.

This is why today we find ourselves faced with fundamentalist approaches to the Koran, approaches that limit the capacity of interpretation to the advantage of an essentialist and literal reading, which can lead to violence in the name of a truth received as sacred. This is even truer today, when Muslims, in the current geopolitical context, feel they are at the margin of history and progress, and use Islam as a strong carrier of identity.

LS: You encourage the necessity of reading the Koran with the instruments of the social sciences, in order to "modernize" the interpretation of the sacred text. What, for you, are the conditions necessary to carry out this operation?

RB: I would like to clarify that for me it is not about a modern reading, or a reformist reading of the Koran. Saying "reform" or "modernize" means falling into a trap of language, where it seems that one wants to order Muslim tradition to conform to a certain number of characteristics of modernity. When one says "reform" or "modernize" Islam, one presupposes that there is a

positive model with which Islam should align itself. This model, in addition, is the product of an epistemological evolution and an intellectual attitude. Now, when one tells Islam to reform itself, reform is considered to be an objective, while it is nothing more than a possible consequence of the intellectual development of a society at a given time. It seems to me, therefore, simply that Muslim thinking should now open itself to new questions that permit it to rediscover itself in a different way and to find its instruments of dialogue with all of modernity.

The renewal of the hermeneutic approach to the Koran has to be based on a dialogue with the methods that critical reasoning offers and that also lead to a functional critical thinking. The historical approach and literary analysis are exegetic instruments forgotten by the Muslim tradition in favour of the transmission of simplified formulae deposited in the collective Muslim consciousness. It is necessary, at the present, to subdue these concepts in order to take a critical look that permits Muslim thinking to enrich its religious conceptions thanks to infinite and renewed interpretations. This is what I work towards.

LS: What do you think should be done?

RB: To find a positive and productive end to the crisis, it is necessary to construct a new common language that can address issues which are often neglected in contemporary discussions. Today, we have seen the limits of many concepts when it comes to effecting and theorizing changes, and also in averting the fears that these changes might inspire. Social reality finds itself entirely reconfigured by a certain type of discourse — mainly represented by the mass media — that places subjects in essentialist categories. To persist in ignoring the imaginings and systems of perceptions that condition the attitudes of individuals, of subjects, means continuing to feed into the vision that dialogue with the Muslim world is at best difficult and at worst impossible.

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