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Input

V. Politics and religion: Re-defining the relationship in diverse societies?

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From the past to the future of politics and Islam in North Africa

Introduction

The case of Islam is mostly characterized by the fact that the prophet was known to provide spiritual guidance, as he was a political leader. This duality used to come up very often, as his political duties were certainly not related to God. In fact, he used to change his strategies based on his apostles' opinions and propositions.

Besides, this was pretty much the tendency in the middle age practically in all parts of the world: there were no clear borders between religion and politics. That also explains why most of Islamic states chiefs were referred to as « commanders of the 'believers' » or « princes of Muslims » or « khalifes of Muslims ».

And with the age of enlightenment came a gradual scission between what was known as personal believes and public affairs management. However, North Africa didn't notice the same evolution as the paradigm stayed and the old conception of politics and religion remained up to date.

On the other hand, that explains why Islam began to be seen as the unique solution to civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental problems, as it was believed that these problems came from 'staying away' from religion.

However, there were, from time to time, some thinkers who tried to build politics on human responsibility, and I will mention two cases:

1- Averroes : truth and its diverse ways

Averroes thought that the truth could be reached and understood by many means. Each mean corresponds to a way of understanding and believing. And this concerns human being, world and God. As one could understand the world by logical reasoning and other will find poetical picture better to understand the same topic. That means that there are many methods to reach the truth of human being, the world and God. "These [common] methods in religion are of four classes:

One of them occurs where the method is common, yet special-ized in two respects: i.e. where it is certain in its concepts and judgments, in spite of being rhetorical or dialectical. These syllogisms are those whose premises, in spite of being based on accepted ideas or on opinions, are accidentally certain, and whose conclusions are accidentally to be taken in their

direct meaning without symbolization. Scriptural texts of this class have no allegorical interpretations, and anyone who denies them or interprets them allegorically is an unbeliever. The second class occurs where the premises, in spite of being based on accepted ideas or on opinions, are certain, and where the conclusions are symbols for the things which it was intended to conclude. [Texts of] this [class], i.e. their conclusions, admits of allegorical interpretation.

The third is the reverse of this: it occurs where the conclusions are the very things which it was intended to conclude, while the premises are based on accepted ideas or on opinions without being accidentally certain. [Texts of] this [class] also, i.e. their conclusions, do not admit of allegorical interpretation, but their premises may do so.

The fourth [class] occurs where the premises are based on accepted ideas or opinions, without being accidentally certain, and where the conclusions are symbols for what it was intended to conclude. In these cases the duty of the elite is to interpret them allegorically, while the duty of the masses is to take them in their apparent meaning”(1).

And these ways depend on the ways of thinking that distinguish people from each other. Therefore, the truth can be reached even through poetic speech, dialectical speech or rhetorical speech or demonstrative speech.

That means that politics whether it's seen as a practice or a study object gives a sense of responsibility to people since they have the possibility to reach the core message through different kinds of speeches.

Moreover, Averroes was convinced that religious matters were a lot different from political ones as he translated Plato's philosophy and Aristotle's works. But he couldn't express himself at that time as the tendency was to believe that politics and religion were pretty much part of the same field.

2- Ali Abderraziq: political matters are human responsibilities

In the beginning of the 20th century, Abderraziq tried with a lot of skills, to build politics based on human responsibilities. For that he gave a lot of examples from Hadith and from the experience of many Muslim leaders, including the prophet Mohammed. In his work, he separated between religion and politics. Therefore, his work can be considered as the one that made a definite separation between political and religious matters. Abderraziq didn't use the concept of secularism but he also didn't put the Islamic borders in politics as European thinkers of enlightenment era did.

In fact, his book about the foundation of power in Islam raised up some violent discussions about what is Islam and what are politics. Abderraziq divided his point of view into seven main points. The masters of Al Alzhar institute's formulated them as accusations like this (2):

- 1- He made of Islam a pure religion without any relation with power execution of life matters;
- 2- Islam doesn't forbid to say that Jihad of the prophet was not for informing about Islam but for power;
- 3- The system of power, at prophet days, was ambiguous;
- 4- The function of the Prophet is to inform about Islam without any power organization or execution;
- 5- He denied that the companions of the Prophet believed in the concept "Imam", who is supposed to care about the Nation's matters in life as well as in religion;
- 6- He denied that justice could be a religious function;

¹ - Averroës. *Decisive Treatise* and Epistle Dedicatory, translation, with introduction and notes, by Charles E. Butterworth, Brigham Young University Press, Provo, Utah, 2001, pp: 159-161.

² - Mohamed Amara, *Islam and politics: a response to the Suspicions of seculars*, Ashuruq Adawliya, Cairo, 2008, p: 152.

7- The government of Abubakr (first Caliph) was a non-religious one.

Later, when another extension of the same point of view tried to help Al Azhar, by formulating two questions, addressed to seculars:

- 1- "Which ideology is able to make the nation stand up and face current challenges?"
 - 2- "What is the nation's "message"? And is it supposed to teach to the rest of the world?"
- (3)

Both these questions show that the confusion between religion and economic/ political point of views still exists as a fallacy. Referring to the modern education, we know that anyone can teach anyone. And who pretends having THE truth (which one? The scientific or the spiritual one?) must prove it every day. And that means that (this) "moslem" pretends that the others are "nonages", as the term of nonage was defined by Kant (4).

3- Questions and issues

Between the first point of view that didn't separate political from religious practices, which gives a religious meaning to the political practices, and the second point of view that tries to rationalize politics by introducing the criteria of human responsibility in political matters, I would like to focus on some paradoxes that can be brought out from the relationship between religion and politics in North Africa:

a) How can we look at politics and religion from the point of view of responsibility and impunity while facing disasters? Who is politically responsible for deviation from religion? Is there anyone who can share with God « accountancy »? Why? And how? Can people sanction the bad manners of the public affairs management? Or must they believe that it is their own destiny?

b) How can we understand and choose to live in democracy or in autocracy? Do we really have the choice or can we « choose » the democracy by « imposing » the point of view of autocracy?

c) How can we solve the problem of progress and regression? How can we be progressive from a religious perspective? Is everybody contributing to the best understanding of religion so every generation adds its experience and its knowledge or is the model just to « go back to a time from history »? The same question stands in politics: do we recognize the changes of our values and of our conception of the human being and give rights without limits or do we have to manage the public affairs without considering human interest?

Conclusion

In fact, the political thinkers have never been able to give an alternative to the relational state, because (even if they are in the opposition) they deal with the same mechanisms. They stay deeply faithful to the fact that they consider themselves as the savers (at the metaphysical level) and never tried to concretize the function of the politician as being a manager of public affairs with temporary permission of the voters who have the real power.

The problem is not to copy one (or more) of the European secular experiences, but build another intellectual area that allow a deep progress in the representation of the political actions as a human action. This is must mean that political programs and orientations are a subject of all kind of critics, because that is the guarantee that we'll make politics better and better for more and more respect of human rights.

³ - Ibid, p: 154.

⁴ - Kant (E), What Is Enlightenment (1784), edited by : Hames Schmid, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1996.