

3

Beyond Profanity and Fundamentalism

Reflections about the coexistence between secular and religious cultures

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Introduction

West and East between Profanity and Fundamentalism

The secularism of the western world is characterized by the separation of religion and state, of religion and science, of religion and economy or of religion and the individual freedom. Due to its strong connection between religion and politics, religion and the society it is not this way in the Islamic world.

So it is no surprise that there are tensions between the Islamic and the secular Western world. We will discuss today about one of the biggest problems of today.

In the western liberal and secular way of thinking only a secular state is able to guarantee the necessary peaceful, mutual cooperative structural

complement of religion and politics. It combines the two worlds - separated but nevertheless merged.

A total separation of the subsystems leads to the kind of secularism which nowadays triggers a moral crisis. If there are no more enough interactions between religion and politics, economy and ethics, science and culture, individualism and society, the sustainability of this culture is in real danger.

A lot of people even in the west believe that this pluralistic culture is in a moral and cultural decline. They fear that our secularity has fallen into profanity, a primitive form of economism and hedonism.

On the other hand the Muslim world is in an economic decline. If both premodern and modern societies are suffering from a feeling of decline, they should cooperate to find third ways in-between, between profanity and fundamentalism.

A moral crisis and a crisis of modernity

In his book “Bowling alone” Robert Putnam describes a western society, in which the social capital is in decline. This could be seen not only in the breakdown of families and communities, but across the whole range of civic and social engagements. Fewer people are joining voluntary groups, church attendance is down. The young are markedly less interested than their parents in politics.

The western culture has to learn from the Muslim culture as well. The new economy leads to an obsolescence of loyalty. The sheer pressure of change means, that jobs are no longer secure. Companies are constantly “downsizing”, “deselecting” or re-engineering, shedding employees or putting them on part-time or project-specific contracts. It is hard to know who owes loyalty to whom, or whether the word has any relevance at all in the contemporary world.

The modern world with its radical pluralism leads to a confusion of the minds. We can interpret the totalitarian answers to that confusion as an attempt to enforce the recombination of the separated ways. But this way, like fundamentalism, destroys the complexities and the chances for complementarity, because it destroys pluralism.

Islam, down through the years, has thrived when it fostered a culture of tolerance, as in Moorish Spain. But in modern form, in too many cases Islam has been captured and interpreted by spiritual leaders who do not embrace a culture of tolerance, change or innovation.

Many of the Muslim countries do not globalize well, although there are some of exceptions, which tend to be more secular Muslim nations. In a world where the single greatest advantage a culture can have is the ability to foster adoptability, the Muslim world today is too much dominated by a religious values and by a system that privileges the men from birth on. A system that privileges the men from birth on, David Landes argues, simply because they are male is even bad for the

men. It builds in theme a sense of entitlement that discourages what it takes to improve, to advance, and to achieve.

The clash of the premodern and the modern paradigm enforces the search for a third way beyond the different but similar crises. Our hope is, that the complementary way is not utopian. It is rooted in the best tradition of the dialectic philosophy. The postmodern way would be not the separation and not the reunification of the disunited elements, but the cooperation between them.

A total separation of the subsystems leads to the kind of secularism, which nowadays constitutes a moral crisis. If there are no interactions between religion and politics, economy and ethics, science and culture, individualism and society, the sustainability of this culture is in real danger.

When tolerance is the norm, everyone flourishes - because tolerance breeds trust, and trust is the foundation of innovation and entrepreneurship. Increase the level of trust in any group, company, or society, and only good things happen. China began its astounding commercial and industrial take-off only when Mao Zedong`s intolerant form of communism was scrapped in favour of what might be called authoritarian laissez-faire.

Fundamentalism is no answer, it just symbolizes a crisis of disintegration within the process of modernization. The Muslim world

needs more modernization and the western world needs more modesty and sustainability.

Fundamentalism leads even to a war of confessions

For the Middle East, the American political scientist Samuel Huntington's (1927-2008) analysis of the "Clash of Civilizations" was even too optimistic.

Here, in fact, cultures such as the Jewish and Muslim, the Western and the Islamic fight against each other. But even internal confessional conflicts came in addition. Between the two most important Islamic movements of the Shiites and the Sunnis, the immemorial inheritance dispute over Muhammad's successor has turned into the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In Syria, their proxies currently destroy a formerly multi-religious country.

The fights split the Islamic countries along the religions and ethnic groups. In the alliances between old and new powers, it is accordingly all haywire. They defy all logic. The alliances are constantly changing. Theocratic regimes which set up a theocracy give secularists their backing; tyrants talk in favor of democracy; the United States join forces with Islamists; the latter, in turn, for the benefit of themselves, demand the military intervention of the West against Assad.

This clash happens not only between Western and Muslim societies but within the Islamic or the Jewish world itself. The crisis of

fundamentalism in premodern cultures corresponds to the crisis of totalitarianism in the modern world of the 20th century.

Saudi-Arabia supports in Egypt Secularists against Muslim Brotherhood and in other places Salafis against Secularists. America forms an alliance with Iraq, which in turn is - via the Shiite majority - connected with Iran; the latter in turn supports the regime in Syria. The U.S. maintains an alliance and with Saudi Arabia, which financed the Salafis. The latter in turn inform the jihadists who want to kill every American.

According to the Middle East experts Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, this new "system" of confused alliances is based on many false assumptions, conceals too many irreconcilable differences, is unnatural and will not end well.

But in their core, the conflicts between fundamentalists and secularist need new understanding and new alliances. Fundamental regimes are not capable to make compromises and to coexist with each other's. In the end they could destroy themselves.

From Universalism to Coexistence

But what about the tensions between the open secular societies and the religious states like Saudi-Arabia and Iran? The west is no longer able to afford the universality of his values as a benchmark for the evaluation of Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan. Against non-political

forces of the economy and also of crime, the world of states is long since on the defensive and must join forces.

Similarly, different identities, cultures and religions cannot be left out of account. A Realpolitik of cultures includes the spiritual and cultural components as essential factors in today's world, without exalting them as the sole, decisive element. Foreign policy will always be a balancing act between ideals and interests.

The West has to say goodbye to its predominance, and fit into a multi-polar world order that has to be established. The former colonies forge ahead demographically, economically and power politically. The West should stick to his ideals and self-critically deal with its history, which was for long periods a history of violations of its own ideals.

For this reason alone we should replace a universalist moralism by an "ethical realism". It includes rules of conduct such as caution, humility towards inevitabilities, studying cultures, responsibility for the consequences, and acceptance of the value systems of other cultures.

In the long term, the old paradigms, the old thought patterns and models for understanding of culturalism and of collective identities will give way to individual economic interests and emancipations. This means that the importance of culture for a society should not be made absolute. A human being is admittedly a cultural being, but in life and in living and working together also other things are of outstanding importance.

In addition to the Holy there is also the profane reality. The absolute entities are accompanied by relative entities. The tendencies to standardize are confronted with the will for diversity. In this area of tension, new things constantly develop. Cultures are as little permanently fixed as societies or States. But change usually happens in conflicts, through self-destruction or the extinction of old thinking. Only after the demise of the old generation, in the Middle East the hour of the new generation will come.

But the West should not allow to get tangled up in political struggles, e.g. between secular dictators and Islamists, between ethnic groups and generations. It may nevertheless use its various systems of action for the international relations. The different activities and approaches, of economic corporations, governments, churches and NGOs, are not an expression of "hypocrisy" but the result of their division of tasks.

Churches and NGOs have to fight for human rights in other cultures, while at the same time the businessmen do their business, and politics diplomatically looks for reciprocities. The one complements the other, provided that you do not absolute one of the tasks.

The cultural incompatibility with the radical religious kind of government is as insurmountable as it was the ideological border in the East-West conflict. As the Western defense alliance, the NATO has on the one hand refrained from interventions in the Soviet system, on the other hand drawn clear borderlines of its own sphere.

In the ideologically irreconcilable antagonism of the East-West conflict, there was no other way than the simultaneity of deterrence, containment, and - where possible - relaxation. The attractions of trade helped to develop the enemy to an opponent and to a partner. In the end, history decided.

The same goes nowadays for the relations between the West and the Islamic World.

- we have to coexist with Iran and Saudi-Arabia,
- we have to contain the Islamic State in Syria, in cooperation with Russia, Iran and Saudi-Arabia,
- we have to be neutral concerning conflicts between Iran and Saudi-Arabia
- and we have to balance these powers like the west did between China and the Soviet Union.

In the end, we hope that the attractions of trade and modern life style will help for good cooperation in a globalized world, sometimes to change the systems from within and will help to develop enemies to opponents and in the end to partners.

Healthy Secularity as a third way

An order without any religious references is neither possible nor desirable in the East - and indeed also in the West.

The cultures of the One-God-Belief have not only the task of preserving their intrinsic value. They should also empower and motivate people to contribute to the civilization of the world. The present era demands pluralism, not uniformity, individuality, not collectivity. If collective ethnic or religious "identities" are paramount, this means endless violence.

During his journey to Lebanon in 2012, Pope Benedict XVI spoke out against the negative form of the radical separation of religion and state.

A "**healthy secularity**", however, means to release faith from the burden of politics and to enrich politics by the contributions of faith. Here, distance has to be kept, a clear distinction, and the indispensable collaboration for the common good.

The division of power according to religious affiliations, as in Lebanon, is also difficult. This example shows that such a division of power can all too easily change into civil wars. That's why there is no alternative to secular structures.

The Role of the Secular Christians in the Middle East

The religiously motivated culture struggle between Muslims and Jews in the Holy Land cannot be overcome by inter-religious discourses but only by a secular political reflection.

The secular minded Christians of the Orient already demonstrate how it is possible to live together in peace with secular powers: by sharing common goals and not mutually excluding one another a priori.

The Christian inspired spirit of social universalism, i.e. all people have equal dignity, may here perhaps be enlivened and be fruitful in a secular humanist manner.

The Christians of the Middle East have many social institutions and excellent educational facilities - from the vocational schools of the Salesians of Don Bosco to the Catholic Universities like in Bethlehem - where more than two-thirds of the students are Muslims.

Knowledge-based economies

If, however, science, technology and personal development opportunities are promoted, from it opportunities arise to develop also healing powers between different cultures and nations. For this civilization, not only the separation of state and religion, but the separation of religion and science, of religion and economy are of utmost importance.

This division of tasks would set limits to the western universalism, without that we betray our ideals. The merely indirect exertion of

influence secures more prestige to the 'soft power' of the West than political or even military interventions.

The preconditions of development are more influenced by education, science, technology and economics than by political structures or religious believes. From education, clarification, communication those forces of freedom and individuality may emerge, which are today noticeable among young people - worldwide and across cultures. Hopefully, this will someday help to stop also the clash of civilizations and the struggle in the cultures.

The political common sense is always a weak force in order to get reforms, peace, some prosperity, security, and more justice under way. A strong force, however, are technical and scientific innovations. However, all sides must benefit from them. Water scarcity in the Middle East is not remedied by the Jordan rivulet, no matter who it belongs to. The solution to the water problem beyond the national and cultural boundaries is the access to knowledge of how to desalinate sea water - no matter who "owns" this water.

The political cards are reshuffled also worldwide by new technologies, as e.g. when the United States gain independence of imports from the Middle East by the ecologically controversial "fracking" for the extraction of gas and oil reserves. At the same time, the Western armed forces must withdraw from the Islamic world. This could definitely promote the civilizing processes.

A Third Way between Individualism and Collectivism

In the Middle East and North Africa until 2020 the number of unemployed young people will grow to one hundred million. Of the eighty million Egyptians every second person is already now younger than 25 years. There are five applicants for every job. The unemployed young men and women have enough of collective "visions", whether they are of political or religious nature. Instead, they demand the right to build their own future. They want to be able to adopt the world as their own. This individualism differs from the old secular forces of the Socialism or Nationalism.

They use social networks which former generations did not have. They are not yet the majority but, as the population development proves, will soon be it. Of course, the individualism of a new generation may be exaggerated, as in Europe, where it often enough turns into narcissism, and absence of emotional bonds. But in the Middle East, this menace is a topic for tomorrow.

Rafik is a student at the University of Bethlehem. He was born in Haifa, has an Israeli passport, and lives in East Jerusalem. After examination he wants to open an Arabic food restaurant in Austria. When I asked whether he sees himself as an Israeli, as Palestinians or soon as an Austrian, he replied tersely, "I hate politics." Politics, in the sense of actions of communities that are built on general cultural, ethnic, national, political or other "identities," has no high value for a

lot of young people. The impotence of politicians towards their key problems, unemployment, lack of perspective, actual social exclusion, is too obvious.

Rafik is a Christian. Another of our former students, Abdallah, is a Muslim. As a Palestinian, he is working in Jerusalem at the "Middle Eastern Institute for Education and Technology." It provides computer science courses for highly gifted students of both the West Bank and Israel. As was noted during a visit, one does on principle not speak about politics and religion. The students had to do better things than to get tangled up in hopeless conflicts.

The revolutionary gesture of this generation is to say "I" to a world that knows above all several hostile "we". They have no political agenda but want only to exercise their right to lead an individual life. However much Arab or Iranian youth might despise the secularized Western culture - all the more they appreciate the Western civilization in the material sense.

That does certainly not mean schizophrenia in the awareness of the individual, but is consistent with the diverse forms of life, purposes in life, and cross-links of the modern era. You needn't like our culture and politics in order to appreciate Western science and technology. From the perspective of those young people, the West is not a self-contained system but consists of a diversified wealth of many cultures.

A postmodern world beyond Collectivism and Individualism

Only a new paradigm can help to destroy the premodern paradigm like the possession of only one identity and the modern paradigm like nationalism and the possession of land. A paradigm shift is urgently needed. We can call it postmodern, because the new paradigm should be beyond the contradictions of the premodern and the modern way.

In the conflict between collectivistic and individualistic paradigms, we need a "third way" between individualism and collectivism, a conception of man as person should be emphasized.

It puts personal and social responsibility, rights and duties, and participation in a relationship of reciprocity. Also in the golden rules of the "Global Ethics" it is about this reciprocity.

An activating assistance strategy in the sense of challenging educational and job-creating measures, on the other hand, could lead to a more sustainable development. From the demographic development of Orient and Occident follows the task to regard the lack of young people in Europe and the youth bulge in the Middle East and North Africa as complementary challenges. In this sense, Germany tries to integrate the refugees from the Middle East.

The premodern cultures are confronted with western modernity, in which the subsystems of society are distinguished and separated from each other, especially religion and politics. The modern times were full of quarrels between the organized parts, between the nations and the subsystems of society.

The possession of Land seemed to be decisive for the wealth of a nation. But as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the success of the European Union demonstrates, nowadays not the possession of land but the possession of knowledge, investments, good governance and social market economy are decisive for the wealth of a nation.

The word „postmodern“ does not mean the radical pluralistic approach of some philosophers (this seems to be a radicalization of pluralistic modernity). Postmodern is a word in search of a new substance beyond cultural fundamentalism and beyond the pluralistic quarrels of modernity.

This new synthesis should combine things, which were seen as contradictions in a complementary manner. Like the combination of state and economy in the Social Market Economy, we should search for new compromises beyond Flexibility and Security (Flexicurity), beyond Competition and Cooperation (Coopetition), and between profanity and fundamentalism in a **healthy secularity**.

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