

Islam and the West, Recovering the Keys to Openness

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Abstract

"Are we perhaps condemned to remain prisoners of the logic of war that cannot perceive relations with others if not in terms that bring to mind hostility, such as peril, counter-position, conflict, threat etc.? In Western countries voices are raised almost everywhere against this way of seeing future relations between the West and other countries. People are starting to question the real meaning of this unfortunate dichotomy, as well as the reality it proposes to conceal. What does the East/West duality really mean through the history of European expansion, from Rome to the empires of modern colonialism? What does its current North/South replacement mean?" Part of this interview with Mohammed Abed Al Jabri was published in Fall 2006 by our Italian magazine Reset. On the occasion of the commemoration of the philosopher's fifth anniversary (d.2010), we are pleased to publish the full interview for the first time

In your book about "Arab reason", at one point you say that the future will be Averroist. Is this a quip or do you attribute a specific meaning to this statement?

I was addressing Arabs, Muslims. Ibn Rushd (Averroès, Editor's note) was a rationalist who had profoundly understood Western schools of thought - hence Aristotle - as well as Muslim schools of thought. Ibn Rushd's idea is that critical rationalism originated in Andalusia, thus within Arab-Islamic culture, but history resulted in this school of thought migrating towards the West. In the Orient, in Andalusia, in Morocco, in the lands of Islam, decadence began after Ibn Rushd. The future envisaged by Ibn Rushd was fulfilled in Europe in the 12th century, with the early Renaissance, and Ibn Rushd held a position in European culture until the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, alongside Spinoza, Kant and others. I believe that this failed future of Arab-Muslim culture must be reborn, and this means that the future of Arab-Islamic culture and its beliefs must be Averroist, hence an open culture, as Ibn Rushd's was. It must be a critical rationalist culture, a culture with great knowledge of the Arab-Islamic legacy, as well as knowledge of the West and its legacy, which at the time was represented by Aristotle and Greek philosophy. That is what I meant

When you speak of critical rationalism and of a “critique of Arab reason”, you are playing on the language of Emmanuel Kant. What exactly do you mean? Do you accept this model without fearing you may be attacked as someone about to propose a Western and European model for the thousandth time?

No. I know exactly what I said. The critical spirit or critical rationalism of which I speak is not essentially Kant's, because Kant wrote his work in the 18th century. The science is not that of Newton and of his epic work, because we have no Newton. In order for us to have a Kant we first need a Newton. I believe, therefore, that there is the need for a scientific evolution such as the one that changed all thinking. However, as I have often said, and as is well-known, mine is an epistemological critique in epistemology's modern sense. This means a genealogical critique that proposes to reveal the foundations of our cultural legacy and to analyse the epistemological importance of all kinds of defined knowledge, both within the framework of the Fiqh (jurisprudence), the Kalam (theology) as well as that of philosophy, history etc. And when I speak of an epistemological critique, I totally exclude ideological critique. I do not use ideological critique with either modern schools of thought or any of the ancient ones. No. Epistemological critique consists in analysing the cognitive system in all fields; the cognitive foundations of the modern, scientific theological discourse

Your originality consists in specific attention paid to science, both to the epistemology of Ibn Rushd and to that of Kant, of criticism, moving in search of the foundations of technique and science. Your books are read by almost all young people, in universities, among all schools of thought, be they Marxist, secular, Muslim and even extremist; they all refer to your ideas. How do you explain this?

Perhaps it is because, to the extent that it is possible, I avoid controversy and ideological clashes, concentrating on method and the foundations of knowledge, leaving aside ideologies, in order to analyse ideas, not so much as content, but rather as the instrument for creating scientific and ideological knowledge.

The défaillances you mentioned certainly exists, because European reason was renewed by the birth of modern science. We are well aware that in Europe, with Galileo Galilei, Bacon, Descartes, Pascal as the technical and scientific progress made in the 16th and 17th centuries, reason discovered a new élan. European reason was renewed by the birth of modern science. In the Arab-Islamic world there has been no modern science; that is the problem. Originally, Arab-Islamic sciences were Greek sciences, which had resulted in a number of evolutions, but did not influence philosophy or theology as instead happened from the 16th century onwards in

Europe.

One could, for example, mention the great doctor Ibn Ennafis, who discovered the principle of blood circulation long before William Harvey 1578-1657, (who studied medicine and anatomy in Italy), and was also a faquih. He wrote a book in which he contradicts the philosophical novel (Hay ibn yakthan) by Ibn Tofail (a friend of Ibn Rushd), in which he proves that mankind can discover God using reason alone. Our doctor argues to prove not the opposite, but the possibility of discovering the Prophet Mohamed himself using reason alone. Let us also mention Ibn Haïtham (Latin name Alhazen), the famous scientist in the field of optics. He .influenced Pascal and others and yet he was a man of Muslim culture, a man of faith

So science has not played the same role it instead played in cultural renewal in Europe. Why is that?

Because it is a science that never moved beyond its own Greek origins. Arab-Islamic civilisation has had doctor-philosophers such as Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, but sciences founded on induction and practice were the competence of the scientists of shari'a. They were interested in "details", in what was "real" and practised analogy, while philosophers remained loyal to the "overall", the "abstract", in other words to Aristotle's syllogism. Philosophers studied physics in the form of metaphysics, while scientists analysed physical phenomena from a different perspective, that of "created things." Hence science, strictly speaking, did not side with philosophy in its conflict with religion, as instead happened in Europe. It often worked outside this conflict. The consequence has been that in Islam, science has not exercised its influence over reason.

The experimental model did not yet exist; it was born with the European Renaissance. With it comes an attempt to create, as happens in nature. Events are "created." Reason becomes a creating reason. It is evident that the new world was precisely this. However, just as Europe's renaissance was beginning, decadence started in our world. Then came the mystic schools of thought, the conquests of the Tartars, the Mongols and the .Ottomans, and then Western colonialism. So it was a completely different story

You have spoken of the Sufi tradition (mysticism). Many are searching for the path through which the Arab and the Muslim world in general could speed up its modernisation. In this sense is there a need for a sort of reformism? Some believe that the most productive reformism for a future of modernisation would be rationalist reformism; others instead, on the

subject of Sufism, say that spiritual reformism is needed. What is your position on this subject?

I have explained this point in other books. In my opinion, Sufism is a personal experience, one that can be helpful in resolving personal crises, personal issues, metaphysical crises if you like. So Sufism is an individual matter, one cannot achieve the rebirth of a nation based on Sufism's concepts. Sufism means withdrawing from the world; it is the opposite of Nahda, it is the opposite of renewal, the contrary of science, as you well know. Hence, a person with problems in his life, his soul, his existence, may perhaps find a solution in Sufism. It is something that is close to existentialism or Bergson's spiritualism. Organising a revolution, a rebirth, building a nation, constructing a science cannot take place with Sufism. One needs reason, rationalism. I am in favour of rationalism because without it one cannot have science, technology; one cannot install a democracy. Democracy cannot be separated from rationalism. Rationalism is the basis of democratic thought, which cannot be achieved in other ways. This is the issue's philosophical aspect, but one must admit that for the Arab world, for the Muslim world, the problem of modernisation, of progressive evolution, the development of the sciences and of .society is a complex problem. It also depends on other factors

External, international, political factors?

Of course. Let us take the Lebanon as an example. Recent events in Lebanon are of great importance in this sense (2006 war, E.N.). Why? Because Lebanon is the most modernised Arab country as far as philosophy is concerned; a country in which there is religious pluralism. It can be considered a secular country in spite of the presence of sects. In any case, Lebanon is a country capable of being in tune with the West as has always happened since the 18th and 19th centuries. But what is happening nowadays? There is the problem posed by Hezbollah. Hezbollah is the party that liberated Lebanon. It is popular and has prestige. However, its existence as the liberation party, as a resistance party, depends on the entire country being free. It would have been sufficient for Israel to evacuate the Shebaa Farms and release the ten or eleven people (certainly fewer than twelve) held prisoners and the Lebanese problem could have been solved. If that had happened, Hezbollah's "resistance" mission would have had no reason to exist.

What would Hezbollah do should the Israeli occupation end and the prisoners be returned home? Resistance would no longer be justifiable in any way. In this case Hezbollah's military organisation would have to be reintegrated in the official army or lay down its weapons forever. But Israel (together with the United States) prefers to always leave open the problems with the Arabs. What does it matter whether the few kilometres of the Shebaa Farms are Lebanese or

Syrian? How important can it be to hold ten or twelve people prisoners in Israel for years and years? Why not release them?

One can say that Hezbollah took action that was not justifiable at the time, but in the logic of liberation through resistance, such actions always find justification. For as long as Israel continues to occupy land, the Lebanese people will continue to see Hezbollah as a necessary organisation and will consider Westernised parties and sects, which distance themselves from the resistance, as lacking in patriotism, thereby not crediting their calls for democracy and modernity with any credibility at all. This situation decelerates the possibility of evolution in the sense of modernity. Intervention by the occupier Israel (and its protector the U.S.) proves fundamentalism is right; it is a word that in Arabic means "a return to the foundations, to the origins."

The Americans did the same thing in Iraq. Saddam Hussein's regime was certainly totalitarian, but it was definitely not the only one in the Middle East. One can even state that it was an openly secular regime. It "produced" a scientific elite, abolished all extremisms; Sunnis and Shias had progressive ambitions, certainly nationalist, but not anti-Western. The United States destroyed a secular and modern state instead of helping it become a democratic nation. The

United States destroyed it, paving the way for retrograde forces, proving them right. If one analyses the Arab world's contemporary history from this perspective, one should necessarily come to the conclusion that all modernisation attempts have been aborted by imperialist Western powers. And this began starting with Mohammed Ali, the pioneer of Egypt's Nahda (1805-1848), all the way to Saddam Hussein. Without this external factor, our evolution would have been similar to Europe's. Europe evolved to modernity with no external obstructionism. It was even able to overcome internal problems thanks to its colonial intervention abroad. In any case, in Europe events took place within the limits posed by internal contradictions that paved the way for the prospects of dialectical excess. In the Arab world, foreign intervention has always hindered the evolutionary process imposing .negative dialectics in which antithesis leaves no room for synthesis

In your opinion, does the delay, the developmental défaillances, depend on political history, on Western powers? In other words on the history of colonialism? Are there not perhaps also cultural and religious reasons?

There is always space for religious or other extremisms in all civilisations, be they ancient or modern. In normal conditions this kind of extremism is destined to remain marginal. There is extremism also in the United States, with the neo-cons, there were the Red Brigades in Europe.

Extremism as an ideology, as action, has always existed in all civilisations. But when in Lebanon foreign intervention hit the harbour lighthouse, the streets, bridges, civilian homes, it strengthened this religious extremism. In these cases, the entire elite, the entire Lebanese population found themselves obliged as a nation to support Hezbollah. The same happened in Egypt in 1956, and in Iraq, where the people suffered due to a global embargo imposed by the Americans for a whole decade. In the Muslim world it is foreign, colonialist, Western and imperialist intervention that places extremism at the centre of society instead of leaving it on its fringes. When extremist movements find themselves at the centre of society and when imperialist intervention does not cease, the ideology of these movements exercises its hegemony on the whole of society. It reduces liberal voices to silence because it is impossible to side with the West that is attacking one's country. We side with the West when it proposes peace, we approve of the West's democracy, science, humanist values... and all that within the context of cooperation and peace. But when the West attacks us, recanting its own values, we are obliged to ask ourselves why. For a few prisoners, for a stretch of land measuring just a few kilometres, for oil? The West will always have "our" oil, because we – the Arab countries, Iran and other third world countries – need and always will need the West and not only because it buys our oil, but also because it helps us extract it from the depths of the earth, to consume it and commercialize it.

What distances us from the West is its hegemonic tendencies, its imperialist spirit. That is what greatly affects moderate trends in the Arab world, all to the advantage of religious or nationalist extremism. If this was the Marxist era, one can be certain that the young now fighting for Hezbollah would be fighting alongside Marxists or Maoists. It is the same thing, it is not religion-based, it is the reaction of a country, of a people. Marxist, liberal, religious, it is all the same thing. I do not distinguish between the Marxist and the religious. Ideologies always play the same mobilising role, be they liberal or Islamic, Maoist or Leninist.

So you are stating the need to emerge from anti-colonial hatred; that the West should change its methods, stop offending the populations of Arab countries. It takes two to achieve this. With its culture and thanks to Gandhi's teachings, India has done this, for example, overcoming anti-British hatred. Will Arab culture be capable of something similar? What solution do you envisage for this hate-filled situation?

Let me tell you a story. Two months after Huntington had published his famous article on the "clash of civilisations", I was invited to attend a conference on this article at Princeton, in the United States. Huntington also attended. I told him, "Your article is well constructed. You have

used a Marxist kind of analysis. But what exactly was the conclusion you came to? You call on the West, asking it to protect its own interests.” However, this conclusion could be the premise for another “peaceful”, rational and fair conclusion.

We could use the following question as a starting point, “how should the West’s interests be protected?” So I replied, instead of speaking in terms of a “clash of civilisations” we choose and defend “the balance of interests.” You are interested in us and we are interested in you, hence one needs to identify an equilibrium between our needs and yours. You would profit and so would we. In this case, we would profit twice as much. We profit from the West’s experience in the oil industry sector, and not only that, but also in the field of implementing democracy, including respect for human rights, tolerance, justice etc. As far as the West is concerned it would benefit not only from our oil and our markets, but also from our trust and respect.

I clearly explained that our oil is worthless without the West and added, take this oil while at the same time helping your partners, help the countries that have this oil, and those that do not, to develop, so that they even reach the point of consuming European and Western goods, allowing a real rapprochement to take place. Then there is the need to educate people, help them open their minds, encourage liberalism, rationalism etc. What Bush is doing now with the conservatives currently in power in the United States, is exactly the opposite. At the moment Western policy, and especially America’s, is ruled by the logic of war. Look at Afghanistan, Korea, Iraq, Palestine, the Lebanon today and Libya in the past. American policy is characterised by the logics of war and is a policy of interests. Thus the reaction will always be .similar to what happens with Hezbollah or Al Qaeda

These days we are often called upon to attend conferences at which democracy in the Arab world is discussed. It seems to me that the main objective in your perspective is to contain extremists and that this is possible through the changes you have spoken of. Are there also structural problems as far as relations between the Muslim culture and liberal democracy are concerned?

No. Religion is the interpretation of texts. Texts do not speak as such, they are made to speak. When one lives in a conflictual situation such as the current one, the interpretation of holy texts moves towards conflict. Should we live in a peaceful environment in the future, in a context of healthy cooperation, the interpretation of holy texts would change direction. Religious texts are multiple by their very nature. Someone once said, “Anyone can discover whatever they want to find in them, even Satan.” Holy texts are subject to interpretation. Every time the world “changes” it becomes necessary to attribute a new meaning to them. However, considering

that we (Muslims and inhabitants of the Third World) must always confront the hegemony of other more powerful men, it is evident that the religious expression assumes a defensive connotation. We defend our religion, we defend our country, we defend God. However, when the situation changes and hegemony is replaced by peace, by the balance of interests, "we discover" in the texts thousands of verses that order believers to cooperate, to work with others, to do good, to be tolerant. All this is present in religions. So why do religions continue to exist? Because the texts are always ready to be interpreted within the framework of a specific .contexts, but also in the opposite one

This is a perspective shared with other philosophers of the Arab culture such as, for example, Nasr Abu Ziad or Iran's Abdolkarim Soroush. And many others too. This applies to Islam, to Judaism and to Christianity. In the history of Christianity there have been times in which religion played a progressive role, a role for humanity, for the people, but there have also been .times in which, on the contrary, it has played a reactionary role. The same applies to Islam

On this subject, are there significant differences between the various Muslim philosophical schools of thought?

There are of course various philosophical schools of thought, but there is one difference between Christianity and Islam. In Christianity interpretation is guided, oriented, by the Church, within the Church or outside it, but there is always this institution attributing to itself the monopoly of the teachings in the name of its religion. In Islam, instead, there is no church. Each individual, feeling capable of reading and explaining the holy texts, can do so. This is Islam's liberal characteristic that allows every educated person capable of understanding the texts to express their own opinion, to formulate their own comments. This explains why there is no clergy. I speak of Sunni Islam. In Shia Islam things are different, there is a clergy, an .imam who in some ways is rather like the Pope

I have heard these things before, as a theory, but I am under the impression that, in the real world, politics or rather the ensemble of traditions, power, shari'a law, ultimately always has a great influence and exercises a sort of organised pressure.

It is always the same thing, as I explained earlier on. When a great reformer appears, such as the famous Egyptian Mohammed Abduh (1849-1905), his liberal positions are always powerfully echoed in the whole Muslim world. Colonial intervention and imperialism's

hegemony have the opposite effect. When people suffer due to foreign intervention, reform, be it religious or of a different nature, must be characterised by nationalism. Reform is not implemented under occupation. In these cases, religion becomes a matter of identity; it concerns the glory of the past, hence against the "Other" and in this case specifically against the West. You quoted Nasr Abu Zayd. So basically what did Zayd do? He tried to question the notion of "text" as referred to the Koran. In reality, he only emphasised well-known perspectives in the literature of the Koran's commentators, especially experts on what are known as "the sciences of the Koran", hence an ensemble of knowledge needed to devote oneself to the interpretation of the Koran. The elders freely debated the issues posed in the field. They practiced their right to "Ijtihad", meaning the use of the effort (juhd) made by reason to understand and also complete the religious text so that its meaning conforms with what reason, physical and social experience proposes. In this scientific context, Abu Zayd did not move beyond what has "already been said". However, when he took a stand against extremists (and he did so with a controversial text that became the introduction to his book), they attacked him. They said, "You have attacked the Koran's timelessness" comparing its texts with historical circumstances. They are well aware that one of the conditions required for interpreting the Koran is knowledge of what doctors of the "sciences of the Koran" specifically describe as "the reasons" for the revelation of the Koranic verses (seeing the Koran's revelation took place by "fragments" reacting to known circumstances and that this lasted over twenty years). In my opinion, in cases such as this one, the problem concerns the strategy of the .discourse

I understand, but before colonialism, centuries ago, when there was no occupation of the Arab world, politics was very powerful, very despotic, and religion was used by politics. In the 14th century, Ibn Khaldun had already said, "Those who want to work, those who want to grow, must leave the country." This occurred well before colonialism.

I believe that Ibn Khaldun expressed himself in this manner referring to a specific situation. He did not make this expression one of his precepts. However, there is a question I am always posed about this point. You refer to a general level. Your question is reduced to asking why Islamic civilisation entered a phase of decadence, a state of sclerosis. Why? I do not think one can answer this kind of question by referring to one or even more causes. These are effectively phenomena that escape determination. One could ask the same question regards to Greek civilisation. Why was it that just after Aristotle it fell into such a period of decadence? Why did the Egyptian Pharaonic civilisation suffer the same fate? Why did Roman civilisation, the great

Rome, also in turn fall into decadence? It is a historical phenomenon that cannot be explained by one cause or another. It is not possible. It is complicated. Wars have certainly always played a very important role. The English historian Toynbee, who studied the history of humankind until the end of World War II, came to the following conclusion: war is the first cause of the decadence of a civilisation. And he said that war is the cancer of Western civilisation. As happens with cancer, one does not initially perceive the decadence, one does not realise that war is the path that leads to decadence. It begins just like cancer, which then spreads to the whole body until, in the end, it is no longer possible to find a solution. War starts with little things to then expand to larger ones

What are the reasons that spark a process of economic and social decadence etc.? Why was there a European Renaissance during the same period? These are things that cannot be explained just with one reason or another; it is the history of humankind, the philosophy of history, just as happened to Greek civilisation etc.

Obviously there are other factors, also natural ones that contribute to decadence, such as earthquakes or floods. There are waves of tribal conquerors, Bedouin riders arriving from uncivilised towns, coming from far away and imposing tribal life styles. Then there are tribal traditions that in our countries have not yet been overcome. In Europe they were surpassed by industry, but not in our countries; we have no industries and so the countryside remains unchanged and tribal customs still thrive today

In the history of Western philosophy one can clearly identify moments in which thinking was able to open to a plural dimension, that of other cultures; times, represented for example by Abelard in the Middle Ages, Nicola Cusan, Montaigne, and many thinkers of the Enlightenment period, and today by someone like Charles Taylor. This is a school of thought capable of building bridges towards others, of considering other cultures as equal from a cognitive perspective. So the question is: At what moments in history did Arab culture experience such openness in the past and the present?

The epic of Muslim civilisation took place in the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries. During those centuries an incomparable openness developed in the lands of Islam. As I explain in my book entitled *The Formation of Arab Reason* (1), the Arab conquest of the lands of the two empires, Persian and Byzantine, ended with the conquest of Arab reason by the cultural legacy of these two empires. Arab-Islamic civilisation was open to all schools of thought, and

this openness was its specific characteristic. It became reality in the multidimensional ideas of Ghazali, Ibn Sinan, Ibn Rushd and others.

However, they were followed in the 14th century by Shatibì (Abu Ishaq ibn Musa Shatibì), a jurist who drafted new rules for the reorganisation of shari'a, not based on analogies, judging new events by comparing them to those judged by the texts and by tradition, but based on God's objectives, hence on the basis of humankind's common interest. He states that this interest consists of - according to what is expressed by all scholars of the three revealed religions - five needs; saving soul, reason, progenitors, wealth and religion. These five needs must be the pillars of all interpretations of religious texts. They inspire the whole religion, all precepts, the entire code, both penal and civil. Hence, this was a renewal. The issue of Islam's religious reform was posed long before Shatibi. In the 2nd century of the Hegira, the existence of a "hadith" (word of the Prophet) was reported, already stated that, "Every one hundred years God sends he who will renew the religion of his community."

It is very clearly an awareness of the need to implement reform. But this can move in two directions, forwards or backwards. If a community finds it must battle against foreign attackers of the colonial kind, reform moves backwards in search of support and hope in the past. This is .(the case of the Salafite school of thought (salaf means ancestor

Do you believe Islam poses obstacles of a religious, ideological or dogmatic nature to the concept of equal citizenship for people belonging to other cultures and religions?

No. Ideology that is religious, or of another nature, plays its own role in cases in which there are given socio-cultural or economic conditions. Per se, an ideology does not create states. Ibn Khaldun said that in order to create a state, first one needs the Assabia, which means a need for tribal alliances, and that of the social and material forces of the time. Then comes ideology as a mobilising force. Ideology's essence consists in mobilising people, the groups. It consists of transforming the desired future into the imagined "reality", a reality that incites action. This is the revolutionary role of an ideology, be it religious, Marxist or of another nature. But ideology does not create history. Ideology is the manifestation, the reflex of material factors in the people's imagination. One does not need to be a Marxist to acknowledge the role played by ideology. It is a socio-cultural truth one can see both in Marx's industrial society and in Ibn Khaldun's tribal society. Without a reality "mature" for change there can be no mobilising .ideology

Translated from the Italian version by Francesca Simmons. This interview was published by

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Note

(1) First of four books on Critique de la raison arabe; the second Structure de la raison arabe, .the third La raison politique arabe, the fourth La raison éthique arabe