

Democracy and Social Development in the Islamic World

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Abstract

The events and upheavals in the context of the so-called *Arab Spring* have again raised the question whether Islam and (occidental) Democracy are compatible. In a review of the history the essay explores the complex and conflictual encounter between the Western and the Islamic Culture. The specifically Western concept of *utopian idea* has obviously no tradition in Islam. Cultural and political change is often interpreted and considered as dangerous secularism. A kind of model could be the secular vision of an Islamic state, such as Turkey. But this model became, however, recently disturbed by islamistic tendencies. The distorted perceptions – in both the Western and the Islamic World – are in fact responsible that it has not yet been any significant progress in this specific intercultural dialogue.

At the beginning of my reflections on the topic of *Democracy and social development in the Islamic World*, I would like to focus briefly on the enormous contribution of Nicolaus Cusanus, the patron of the Cusanus-Academy Brixen, to a new way of thinking since the late middle ages.

In 1453, the Turkish army took the city of Constantinople after a hard battle conducted with fierce cruelty by both sides. A flourishing Christian culture is being subjugated to the Islamic realm, churches are turned into mosques and many inhabitants are forced into exile or to conversion. Under the impression of the breakdown of a possible peaceful coexistence, the philosopher and theologian Nicolaus Cusanus writes the essay *De pace Fidei – On the Peace of Faith* (Cusanus, 2002). Astonishing and fascinating about this work, written more than five hundred years ago, is the fact that this cardinal of the

Catholic Church and adviser of the popes recognizes and accepts the truth in other religions, and that he opposes any form of violence and forced *conversion* of followers of other faiths.

The discussion of Islam takes the major part of the mentioned essay. This may be caused not only by contemporary circumstances, but also mainly by the spiritual proximity of Christian and Islamic religious tradition.

The text is set as a dialogue among seventeen wise men, belonging to different religions and faiths. They strive for peace and tolerance between religions and in the end the Christian image of God turns out to be the one that convinces and unites them all. But it is certainly not a narrow absolutizing faith that propagates stiff Dogmatics as basic principle of religiosity. The conciliating faith means rather sharing of truth, sensibility and common values that are accessible to all human beings.

In this sense, Cusanus is more *catholic* (in the original meaning of the word) than his one-sided, stubborn critics – namely Christian fundamentalists - because the Greek word *kath'olon* means barely *general, universal*, what by all mankind is considered as true and reasonable.

It took exactly five hundred years until the Pope recognized Cusanus' revolutionizing thought in two official declarations. In 1965, in the documents *Nostra Aetate* and *Dignitatis humanae* of the Second Vatican Council it is stated, that in every religion a ray of that very truth is recognizable, which enlightens all human beings (Vatican Council II, 1965).

You may ask: Why is a thinker of the late Middle Ages still highly relevant in the framework of our contemporary discussion on *Democracy and social change in the Islamic World*?

I think that our time is lacking people like Cusanus who dare to cross and transcend the artificial borders between cultures and religions and to prepare the ground for a fruitful inter-cultural dialogue which is in fact more

a *trans-cultural dialogue* because it recognizes that there are elements of the *other* in our own inherited culture and vice versa.

When I am now talking about the events, that took place since winter 2010/11 and which are called by some commentators as *Arab Spring*, I would like to exclude a detailed history of the events since they are documented extensively and in a very elaborated way in many sources (Phares, 2003; Darwish, 2012; Abdel-Samad, 2011; Dabashi, 2012). I would rather like to focus on questions like “Why does this revolution take place now and with such a powerful impact?” – “In which way does it reflect changes in the mentality of societies in Islamic countries” and finally “What is the significance of this move towards democracy and change for us, in the so-called western world?”

It is worth mentioning, that the revolutionary movements in the Islamic world began in the northern part of Africa - in countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Libya – ruled for decades by dictators, who suppressed and terrorized their people with a system of corruption and repression. It is a tragic fact that the western world is responsible for this negative development too. Since the then President of the US, George W. Bush, declared the *War on Terror* as one of the driving forces of his foreign policy, many western democracies did not dare to criticize the lack of democratic development in the so-called *moderate Islamic countries*. The governments in Cairo, Tunis, Algiers and Tripoli were considered as guarantors of certain stability in the region, which led to a continuous more than tacit support of the regimes in power. Even now, after the partly successful *Arab Spring* we do unfortunately observe a fallback into the traditional pattern of traditional western thinking and strategical action. The fight of the former governments against the Islamic Fundamentalist movement in their countries was seen as a contribution to the said *War on Terror*. But a closer look into the reality of these societies showed two parallel movements: the so-called *Muslim-Brotherhood* – I would call them *soft-core-Islamists* – became more and more influential, and, in the urban centres of the countries, the academic youth started expressing their disagreement and frustration in the social networks:

via Internet-Blogs, Facebook, Twitter and TV-Channels like Al-Jazeera and Al'Arabiya. The significance of the New Media in the context of the protest-movement is certainly one of the most interesting chapters of this revolution and a highly relevant topic for further extensive studies (Keif, 2011). The protest of the young people mainly targeted a hopelessly back-warded system that did not allow any form of participation and made the fruits of economic development only accessible to a so-called elite of privileged *nouveau riches*. The harsh critic, the aggressive frustration also targeted the corrupt system of family-clans and oligarchies, which undermined any movement towards democratization. The so-called *tradition* in the countries of Northern Africa served for many decades as a universal argument against any tendency to reform and to change the system peacefully. Maybe there is a certain frustration among the people in the respective countries about the lack of *real utopia* in their societies, i.e. the inability of many people to recognize the creative impulse of the utopian concept.

It is worth mentioning that the concept of *utopia* is considered a highly controversial one in philosophical discussions in the Islamic world. *Utopian* thinking is mainly found in books written by members of the Sufi-Movement, the mystical stream of the Islamic spirituality. One of the most remarkable Persian poets of the Middle Ages, Attar, describes in his famous *Book of Sufferings* the *metaphysical revolt* against a God, who makes suffering possible. At the same time Attar drafts a vision of reconciliation through experiencing the *inner*, the sphere of unlimited thoughts and arts. But thinkers like Attar were more or less very critically acclaimed lonesome wolves. They certainly never reached the relevance of people like Thomas More, whose story of the island of *Utopia* became a symbol of intellectual and philosophical reflection on the importance of free thinking and transcending borders (More, 1901).

Utopias are – in a way – secular transformations of the messianic idea. What does it mean, and in which way is this concept linked to our topic of *Democracy and social change in the Islamic World*? The monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – have a strong tendency towards a future

prospect, which is considered as the *genuine time*, and the time of salvation. The *salvation of the world* is certainly not to be found in our more or less miserable circumstances of time, but at the very end of time, which is connected with the advent or the parousia (second coming) of the Messiah, who is said to establish a reign of peace. This idea is the root of the secular idea of progress, and within the framework of this theological concept, the basis of the utopian idea is to be found, too. The groundbreaking-study of Norman Cohn (1961) on the impact of the messianic idea is of major significance in this context.

Judaism and Christianity in particular developed the mentioned messianic idea and incorporated it as a key element of their respective eschatology and later on transformed it into a secular concept. The latter is highly relevant in the context of constitutional democracies, too, as the "*real power (in these democracies) lies in the majority of the community*" (Madison, 1788) – not in a government or in the hands of an elite of clerics.

But the Islamic tradition lost the contact to this fascinating element of its theology, because since the late 12th century more conservative and later on even narrow-minded people dominated the intellectual discourse in the Islamic World. It is an interesting phenomenon, that at the end of the 18th century, at the peak of the Age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution, the Islamic sect of the Wahabi's spread throughout the Arabian peninsula and in many areas of India, Sumatra and the Sudan (DeLong-Bas, 2004). This extreme puritanic movement, which tried to preach the *pure* and unsophisticated teaching of Islam, nowadays gains influence in the madrassahs (Quran-schools) in the big metropolises of South-Asia: In Lahore, Karachi and Dhaka. It is worth investigating the immense and mostly negative impact of these activities, which obviously undermine any free discussion and any form of questioning the ruling system. Democratic movements are considered as *haram* (forbidden) since they are seen as incompatible to the given traditions. The export of this extremely harmful religious ideology is one of the main reasons for the fact that there is still no noteworthy protest-movement in Saudi-Arabia (the heart-land of the Wahabi's) and in the urban

centres of Pakistan and Bangladesh. The peer-group-pressure in these countries and the immense oppressiveness of the financial powers of the Saudi Kingdom are so strong, that even students mostly do not dare to organize themselves in similar protest-movements like in Tunisia or Egypt. But this might change in the future.

What are the roots of the widespread animosity towards democracy and social change in many parts of the societies in Islamic countries? Is it the more or less irrational fear that a secular movement to change the society is inconsistent with the *true* ideals of Islam? Why is such a distinct refusal of secularism prevalent in many Islamic countries and even among intellectuals?

First of all it is necessary to reflect about the specific history of secularism in the so-called *western cultures*. The philosopher Hans Blumenberg describes the typical western *idea of progress* as the result of a *secularization* of religious concepts (Blumenberg, 1985). It seems that many people in the West do in fact consider secularism as a kind of transformed religious creed: the humanistic values of an "open society" (Karl Raimund Popper) are the basis of a secular *Credo*, which guarantees the essential human rights, freedom, tolerance, pluralism, participation, gender-equality et cetera. The movement to separate religion and state is nowadays the dominating force in all constitutional democracies in the west. But the primacy of secularism does not necessarily imply, that religion has lost its significance in the western countries. The process of liberation and emancipation, which began in the Age of Enlightenment (18th century), was a movement against the misuse of power by church-authorities. Secularism opposed and opposes any kind of terrorizing people through intimidation and compulsion. The ethical values of secularism are still deeply rooted in the religious values of Judaism and Christianity, but without referring to an *absolute truth*, which is the basis of monotheistic religions. As I already pointed out: Secularism is basically the fruit of the European Age of Enlightenment. When people in western countries talk about a necessary change in Islamic countries, they always demand a movement towards Enlightenment in these cultures. But only few

people know that the history of Enlightenment in Islamic countries is not quite a recent phenomenon as in Europe. It already began with philosophers like Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) between the 10th and the 12th century A.D. The contribution of the said philosophers to a new and enlightened way of thinking is unique. They made the main texts of Aristotle – for centuries forgotten or ignored in the occident – accessible through translations and paved the way for scientific work independent from religious supervision. It is certainly the sad part of the story that these thinkers were later banned and declared heretics in their own cultures and that their contribution to the development of free thinking never gained any broad support. Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd were not non-believers, but they opposed the idea of an absolute authority, which is the foundation stone of the Islamic theocracy. Nowadays a political analyst like Bernard Lewis analyzes the “lack of freedom and modernization” in the Islamic World and points out that the denial of Islamic Enlightenment certainly is one of the main reasons for backwardness and fundamentalist rage (Lewis, 2002).

When we look at the protest-movements in Northern-Africa, in the Arabian Peninsula and in the Middle East now, we find a new generation of young people, questioning the traditional ideals of authority and control, the outrageous social imbalance, caused by corruption, the lack of participation. What they demand is not always a fundamental change in society. But they are calling for more justice, they want freedom of speech and thought and the right to shape and create their own future. The dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Saudi-Arabia have always used religion as a mean to control people, their behaviour and (political) activities. For decades it was quite easy influencing people, but in the information age, people can easily communicate with each other and create a social network of activists. The importance of the new media in the process of the protest-movement cannot be underestimated. But the new media only facilitate communication; they do not shape a new society. The young people on the streets of Cairo, Tripoli, Damascus und Aleppo are calling for a new culture of living, they practice democracy beyond democracy. The autocrats and absolute monarchies in countries like Egypt, Yemen, Syria or Saudi-Arabia are

anachronisms in times of the worldwide web. Their rule can only be maintained through suppression and the use of military force. But it is certainly only a matter of time when people like King Abdullah of Saudi-Arabia or President Assad have to hand over the power to a new and democratically elected government.

It is an interesting fact, that many followers of the protest-movement take their inspiration from the secular vision of an Islamic state as drafted and established by Kemal Atatürk in the 1920s. The so-called *Turkish Model* could work as an example for a proper balance between Islam and Secularism and even satisfy those political leaders who always declare that the true ideals of Islam are incompatible with secular values. The efforts of the Turkish President to support the opposition in Syria are a clear indication, that Turkey is ready to *export* its form of moderate Islamic Constitution, thereby expanding its political influence too. The new Egyptian President, the former head of the Muslim-Brotherhood, obviously tries to copy the successful Turkish Model, despite the fact that many of his strict conservative followers are very much reluctant to accept it. But times of anachronistic Islamist regimes (like Sudan, Iran, Saudi-Arabia etc.) are fading away and even the Islamist hard-liners in the mentioned countries are clever enough to realize that a new time needs new answers and a new spirit of living-together.

The civil uprisings in many countries of the Islamic World are caused by human-rights-violations, extreme poverty, unemployment, corruption, lack of positive future-prospects and mainly by the lack of transparency and participation. The last-mentioned factors are indeed the decisive ones: lack of transparency and lack of participation. Transparency and participation are the most important characteristics of a democracy and an *open society* as defined by Karl Raimund Popper (2002) in his major work *The open society and its enemies*. In his profound defence of democracy, Popper tries to investigate the dangers of inherent absolute ideas and ideals in the philosophy of Plato, Hegel and Marx and the fatal impact of these ideas. At the same time, he attacks any form of religious paternalism and the instrumental use of religion as a mean for political interests. The idea of the

absolute appears to be the reason for manifold extreme political tendencies in society and the cause of religious intolerance and narrow-mindedness. Popper published his most significant study just after the catastrophe of World War II and in the eve of the cold war between East and West. At the same time, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (2007) wrote their groundbreaking book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which they analyzed the *regression of reason* in totalitarian systems and the tendency of capitalist societies to create a *culture industry* meant to deceive and misguide people. The double-face of the process of enlightenment nowadays needs to be expanded into “dialectic of secularism” (Habermas & Ratzinger, 2007).

The dogmas of secularism – scepticism, pluralism and tolerance – seem for many people in Islamic countries inadequate and incompatible with their religious values. The tolerance that secular people are requesting for protects the personal rights of religious people, their freedom to express their views and to shape their lives, too. It is understood that tolerance find its limits when confronted with hatred and violence, such as terrorism and any kind of totalitarian regime under the umbrella of a so-called theocracy. But the vast majority of devout Muslim people trying to find a balance between their religious convictions and the demands of modernization certainly do deserve respect and not an arrogant disrespect of their way of life. The fact that many people in Islamic countries experience fragmentation, disorientation and the lack of an *ordering centre* – that is a kind of integer ethical governance – in our globalized world is not to be interpreted as backwardness or balky adherence to the past. It is a most human reflex that expresses the fear of loosing one’s cultural and religious identity, which is at the same time the common heritage that unites people and creates understanding.

The situation now calls for a new dialogical process – a kind of *enlightenment of the enlightenment* – and a new attitude of communication that respects the fact of different cultural identities and the pluralism of ethical fundaments.

More than forty years after the student riots in France and Germany and more than twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall the world is facing an

event of a similar importance. The movement towards democracy and social change in many countries of the Islamic world sees itself in difficulties when confronted with a renewed *colonial attitude*, intending to lecture instead of conducting a serious dialogue and facilitating change. Let me give you an example: The complicated and more and more dangerous situation in Afghanistan is deeply connected with the history and politics of its neighbouring country, Pakistan. During the 1980s, when the Soviet Union installed their puppet-government in Kabul and controlled the entire country with brutal military force, the US-Government tried to destabilize the situation by supporting the militant *Mujaheddin*. This support finally made the raise of the Taliban possible, with fatal consequences for both countries, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the US, too. Until now, the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan is on the brink of collapse, despite the fact that a more or less democratic system has been established in both countries and free and relatively fair elections have taken place. But a similar protest-movement like in Northern Africa or in the Middle East can hardly be found (Lieven, 2011). There is a certain frustration about the reality of a weak democratic system perceptible and of course furiousness and disappointment due to the systematic corruption, which is in fact the ruling power in both countries. The social imbalance in Afghanistan and Pakistan – both countries have illiteracy rates of more than 55% and more than 60% of the population earn less than 2 US-Dollar per day – prevent any development and progress and prove the term “democratization” meaningless (Human Development Index, 2011).

The Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid analyzes the schizophrenia of the pseudo-democratic system in his country with anger and wit. The main character of his novel *The reluctant fundamentalist* reflects about America’s war policy following the terrible events of 9/11 and comes to the following remarkable conclusion: “As a society you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own differences, assumptions of your own superiority” (Hamid, 2007, p. 101).

In the light of these words we should rethink our concepts of dialogue and the hermeneutics of our debate, revealing hidden identities and power structures.

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