

THE 'ARAB SPRING'

SOME REFLECTIONS FROM THE CROSSROADS

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The intention of this paper is to offer a few reflections following the recent dramatic events taking place in the Arab world, especially in the context of a resurgent Islam both there and in Europe, as observed from a member state of the European Union that has received more than its fair share of conflict and cross-cultural relations.

The 'Arab Spring' and its development

The so-called "Arab Spring" that was set in motion in December 2010 by a popular uprising in Tunis has now spread and transformed almost the entire political landscape of North Africa and parts of the Middle-East, as well as some areas of the Arabian Gulf. I am deliberately using this turn of phrase with regards to the common name given to the rapidly unfolding events within the Arab world. The term itself is borrowed from those events that took place in central Europe in 1968, later labelled as the 'Prague Spring'. These were triggered by a short-lived movement in the former state of Czechoslovakia that advocated a more democratic structure within the Communist Party as well as freedom from Warsaw Pact armies.¹ The leader of this movement was none other than the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Alexander Dubček. In his words, it aimed at promoting "Communism with a human face".

One has yet to see whether the uprisings in the Arab world will lead to a more stable and democratic environment in this region.² Indeed, one would be able to

¹ It is interesting to note that both the 'Prague Spring' and the 'Arab Spring' attracted media attention worldwide by way of two incidents involving the self-immolation of young people: Jan Palach, a university student who set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square (Prague) in order to protest against the renewed suppression of free-speech; and Mohammed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Sidi Bouzid (Tunisia) who set himself on fire in protest against the confiscation of his wares and what he considered to be continuous harassment and humiliation at hands of the market police. These two tragic incidents came to symbolize the revolutionary movements in Czechoslovakia and in Tunisia respectively.

² Bruce Thornton, *The Arab Winter Approaches*, in *Defining Ideas*, November 22, 2011, on the website

speak of real democracy only if free and fair elections become *the point of departure for*, rather than the *final destination of*, the democratic process.³ The movement has yet to prove its credentials.

Back in 1996, when Al-Qa'ida was not yet making headlines, and calls for the adoption of the principles of Sharī'a in Muslim countries were not so common, Bernard Lewis came up with this very interesting observation:

Even if we confine ourselves to speaking of Islam as a religion, significant distinctions must be drawn. First, there is what Muslims themselves would call the original, pristine, pure Islam of the Koran and the hadith (the traditions of the Prophet Mohammed) before it became corrupted by the backsliding of later generations. Second, there is the Islam of the doctors of the holy law, of the magnificent intellectual structure of classical Islamic jurisprudence and theology. Most recently, there is the neo-Islam of the so-called fundamentalists who introduce ideas unknown alike to the Koran, the hadith, or the classical doctrines of the faith.

Clearly this last version of Islam is incompatible with liberal democracy, as the fundamentalists themselves would be the first to say: they regard liberal democracy with contempt as a corrupt and corrupting form of government. They are willing to see it, at best, as an avenue to power, but an avenue that runs one way only.⁴

At the same time, one cannot expect this region, which possesses a totally different culture from European societies and those on the other side of the Atlantic, to adopt the liberal brand of democracy that is integral to the latter.⁵ Furthermore, one also has to keep in mind that liberal democracy, which back in 1990 had been trumpeted by the historian Francis Fukuyama as bringing about the end of history through the victory of consumer culture,⁶ is not necessarily the best and most beneficial, even for European societies today.

of the Hoover Institution: <http://www.hoover.org/publications/defining-ideas/article/100526>, as well as Sam Dagher, *An 'Arab Winter' Chills Christians*, on the website of *The Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2011:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203710704577053221510203422.html>

³ In Tunisia the Salafi movement has already been advocating rule according to the principles of *sharī'a* rather than secular law in the running of the country. See:

<http://www.vancouversun.com/sports/Tunisia+birthplace+Arab+Spring+hardline+Islam+emerges+threat/7009527/story.html>

⁴ Bernard Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview," *Journal of Democracy* 7.2 (1996) p. 54 in <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/blewis.htm> Accessed 03.08.2012

⁵ See the interesting interview carried out by Barry Weiss with Bernard Lewis entitled *The Tyrannies are Doomed* and published in *The Wall Street Journal* (Online Edition) April 2, 2011: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703712504576234601480205330.html>. See also the report filed by Mukul Devichand, *Rachid Gannouchi on Britain, Islam, and liberal democracy*, for BBC Radio 4, 12 February 2012: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-16932923>

⁶ Fukuyama originally launched his theory in a 1989 article (see Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?' *The National Interest* [Summer 1989], pp. 3-17). He later expanded his ideas and published them in a book in 1992 entitled *The End of History and the Last Man*.

One would hope, however, that the freedom from oppressive and corrupt regimes won at such a high cost in terms of human lives would also bring about the full exercise of basic human rights. There are two specific rights in the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights that have never been implemented in any country in the Arab world (nor in the Muslim world at large) irrespective of the natures of governments then in power. I am referring to Article 16 and Article 18 of the U.N. Declaration, the first referring to the right to marry and to found a family, and the second referring to freedom of religion (which is different from freedom of worship):

Article 16.

(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

(3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State

Article 18.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.⁷

If it wishes to live up to its name, the 'Arab Spring' must indeed herald the beginning of a new era in terms of human rights for all citizens of the Arab countries involved, irrespective of race, sex or religion. Recent violence against Christians in Egypt and in Syria has been a cause of concern for the future of religious minorities in these as well as in other Muslim-majority countries in North Africa and the Middle-East.

Social upheaval in these regions has also spilled out beyond the frontiers of the Arab world, and Malta is by no means an exception to this phenomenon. The first consequence has been the dramatic increase in the number of illegal migrants reaching our shores and those of other countries in southern Europe. Before discussing this issue, however, it would be useful to recall some salient historical points concerning the Maltese archipelago.

⁷ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#atop> Accessed 05.08.2012.

A few historical notes concerning Malta

The Maltese Islands are strategically situated right in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea at the crossroads between two continents (Europe and Africa), as well as between two different worlds and two different cultures. According to the latest UN report (2011) they occupy an area of 316 sq. kilometres with a population of 418,000. For centuries the country was considered a bastion of Christendom against the marauding corsairs hailing mainly from North Africa and the encroaching military and naval might in general of the Ottoman Empire. In 1530 the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V ceded the Maltese Islands to the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta as a fiefdom. Owing to the Order's presence the following 268 years were marked by a history of mutual hostility between the Knights and the then expanding Ottoman Empire. The Order's rule in Malta also helped secure the Catholic faith in the islands and enhance the contribution of the Catholic Church in the fields of culture, the arts, education and philanthropy. Regarding education and philanthropy the contribution of the Church in Malta through religious orders and congregations was – and still is – immense. Generation after generation of orphans or children hailing from problem families have found love and solace, as well as a solid education (especially in the crafts) that has helped them forge for themselves a future and build good families.

The French occupation of Malta, albeit brief (1798-1800), and subsequent British rule (1800-1964) contributed to the first exposure of Maltese society to secular thought. The French were more violent in this regard, looting the churches and planning the closure and occupation of religious houses. The British authorities, however, were more astute in their policies. Having realized that the Church wielded great influence over Maltese society they strove to implement their policies without provoking unnecessary tensions with the hierarchy.

Malta gained its independence from Britain on the 21st of September 1964 and was declared a republic by an overwhelming majority vote in parliament on the 13th of December 1974. The country joined the European Union on the 1st of May 2004 and adopted the euro as its currency on the 1st of January 2008.

Illegal migration and Islamophobia

In recent years Muslim presence in Malta has increased through illegal

immigration, a phenomenon that is being faced by all southern European countries (especially Italy, France, and Spain). Malta is seen by such migrants as a stepping stone rather than a place where they could actually settle down. However, their arrival in ever-increasing numbers is taking its toll on the resources that the island has at its disposal. Unlike, for example, the island of Lampedusa – which is part of the Italian state – Malta is not only a small island, it is also a sovereign state.

It is quite clear that these continuous waves of illegal immigration reach our shores mainly via Libya. Even today the authorities there state that they cannot be held accountable for such a phenomenon, because the country has a long shoreline that cannot possibly be fully controlled. This is a strange declaration given the state of heightened security which the Libyan government still imposes even in the post-Qadāfi era. Furthermore, this phenomenon had been considered by Mu‘ammar al-Qadāfi himself as an effective method for what he envisaged would lead to the Islamization of Europe (see attached files QADHAFI-IMMIGRATION-001; QADHAFI-IMMIGRATION-002 accessed from his own personal website <http://algaddafi.org/> whose contents have been either restricted or removed, as well as the following weblink: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11139345>). One might well dismiss these declarations as mere ranting of a madman; nevertheless, they were uttered when he was still head of state and very much in control of his country and continuously holding European states hostage.⁸ Needless to say, Malta is still bearing the brunt of such policies. One must also highlight the fact that in both the detention as well as the open centres there are cases of overt and covert intimidation on the part of some Muslim illegal migrants against their Christian counterparts.

Islamophobia exists in Malta just as it exists in the rest of Europe. This phenomenon surfaces periodically in subtle and not so subtle ways. Just as with other phobias directed against religions as such (even *Christiano*-phobia is alive and well) it is to be condemned outright. In doing so, however, one has to clarify two points: First, Islamophobia is certainly not fuelled by Christian or, specifically in the case of Malta, by overwhelming Catholic sentiment, as some local bloggers and so-called ‘opinion leaders’ who have their own agendas often claim. Secondly, that Islamophobia in Europe is on the increase is not only due to demagoguery employed

⁸ See the full transcript of Qadāfi’s address to the United Nations General Assembly on the 23rd September 2009 in which he demanded the sum of 7.7 trillion dollars in order to stem the tide of immigration from the African continent to Europe: <http://metaexistence.org/gaddafispeech.htm>

by pro-fascist extremists such as Geert Wilders or the BNP, or their Maltese equivalent *Imperium Europa*, but also to the sometimes inflammatory rhetoric adopted by Muslim orators in Europe such as ‘Umar al-Bakrī and Abū Ḥamza al-Maṣrī.

Here in Malta the media, and especially the secular press, contribute their own share of one-sided reporting, which only exacerbates an already tense situation by highlighting violence and poor health conditions existing in detention centres for illegal migrants (which is true)⁹ without taking the trouble to research the causes of such tension. They rightly criticize high-handedness, but rarely highlight the frustration almost bordering on despair suffered also by those who are entrusted with the running of these centres.¹⁰ Bearing such circumstances in mind it is most unfortunate that the truth becomes the first victim of public opinion and public outrage. The situation is not rendered any better by other EU member states, who insist that the Maltese government respect human rights (which it is duty bound to do), but then do not so much as lift a finger in order to share the burden of illegal migration that is taking its toll on the country’s resources.¹¹ These same states would be well-advised to consider investing in the countries of origin of these illegal migrants, thereby contributing to the creation of a solid infrastructure that would provide a modern system of education and, consequently, create jobs. It is all too easy to criticize and impose burdens on others; it is much more demanding to roll up one’s sleeves and do something in order to improve the situation.

Multiculturalism

Another phenomenon that is much talked about but seldom understood is ‘multiculturalism’, which, alas, has become a much-used (and abused) expression. Many frequently tend to fall into the trap of identifying multiculturalism with religious

⁹ See Kristina Chetcuti, “Migrants at risk of mental illnesses: Migrants’ new lives trigger problems” in *The Times* (Malta), Saturday, July 7, 2012:

<http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20120707/local/Migrants-at-risk-of-mental-illnesses.427471>

¹⁰ For one such rare article see Bertrand Borg, “Despair of soldiers in ‘obscene’ Safi centre,” in *The Sunday Times* (Malta), Sunday, July 22, 2012:

<http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20120722/local/Despair-of-soldiers-in-obscene-Safi-centre.429531>

¹¹ Malta’s plight had already been highlighted as far back as 2006. See Ariadne Massa, “Europe ‘must pull up its socks and help Malta’”, in *The Times* (Malta), Wednesday, November 1, 2006:

<http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20061101/local/europe-must-pull-up-its-socks-and-help-malta.36710>

diversity. They are not mutually exclusive, but they are distinct. One may, for example, belong to the same religion as the majority of a given society and yet belong to a different culture.

It is all too obvious that the European Union as a whole has in fact undergone a process of profound transformation after decades of immigration, especially from the Balkans and the Slavic regions following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and recently from the Middle East and from North African countries. The scale and speed with which this process is taking place is unprecedented in European history. As a phenomenon it has brought about awareness of the non-European “other” in our midst. The problem arises when multiculturalism becomes, on the one hand an extension of relativism and, on the other hand, a subtle way of avoiding integration into the host society because such a move is seen as a threat to the preservation of one’s religious and cultural heritage.

We hear and read much about the need to achieve a tolerant and multicultural society, but with such a vague and ill-defined approach we would risk belonging nowhere and everywhere. In this regard one would also be well-advised to heed the words of Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks when he writes that “tolerance means ignoring differences. Multiculturalism means emphasizing them. You can have tolerance and multiculturalism, but not both.”¹²

This same approach might well do away with the sense of belonging that is essential for full integration as well as for maintaining harmony and progress within a given society. Such elements as local customs, tradition, and citizenship all lie at the core of any particular society. If you remove them you will end up, not with “multiculturalism”, but with “indifference”. As Sacks rightly points out:

The good news about multiculturalism is that it honours multiple identities; the bad news is that it leaves us with too little to bind us together as a society in pursuit of the common good. That is society as a hotel: where we live but not where we belong. The very idea of belonging – of society as home – has become problematic, not just for minorities but for the majority as well.¹³

¹² Jonathan Sacks, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

¹³ Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society*, Continuum, London 2007, p. 86. See also a report on recent cases where Islamic jurisprudence has clashed with state law in some European countries:
<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2012/07/31/we-should-respect-minority-religious-laws-muslim-jewish-or-hindu-but-only-if-they-accept-our-over-arching-tradition-of-liberty-under-the-law-of-england/>

A clash of civilizations?

Just as with “multiculturalism” the phrase “clash of civilizations” has now turned into a cliché that is being constantly spouted *ad nauseam*. The underlying threat facing European societies today, including Malta in a few years’ time, is not a “clash of civilizations”. It is rather *a confrontation between a secularism that is being transformed into a religion and an Islam that is being increasingly portrayed as an ideology*.

On the one hand, we have a secularism that is becoming increasingly obsessed with wanting to edit religion out of the public forum by applying means that are reminiscent of a religious fanaticism of bygone times: ridicule, demonize, and destroy. Contrary to secularity, secularism is not happy with the mere drawing of the distinction between religion and state and the necessity on the part of both to maintain their autonomy while at the same time collaborating for the common good. As a movement secularism is bent on desecrating all those symbols and beliefs that religious people hold dear, and which they consider an integral part of their life and which define their role in society. It does not limit itself to criticizing religious beliefs and attitudes; it enthusiastically holds them up to public ridicule in order to humiliate them and, subsequently, edit them out of existence *permanently*.¹⁴

As Martin Newland, former editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, has so well observed, “Secular society does not allow for openly religious people to be seen as normal and well-adjusted. There always seems to be a desire to pigeon-hole them as semi-rational, spiritual fifth columnists.”¹⁵ This attitude has been made painfully clear by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's admission some years ago during an interview on the BBC One series *The Blair Years* that “you talk about it [religion] in our [British] system and, frankly, people do think you're a nutter”.¹⁶

It would also be useful to refer to the judgement handed down by the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of Refah Partisi vs Turkey (13 .02.2003) which stated that “Mindful of the importance for survival of the democratic regime of ensuring respect for the principle of secularism in Turkey, the Court considers that the Constitutional Court was justified in holding that Refah’s policy of establishing sharia was incompatible with democracy”. See: <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-60936>

¹⁴ At the height of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, the *Jyllands-Posten* came up with a cartoon depicting St. Joseph pointing an accusing finger at the Virgin Mary with the child Jesus in her arms. The caption below it read: “I did not have sexual relations with that woman!” Long before the film *Submission* was aired on Dutch television, Theo van Gogh had already caused many an uproar by pouring scorn and abuse on Dutch Jews and by calling Jesus Christ “that rotten fish from Nazareth”. See Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam*, Atlantic Books, London, 2006, p. 91.

¹⁵ Martin Newland, ‘I am a Catholic. I’m also sane. But these days people find it hard to accept that religion and rationality can co-exist’: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/oct/16/politics.homeaffairs>. Accessed 03.08.2012.

¹⁶ This statement was confirmed by his former spokesman Alastair Campbell – known for having once told reporters: “We don’t do God” – when he stated that the UK electorate was “a bit wary of politicians

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, has frequently expressed his disappointment at the lack of sensitivity on the part of European politicians and legislators to address religious concerns, especially their refusal to mention the all-too-obvious contribution Christianity has made to European society and culture. The reason given for this lacuna is that today's Europe is a multi-cultural society, and one must not seek to give precedence to one religion over another, the latter being presumably Islam. On this point Ratzinger once made the following reflection:

Muslims feel threatened, not by the foundations of our Christian morality, but by the cynicism of a secularized culture that denies its own foundations... it is not the mention of God that offends those who belong to other religions; rather it is the attempt to construct the human community in a manner that absolutely excludes God.¹⁷

It is indeed ironic that in such cases secularism manipulates a particular religion in order to adopt a pseudo-neutral attitude.

At the same time European societies are being faced with Islamic movements that seek to present religious belief and conduct as homogenous, doing away with inculturation and seeking to present a standard mode of belief and conduct. The sometimes enforced wearing of the *hiğāb* (or the *niqāb*), the increase in the number of Muslim men wearing long beards, the frequent branding of European societies as decadent, immoral and corrupt are typical of this attitude.

This state of affairs is being aggravated by the continuous and persistent application on the part of the secular media (especially by so-called 'religious affairs correspondents') of ideological terms to religion, any religion. Terms such as "conservative", "liberal", "hardline", "progressive", "radical", and "moderate" make no sense in religion, where God is supposed to lie at the centre of any discourse.

Citizenship and belief

Modern European societies face the phenomenon of populations whose roots are culturally and religiously diverse. Here one needs to be reminded that the modern democratic nation is also based on the notion that there is a public domain in which a

who go on about God".

See http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk_news/politics/7111620.stm published on 25th November 2007.

¹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2006, p. 33.

multiplicity of communities with different traditions (including religious ones) can join in that collective enterprise which is called citizenship.

In many European countries we are witnessing larger societies disintegrate into religiously, culturally or ethnically defined identities. The more plural and multi-religious a society we become, the more we need to reflect upon what holds us together. In the words of Sir Jonathan Sacks, “we each have to be bilingual.”¹⁸ Following his line of thinking “there is a first and public language of citizenship which we have to learn if we are to live together”. Then “there is a variety of second languages which connect us to our local framework of relationships: to family and group and the traditions that underlie them. If we are to achieve integration without assimilation, it is of the utmost importance that each language be given its due.”¹⁹ Our second languages are cultivated in the context of families, which are the first educators as well as our intermediaries between the individual and the state. They are where we acquire and learn our identities, where we develop a sense of belonging and obligation. *Pluralism must not be reduced to neutrality.*²⁰

We would, however, be ill-advised to ignore our belonging to the wider community brought into existence by citizenship. Recent events in various European countries have proven that such a stand creates sectarian leadership, the politics of protest, single issue lobbies, and frequently, acts of violence. Keeping alive the notion of citizenship demands working and collaborating *for the common good.*²¹ And herein may lie a momentous possibility, not in stubborn entrenchment and isolation within one’s own religious convictions, but in encountering and understanding secular society and pointing toward a meaning, purpose and direction that lie beyond its present horizons: what the Russian Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément has aptly described, albeit in a different context, as *prophetic partnership.*²²

¹⁸ Jonathan Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality and Society in a Secular Age*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1991, p. 66f.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ On May 9, 2005 the Commission of the Bishops’ Conference of the European Community (COMECE) published a document entitled *The Evolution of the European Union and the Responsibility of Catholics*. As regards the contribution to the common good n. 42 states the following:

As Christians we share the conviction that, although politics is not everything, political action is important for our faith and our faith is important for our political engagement... When we have to take decisions, the Common Good of humanity must be our ultimate criterion. At the same time, we must be able to distinguish between levels of our actions, whilst giving appropriate importance to provisional attitudes. For it is there in the concrete reality of our commitments, that our spiritual fulfillment is realized.

²² Olivier Clément, “Witnessing in a Secularized Society,” in George Lemopoulos (ed.), *Your Will Be*

In this perspective we would do well to take as a guiding principle the *Final Statement* issued at the end of a conference organized by the Committee for Relations with Muslims in Europe of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) and the Conference of European Churches (CEC) [see attached files MECHELEN-2008E; MECHELEN-2008-F]. The meeting was held in Mechelen in Belgium between October 20th to 23rd 2008 in order to discuss the topic: *BEING A CITIZEN OF EUROPE AND A PERSON OF FAITH: CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS AS ACTIVE PARTNERS IN EUROPEAN SOCIETIES*.

Conclusion

In the European context a pluralistic society requires communities wherein the individual feels that his/her values are being safeguarded and handed down to the next generation, together with an over-arching sense of national community where different groups take an active part in their quest for the common good. Only in this manner can society truly become a community of communities.

Finally, although the situation in the Arab world remains volatile and fluid, it is also a golden opportunity to take up the challenge of exploring what it means to be a citizen and a person of faith. It still remains to be seen whether religious diversity and shared citizenship are allowed to proceed hand in hand. Liberal democracy need not be a *sine qua non* for this development, but the respect and adoption of basic human rights are a must.

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