The Debate of Ideas within Islam

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Before dealing with this subject, it would be appropriate to recall two fundamental truths often ignored or hidden by todays' profuse literature on Islam. First of all: it is illusory to separate ideas and culture in general, and religious doctrines in particular, from their general conditions of emergence and development; otherwise, one would fall into an essentialism categorically rejected by human sciences and society as admitted today by the scientific community. This is one of the main lessons taught by modern historiography. Secondly: the notion of Islam is used as a catch-all for dogma, ritual, practices and culture indiscriminately, as if it were a rigid monolithic phenomenon emerging all at once, having experienced neither evolution, nor indecision, nor distortions under the effects of historic and geographic factors.[1] This means we need to know what we mean every time we refer to Islam in its diversity of manifestations.

Historic Debates

This being the case, a brief review of historical context is in order. Since the time of the revelation of the Koran, its reception has given rise to questions and controversy, the traces of which can be noted in the official corpus. Moreover, the new religion could not simply erase ancient ideas and convictions held in the Hijazi milieu of the early 7th century of the current era, as with the wave of a magic wand.[2] Debates of ideas were at times heated and often required the intervention and arbitration of the Prophet. The *Hadiths* (prophetic traditions) amply attest to this, even if they were only recorded much later and reflect the concerns of later generations in more than one instance.

After the death of the Prophet, what could be more natural than the first generation of Muslims, that of his Companions, discussing problems that had not been posed during the time when the answers and solutions had an incontestable prophetic authority? But the real debates took place above all among the following generation, which had grown in number due to conquests and the conversion of many non-Arabic peoples, when they were attempting to qualify the positions of the great Companions who had been killing one another in the struggle for power. Could they all have erred, or were some right and others wrong? Were they acting on their own, or were they predestined to take antagonistic positions? These were questions with practical repercussions for the experiences of Muslims, but that also served as a foundation for subsequent Muslim theology.

Despite the relatively modest degree of theoretical production over the course of the Umayyad Caliphate, overthrown in 132/750 by the Abbasids, it must be noted that certain figures, such as Jahm b. Safwan (d. 746), so reviled by official Umayyad ideol-

[1] In this regard, see the 18 titles we have edited, published by Dar al-Tali'a (Beirut, 2006 – 2010) in Arabic on "Islam: One and Multiple" (*al-Islam wahidan wa muta'addidan*).

[2] Jacqueline Chabbi's supposedly anthropological approach (cf. in particular her latest book: *Les trois piliers de l'islam,* Paris: Seuil 2016) is unfortunately reductionist. The tribal context, with its intrinsic values, is important, but contrary to what she asserts without evidence, it is inconceivable that the religious ideas debated throughout the Middle East region were ignored and had no effect on the Hijazi mindset in the times of Muhammed.

ogy and afterwards by the Sunnis, were against official doctrine, which would have one believe that, if governors did not display irreproachable behaviour, they were acting, not of their own accord, but in application of a divine decision that subjects had to obey. The first rationalist theologians (the *Mu'tazila*) were, moreover, concerned first and foremost with this issue, with its obvious practical repercussions. Among other things, debate revolved around the limits of human liberty and predestination, namely because the two notions exist in the Koran and the balance of the interpretation of the sacred text had to be tipped towards one of the two. Certain theologians, favouring predestination, wished to safeguard the transcendence of God, his omnipotence and omniscience. Others leaned more towards divine justice, which could not be applied unless humans were free and responsible for their acts, God being unable to compel people to do wrong and then punish them for these reprehensible actions.

Other related problems were likewise posed, particularly concerning harm coming to the innocent, such as children or the infirm. How could its existence be explained in relation to God's goodness, recognized by all Muslims? How could it be justified according to our human criteria? What is the nature of retribution in the wake of acts and situations beyond human control and which people may experience as fundamentally unfair? Debates on such matters and many others, such as those regarding the status of the Koran, created – and thus different from God and temporal – or not created – and thus consubstantial with God, atemporal and eternal – and the authority lent to the Tradition of the Prophet (*Sunna*) recorded in the *Hadith* from the Sunni point of view, or carnally pursued, so to speak, by the imams born of his daughter, from the Shiite viewpoint, all of these debates raged on, dividing the intellectuals of the time into schools, clans and sects. At the outset, Abbasid political power did not have a single, definitive stance on these issues. Or rather, there were contradictory tendencies within the very circles of power favouring the advocates of different positions that ended up becoming irreconcilable. Senior Barmakid officials, followed by Caliph al-Ma'mun (813-833) and his two immediate successors, were known for their encouragement of rationalism and translation of the works of Greek, Iranian and even Hindu philosophers and scholars. At the opposite pole, particularly after the about-face by al-Mutawakkil (847-861), against the Mu'tazilites, were the advocates of literalism, enemies of foreign culture in all strictly religious disciplines, supported by people in high places and above all the illiterate masses, and always dragging down thought relating to religion.

Moreover, the Abbasids had another concern directly associated with the organization of social life. They effectively attempted to promulgate a single legal code valid for the entire empire, but the opposition of legal scholars was so strong that they desisted from unifying the law, allowing each region and each legal school the liberty of issuing legal opinions (*fatwa*), thus tolerating that jurisdiction could change from one geographic and jurisprudential context to another. In this regard, debates and divergences never ceased, sometimes going as far as exclusion and enmity.

Nonetheless, though legal scholars were often in disagreement on minor subjects, and sometimes also on matters of extreme gravity relative to life and death or the physical integrity of those concerned due to their beliefs, they were unanimous in believing that the five *fiqh* legal ruling categories (*Ahkam*)[3] were applicable to all human acts without exception. In other words, the legal scholars established a straitjacket from which no Muslim could, in theory, escape. This is precisely what was contested by the first mystics (*Sufis*) of Islam, who felt hemmed in by these rigid rules, applicable in the sphere of worship as well as that of transactions. In this regard, intense debate arose, even leading to momentous trials, as was the case with Hallaj (d. 922) in the 4th/10th century. The mystics rejected the literalist reading of the Koran advocated by the legal scholars, favouring an esoteric reading and a more spiritual, more individualist approach, far removed from legalism.

The debates around these issues and an infinity of others relative to any subject raised by beliefs, culture, reflection and speculation took place at the Caliphs' courts and in circles of power and of intel-

[3] Recall that the five categories of legal rulings are: 1) mandatory, *wajib*, 2) recommended, *mustahabb*, 3) neutral, *mubah*, all three in the category of licit or *halal*, followed by 4) reprehensible, *makruh,* and 5) prohibited, *mahzur*, which is illicit**,** *haram***.**

lectuals, such as at mosques or at the *madrasa* (theological institutes). The work of Tawhidi (d. 1023) provides an example of this discussion activity in Baghdad in the 4th/10th century, where Christian and Jewish philosophers participated in high-quality debates. Other metropoles in the Mashreq and Maghreb were not lagging, not to mention the proliferation of ideas and controversies of all manner in Al-Andalus until the late 6th/12th century.

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The period from the 13th to the 18th centuries is known as a time of stagnation and decadence. Although this characteristic cannot be applied uniformly to the ensemble of the Islamic world or all of its domains at the time, since areas such as Moghul India or the Ottoman Empire experienced irrefutable progress and could compete with the most civilized countries of the period, the fossilization of culture was relative, even if original thinkers were somewhat scarce. The authors of this period, feeling the dangers of the decline of their civilization, and in an attempt to preserve the acquis of their predecessors, left posterity remarkable encyclopaedic works in which they compiled the legacy of the past. Any encyclopaedia, however, if not exhaustive (and strictly speaking, this is impossible), entails choices that can only be made as valid responses within the compilers' particular historical context.

The *Nahdha* (Renaissance)

The conquest of Egypt by Napoleon in 1798 was considered a turning point between two eras, insofar as it demonstrated to the Arabs the degree of their historic backwardness, not only on the military level, but also in the economic, political, cultural and social spheres. The shock of that conquest, followed by the French occupation of Algeria, then the protectorates imposed on Tunisia and Egypt, gave rise to a movement called the *Nahdha* (Renaissance), initiated by Syrian-Lebanese authors, particularly Christians, and followed by intellectuals and governors aware of their societies' need to catch up. Under the circumstances, religious thought could not but be affected by the questioning of all phenomena considered a cause of this backwardness.

Hence a debate opened up, limited at first to restricted circles, then increasingly spreading out, regarding the manner of conceiving of dogma and practices considered the most faithful to the spirit of Islam and its founding texts. Three major trends can be distinguished at this point. The first essentially consisted of representatives of the official religious institution. As a general rule, they had a conservative mindset denoting an absence of awareness of the changes occurring in the different spheres of activity, both interior and exterior, in their societies. And even when this awareness existed, they believed the best rampart against the devastating effects of these changes was to cling to solutions that had succeeded in safeguarding Muslim societies from past dangers.

This reading was clearly not shared by those conventionally qualified as reformists or Neo-Salafists. Various central themes emerge from their positions that warrant attention:

— First of all, they believed that the root of the evils Muslims suffered resided in their absolute, mimetic attitude, servile imitation and unthinking conformism. Hence their appeal for Muslims to take charge of their lives and stop being slaves to positions held in very different historic contexts. In other words, they called on people to practice *ijtihad* once again, an exercise in reflection that had been forsaken during the Islamic civilization's centuries of decadence. In this manner, they intended to renew their societies using the practices of the *salaf*, the pious predecessors, who were responsible for advancing this civilization in the first centuries of Islam.
— Maraboutism being predominant in this period, they carried out a fierce struggle against the brotherhoods considered responsible for popular belief in myths contrary to a healthy under-

standing of Islam, and for the propagation of the fatalist mentality they reproved.

— Wishing, moreover, to purify the dogmas prevalent among the majority of clerics, they were led to distrust the sum of the *hadiths*, upon which were based the outlooks the reformists rejected, for they had been recorded late and they considered them obvious forgeries.

— In addition, two new themes appeared in their writings: the situation of women and the state of education. They actively campaigned for Muslim women to no longer be cloistered and for them to participate in public life, the entire veil enveloping them having no root in the precepts of Islam or the behaviour of the first generations of Muslims. They thus demanded education for girls, just as they deplored the prevailing illiteracy and prioritized reform of the fossilized educational system, advocating an education in keeping with the values they held.

Salafism and Modernism

Naturally, these positions caused a frontal clash, not only between representatives of the official institution but also the collective consciousness, accustomed to ancestral practices and doctrine. The numerous texts from the turn of the 19th to the 20th centuries, in the form of informed books or newspaper and journal articles, bear ample witness to the acuity of debate on these subjects. Should new Koranic exegesis be put forth, or the prescriptive nature of the prophetic traditions be disavowed? How far could one go in appropriating the Western lifestyle and thought, particularly on the status of women? Should people's minds be worked gradually or on the contrary, should a healthy shock be generated by proclaiming a rupture with the past and present? Was there cause to directly confront the narrow-minded despotic powers and attempt to replace them with enlightened despots, or should they begin by raising awareness among the populace? Standpoints on these issues and many others diverged. But it was the abolition of the Caliphate by Atatürk in 1924 that would reveal two antagonistic tendencies in this reform movement that were bound to grow and bring thinkers into opposition, in principle having the same ideals of progress but envisaging different solutions that could hardly be reconciled.

Two figures summarize these two trends in and of themselves: Ali Abdel Raziq (1888-1966) and Rashid Ridha (1865-1935), the former from a large Egyptian family, with an Azharite education followed by studies in Great Britain, and the latter of Syrian-Lebanese origin, living in Egypt and director and founder of the journal *Al-Manar*, both disciples of Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and claiming to be his heir.

Though the issue of reforming the political system in Muslim countries was constantly on the agenda in the works of reformists, after Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) in Egypt and Hayreddin Pasha (1822-1890) in Tunisia, not to mention the modernizing efforts of numerous Ottoman authors, the merit of having made a clear break between religious and temporal power, following a non-conventional reading of the classic Muslim doctrine on this subject, incontestably belongs to Abdel Raziq and his famous work, *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power* (*Al-Islam wa usul al-hukm*, 1925).

By the same token, although many thinkers of the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century, namely the Egyptian Qasim Amin (1863-1908)[4] and the Lebanese Druze Nazira Zain al-din (1908-1976)[5] were activists for Muslim women's liberation, it was the Tunisian, Tahir Haddad (1899-1935) who, in his book, *Our Women in the Sharia and in Society* (*Imra 'tuna Fi 'l-sharia Wa 'l-mujtama*, 1930), went the farthest in the defence of women's rights and their full equality with men. Heated controversy ensued after the publication of this book, but certain deep political and social currents bore his revolutionary ideas, whose crowning achievement was the promulgation of the Tunisian Personal Status Code in 1956. The latter, in an audacious interpretation of the sacred texts, prohibited polygamy, established a minimum age for future spouses, gave women who were of age the right to marry without a male guardian, established

[4] Authored two books that caused a sensation: *The Liberation of Women* (*Tahrir al-mara'a*, 1899) and *The New Woman* (*Al-mara'a al-jadida*, 1900).

[5] Author of the book *Unveiling and Veiling* (*Al-Sufur wal hijab*, 1928).

divorce before a civil judge, and granted females the right to inherit their parents' entire legacy. The only step that the Tunisian legislation failed to achieve, although it was already in Haddad's programme, was the right for brothers and sisters to equally share their inheritance, a demand that is still on the agenda today among a significant number of intellectuals, civil society activists and even political actors. Other Muslim countries, with the exception of Turkey, which adopted a secular regime and the Swiss Civil Code, did not go as far as Tunisia in family rights, though they did enact provisions for women.

Salafism would never have had the impact and audience it has enjoyed in the Muslim world over the past few decades if it had not had the benefit of the oil bonanza used by the anachronistic Gulf regimes on the one hand, and the humiliation felt by the Arabs in particular and the Muslims in general regarding the West's political double standards on the other.

The second tendency, also emerging from the reform movement, was squarely to the right and evolved from the 1960s towards extremism under the influence of Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). The Muslim Brotherhood movement, representing this trend, was founded in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) in reaction to the abolition of the Caliphate. In the same vein, just after Abdel Raziq's book, Rashid Ridha published a thorough defence of the caliphal system. The connection between the Brotherhood and Wahhabism – a rigorist sect linked to the Saud family emerging in the 18th century, reviled by the ensemble of *Ulama* of the time and until then limited to the Arabian Peninsula[6] – was particularly due to him and the shared reference to the work of Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328).

The developments of Islamism after the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967 in movements emerging from the Brotherhood-Wahhabi matrix, increasingly sectarian, exclusivist, intolerant and violent, are now known by everyone throughout the world, especially after a certain 11 September and the terrorist actions perpetrated by al-Qaeda and Daesh. Nevertheless, Salafism, in any of its forms, would never have had the impact and audience it has enjoyed in the Muslim world over the past few decades if it had not had the benefit of the oil bonanza used by the anachronistic Gulf regimes to counter modernizing tendencies, on the one hand, and the humiliation felt by the Arabs in particular and the Muslims in general regarding the West's political double standards and the arrogance and apartheid of the Zionist entity in Palestine on the other.

Conclusion

It would be superfluous to dwell on the disastrous consequences of this political Islam. In closing, let us simply note that, though this ideology is the most well-known to the media, it only occupies a limited space in the debate of ideas within Islam, and it is far from representing the general frame of mind of the majority of Muslims. But to eradicate it, or at least limit its damage, it is important not to let oneself be influenced by the commotion it produces, which is but the sign of the difficulties encountered by Muslims, and monotheists in general, in reconciling their religious traditions and the demands of modern civilization, with its cognitive and socio-economic values and constraints. It is incontestable that the adepts of Islam aspire to the same ideals of liberty, equality, justice, dignity and peace as the rest of humanity, but the paths leading there are often tortuous, as demonstrated by events in the Arab region since the onset of what is commonly referred to as the Arab Spring.

[6] In this regard, see: Hamadi Redissi, *Le pacte de Nadjd* (2007).