

Stereotypes on Islam

All ages have been marked by specific and “rational” prejudices; they were considered so “natural” that they lost their outlines and split themselves into thousands of small “historical” and “motivated” facts. It appears that human beings need, in the course of history, to focus their wish of giving vent to unsolved problems and individual or collective dissatisfaction by finding a scapegoat, whose sacrifice provides meaning and a sense of relief both necessary in order to guarantee convenient alliances. Especially when the horizon turns to twilight. At present Islam and the Muslims have been undoubtedly chosen as target of prejudice, losing the common status of human beings and getting an appearance of hazard and ignorance anyway.

The single prejudice, identified with a precise name, is supported by multiple stereotypes. Let us examine some of them:

1) Islam is a male chauvinist religion

In order to give an answer to such an assertive statement, first of all it is necessary to operate a double distinction: one between religion and culture; the other between texts and interpretation. If we can find the presence of male chauvinist elements in islamic society and mentality, it is however incorrect to attribute these elements to religion itself. Many factors, above all economical and political, contribute to this. The evidence of this opinion is that the position of women in these frameworks is surprisingly similar to the one we find in almost all preindustrial societies. Anyway those societies, seen in the right perspective (not according to a positivistic point of view supporting the idea that history undergoes a progressive and necessary evolution), also show values of familiar solidarity and protection of the woman that have disappeared in the contemporary age.

The second element to consider is the interpretation of the fundamental islamic texts. In the islamic world there is a huge variety of interpretations that are absolutely ignored by those who are interested in increasing the prejudice. This variety of interpretations range from absolute literalism to extreme rationalization that drives far from the depth of the text itself, favouring, on the contrary, its “pure meaning”. However the two main areas are the one of traditionalists and the one of reformists; the former, called al-muqallidun (imitators), are characterized by a literal interpretation of the Text or by the importance given to the production of ancient learned men; the latter, called al-mujaddidun (renewers), continuously reinterpret the text according to its general meaning, its objectives and the social context.

2) The veil is a sign of oppression of Muslim women, who are always victims.

Prejudice and islamic hijab are almost synonyms. In fact the veil has become the symbol itself both of women oppression in Islam and of being Muslim. It is matter of much discussion and it is exploited by politics and mass media, in the European countries but not only, and at the same time it is strongly protected and exalted by Muslim communities. Why has this stigmatization of the veil proved so successful,

even though a large number of intelligent, conscious women rise their voices declaring their free choice to wear it? First of all because it refers to different values, such as modesty and discretion, which clash with a cultural perspective where the body is freely shown and where being unwilling to show it is perceived as a psychological problem and a denial of the person. Besides, the veil expresses a concept of the human being which is homogeneous and differs from the western culture where the body is usually seen as separate, disconnected from the spirit, promoting one or the other in different historical periods. The veil refers to a specificity of being a woman which is not well accepted by a western feminism still aiming to the target "always equal anyway". Furthermore it calls attention to the acceptance of an objective norm, whose value is misunderstood in a society where individualism and subjectivism (the so called "how you feel like") dominate.

The pounding political campaigns against the veil take advantages of these cultural characteristics in order to promote the belief that there is a strong incompatibility between Islam and western culture, belief which is functional to several political and economical interests and which has produced inside the islamic community a defensive attitude that has increased the gap. On one side this attitude has become the symbol of a legitimate defence of one's own identity and religious freedom, but on the other side it risks darkening many other dimensions of being a Muslim woman and other battles for the repossession of her rights.

3) Is polygamy an islamic obligation?

Together with the veil, the fact of polygamy teases the western public, who vindicates an unusually candid and respectable soul. In fact it is weird to observe how polygamy is put in contrast with the sanctity of the monogamous marriage, which actually only a few people respect with devotion. Do reference books on Islam talk about islamic polygamy? Is it described as compulsory? References to it can be found both in the Quran, primary source of islamic religion, and in the prophetic example collected in the Sunnah. The Sura "The women" contains the following main verses about polygamy: **"And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one or those your right hand possesses. That is more suitable that you may not incline [to injustice]."**

It is easy to notice that the regulation of polygamy, as described in this verse, is characterized **as a permission and not as an obligation**, and that polygamy is also limited by two conditions: an extremely serious situation and the ability to practise it with fairness. Monogamous marriage appears to be the safest and most common way to achieve a good man-woman marriage relationship, as in the original state of unity of the first couple created by God. **The concept of "situation"** (as well as "affordability") **is the basis of the polygamous choice**. At the time of the revelation, polygamy was considered normal, both in the bedouine culture and in other coeval cultures, and ensured the survival of women and orphans who lacked social protection. Even today in certain poor cultures of Africa, polygamy appears as a suitable solution for women, who are burdened with a very heavy workload. In

Europe it is particularly necessary to reflect on the "permission" of polygamy in social contexts where it is not permitted by current law, and it is anyway against the changed self perception of the contemporary woman and of the couple's relationship. This reflection should promote a balance between two different positions both supported in the islamic community: the first one, ahistorical and simplistic, considers polygamy merely as a permission that is always possible, if affordable; the second position believes that it is a legacy of the past, impractical in a modern society, regardless of the conditions.

4) Are mosques harbours of terrorists and schools of fundamentalism?

Recent newspaper titles show great aversion to the building of mosques; they also mention threats of closure and referendums where citizens (often tempted by electoral promises...) are asked to express their own suspects and fears. Mosques appear to be the principal danger for a country such as Italy, which should solve other problems instead. Besides, the building of mosques is teorically allowed by our constitutional principles, which, however, are not respected, favouring partisan politics and racist ideas.

But what is a mosque for the Muslims? The ethymological meaning of the Arabic word "masjid" ("mezquita" in Spanish, and then "mosque" in the other European languages), comes from the Arabic root s - j - d, which means "prostrate"; therefore the term "mosque" may be translated as "place for prostrating": a place where the Muslims, performing the *salat*, bow down to the ground in order to pray God. The primary meaning of the word "mosque" is therefore related to the prayer, as written in the Quranic verse: **And [He revealed] that the masjids are for Allah, so do not invoke with Allah anyone. (LXXII,18).**

Apart from "masjid", in the islamic tradition there is another word that refers to the mosque; this word is "jamah'a", it is widespread in the Arabic-islamic world, and comes from the three-letters root "j - m - a", which means "gather". This term is close to *ekkllesia* and *synagogé*, two words that indicate an assembly of believers. Friday, the day in which the community prayer is required, is called in arabic *yawm al-jumu'a*, that means "the day of the assembly". The building of a mosque was the first action performed by the Prophet, *Peace and Blessing be upon Him*, when he went to Medina, where the first islamic city was founded; there, from the very beginning, in addition to the prayer, many other functions, which we can include in the cathegory "utilities and services to the community of believers" were carried out. Some of these activities were related to Islam as a system of government, and therefore inappropriate for a secular society, like the western one, where religion is supposed to play a role which is not directly related to power; on the other hand, other activities were confirmed as necessary because of the surrounding context.

Nowadays it is particularly necessary to create places such as mosques for a proper teaching of religion, since in the public institutions these places are missing. Besides, mosques are aggregation places for Muslims, in a period where the legitimate pleasure of meeting between similars is essential; yet also the refusal of the "different", carried out in Italy by the *Lega Nord* thought, which connects it with the

fear of the economic crisis (by seeing the immigrants as usurpers of citizens' own rights), plays an important role.

Many cases confirm that the most extremist fringes of Islam do not meet in the mosques; for instance, a research carried out by Tony Blair after London attacks demonstrated that terrorists used to meet in gyms and similar places, not in mosques.

5) Islam allows usages like lapidation, mutilations...

The subject of lapidation is long and complex, therefore I refer to the dissertation of Tariq Ramadan in the "An international call for moratorium on corporal punishment, stoning and the death penalty in the islamic world" (<http://www.tariqramadan.com/spip.php?article263&lang=en>), which I personally signed.

I also affirm that sexuality is a fundamental and positive element in the islamic conception, and that it should not be experienced only according to individual desire, but inside the marriage, both for men and for women; transgressions in this important context are considered serious.

Regarding infibulation, most of ulemas affirm that it has no basis in the Shari'ah, and therefore it should not be considered as an islamic usage; this is confirmed by its absence in several muslim cultures and its presence in communities of other religions, including christians, unified by the fact of inhabiting the same land.

For instance these usages are not performed in Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria; there are a few cases in the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Pakistan and Malaysia; the Shiites do not perform it; in Saudi Arabia it is officially not practised just as in Oman, Qatar, Yemen and Emirates; yet it is widespread in Ciad, Sudan, Somalia, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Kenya, and in the Horn of Africa. There are no traces of that in the Quran; in the Sunnah there are a few weak hadith where the Prophet says to a woman who practised it in the preislamic era: "reduce it lightly but do not overdo, do not extirpate".

It seems that infibulation originated in the pharaonic era, where women who wished to enter the sacred temple and become priestesses submitted themselves to the most extreme form of infibulation in order to confirm their vow of chastity.

Here, as in other subjects, the problem of cultural influences on religion emerges; sometimes cultural aspects overcome religious principles.

It is a duty for the Muslims to stand up clearly against it, because of its extremely heavy consequences on women's health and the negation of pleasure that follows it, especially if practiced in its most radical form.

Important stances came in these years from religious leaders as the Grand Mufti of Egypt and Dean of al-Azhar, Muhammad Sayid Tantawi, who wrote a fatwa in 1997, stating that there is no prescription regarding infibulation, and that the hadiths which refer to it are not authentic. He also declared that he never subdued his daughter to this mutilations. Immediately after this fatwa, the State Council of Egypt banned these practices all over the country (27/12/1997). It is also prohibited in other countries, and a long educational effort is necessary to support the laws, in order to extirpate this terrible usage.

6) Does an islamic feminism exist? What are its battles?

Movements or individual intellectuals who commit themselves to a renewal of the interpretation of the woman and her roles, starting from the study of islamic sources, have emerged since the early 90s all over the world, wherever there are islamic communities. For some aspects the way they follow traces the one of western feminism, for instance regarding the fight for denied rights and the equality of genders; yet it is different because it takes place inside the religious tradition.

It is respectful that feminist protest grows in a secular way; however I think that a religious-based feminism is more suitable and capable of bringing actual changes in the islamic communities. Though it is ignored in the West, where it is always preferred to promote a protest based on western principles, islamic feminism is actually the only one able to compete with the most literalist religious perspective, which paralyzes the role of women, eliminating any possibility of interpretation.

In Italy there are several people who carry on these objectives individually; we started to publish documents pertaining to this movement under the name of Al Hikma Islamic Edition, but as far as I know there are no proper associations.

It seems that current associations created for muslim women aim more to the conservation of muslim identity, than to its renovation, though aspects of progress of women status are not missing. This is probably due to a lack of communication caused by huge differences existing between groups of immigrants coming from different cultural traditions, and also by the persistant necessity to defend themselves from external attacks, which certainly do not facilitate a fair criticism of their own reference points.

However the participation of ADAMI (Associazione Donne Musulmane d'Italia – Muslim Italian Women Association) to the European Forum of Muslim Women, which includes feminine associations coming from 20 different countries such as Spain and Ukraine, has to be reported. This Forum follows several objectives related to feminine emancipation, and focus especially on the condition of muslim women in the European context, by denouncing both discriminations and abuses committed in the name of a wrong interpretation of the Shari'ah.

Subjects belonging to islamic feminism also appear in the publications of the European Muslim Network, a European group composed of muslim men and women, led by Tariq Ramadan. Four Italian members, including me, participate in the group. Another aspect of this movement is that its activity is also shared by men, and therefore characterized by a smaller gender contrast, even though in general there is a need for a work which should be done above all by women itself.

Other minority groups claim to defend muslim women, but they actually carry on an enduring demonization of Islam and of the Muslims; though these groups are greatly supported by politics, there is not much to say about them, especially regarding Italy.

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published in the **monthly** Carta

