

Christianity and Islam:

The Search for Peaceful Coexistence

Some comments by Andreas Andrianopoulos

There are essentially two viable alternatives between the world's most powerful and aggressive religions: Confrontation or Co-existence. Confrontation would ultimately lead to chaos, bloodshed and endless acts of terrorism and violent counter initiatives. There are pending Christian repercussions upon Islamic followers' intolerance of western freedoms of speech and gruesome acts of terrorism that appalled all reasonable and peace loving civilians. Strike would ultimately lead to counterstrike and political acts of unjust discrimination and outright hostility. Turkey's candidacy to European Union membership and its unfavorable treatment by xenophobic elements of western societies is a point at hand. In short, the option of confrontation would ultimately play into the hands of extremist jihadists that pursue the road of a final clash of civilizations.

The option of co-existence is quite realistic. After all, the two cultures have lived together for centuries, albeit in an atmosphere of – direct or indirect - domination of the one (Christianity) over the other (Islam). However, the option of peaceful co - existence should not be taken lightly. It is not easy now that religious fundamentalism has broken out of its strict societal bounds and has been associated with self –righteousness and nationalism to be contained back within the limits of religious faith. For this option to succeed there is a need of a close realignment between the leaders (religious and otherwise) of Muslim communities in the West and the centers of dissemination of Islamic teaching in the countries of the Middle East, Central and South Asia.

It is imperative however for the West (especially Western Europe) to take into consideration some basic features of the existing political condition. The effort for rapprochement should not be viewed as an attempt to appease the religious fanatics. Appeasement is considered a weakness by many a revolutionary. And the fanatic jihadists are engaged in a sort of revolution. If the West is prepared to make way for accommodation its intentions should not be misunderstood. Any sign of weakness would promote further radicalization and new attempts at undermining the social order.

For the extreme teachings of Islam the West is the enemy; not because of what it does, but because of what it stands for. The values of freedom and tolerance constitute an unacceptable threat for the exponents of usurper Islam. Any act of appeasement therefore, will be viewed as a sign of fear and a willingness to bend our values to accommodate the objectives of the distorted version of Islam as taught by the jihadists.

It is imperative therefore that Western Europe stands firm in upholding its basic values and principles and to demand from Islam respect, tolerance and accommodation. The prospect of co-existence can only be built upon the

understanding that there is a mutual respect of each other's values, of the rule of law and of the dominant societal norms. In the same way that a Christian woman

in a Muslim country cannot move around dressed in a provocative way and with her hair uncovered, it is equally demanding for Muslims to behave in the West in the way that western values dictate. It is not easy to understand why western countries should erect Mosques in their cities while it goes without question that any similar initiative by westerners in Moslem countries (ie., Saudi Arabia, Sudan or Pakistan) is usually beyond the bounds of the law and of local tolerance.

It goes without saying that all of the above should become issues of a fruitful dialogue with the leaders of Muslim communities in the West as well as with Islamic leaders in Muslim countries on a step-by-step basis. Friction should be avoided at all costs. But the West should remain firm in its beliefs and support of its way of life.

There are of course many fields for substantial cooperation and mutual understanding. The issue of democracy is of paramount importance. Unfortunately, its adoption by the dominant neo-conservative caucus in Washington and its becoming the banner of US involvement in Iraq and the Middle East in general has loaded the concept with negative ideological overtones. This, however, should not prohibit sincere efforts by other parties (e.g. the European Union) to encourage pro-democracy forces in the Islamic world to engage actively in the political arena.

One should nevertheless always keep in mind that the values and teachings of Islam are not entirely compatible with the concept of an entirely open democratic process, as we understand it in the West. It is necessary therefore to accommodate for local idiosyncrasies and peculiarities when debating the application of democracy in an Islamic context. This does not mean of course that Europe should compromise its values with despotic rule in the Muslim world neither with emerging democracy - bashing Islamic fundamentalist regimes.

Europe's attitude towards the Arab world should not give excuses to basically unfounded allegations that, because of oil, Europeans have sold out to the Arabs (clf. the recent publication by Bat Ye'or, *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis*). There should not be double standards vis a vis the Arabs / Moslems and their pursuits. Europe cannot be concerned only about the Palestinians and appear indifferent to the plight of indigenous Africans suffering by Muslim Arab militias in Darfur of western Sudan. These considerations, however, should not hamper the realization that western European pure concepts of democracy cannot be totally applicable in the Muslim world. There should be discussions with Muslims leading to final governmental blueprints, which should contain provisions for citizen participation in decision-making and policy design.

Primarily, these efforts should be directed towards the implementation of directives dealing with market reform and effective social protection. These are spheres of policy in which Europeans can be firm and absolute. The battle against corruption and exploitation of natural resources for the benefit of some exclusive and well-placed social elite should be a priority. Socially conscious Europeans cannot tolerate regimes disregarding the welfare of their citizens and caring after the interests of a small group of people. This is not something that Islam condones

and it is a point that Europeans should point manifestly to Muslim leaders. Unequivocal support for policies promoting the well being of poor Arab populations would settle well even with Islamist radicals and prove that westerners do not close their eyes to injustice and to unfair distribution of the wealth accumulated by the exploitation of national natural resources.

Finally, religious tolerance should be a crucial step towards an understanding and peaceful co-existence between Christianity and Islam. Islam does not preach fanaticism. This is a distortion introduced by fanatics. The Qur'an clearly states that "There is no compulsion in religion." (The Qur'an 2:256). And this is the verse frequently used by Muslims to defend themselves against the charge that Islam is an intolerant religion. The charge of intolerance has been haunting Muslims everywhere since the beginning of Islam. And this was because versions of Islam teach almost total intolerance. According to many fundamentalist teachings (a) Muslims believe that they have the right to compel people to accept Islam because it is the truth. (b) Muslims believe that Mohammad was given a divine command to fight against people, not in self defence or for economical or political reasons, but because people do not worship the one Mohammad worshipped and (c) The above teachings place no value on the human free will. To them, forcing Islam on people is justified if later on they will become Muslims. Within this context therefore it is not an exaggeration to say that the sword is Allah's final word.

In a recent speech at Regensburg University in Germany, the Pope explored some of the spiritual as well as historical differences between Islam and Christianity. He also dwelled upon the relationship between violence and faith. When he touched upon the above mentioned sensitive issue he made it quite clear that the words he used were not his own but those of the long gone medieval Emperor Manuel II Paleologos of the Byzantine Empire. Of the Orthodox Christian empire that is, which had as its capital the fabled city of Constantinople. Which is now the Turkish city of Istanbul. The Pope stressed that the then emperor's words were: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." Pope Benedict reiterated the word "I quote" twice to stress the words were not his and added that violence was "incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul".

However, the national parliament of Pakistan passed almost immediately a resolution claiming that: "the derogatory remarks of the Pope about the philosophy of jihad and Prophet Mohammed have injured sentiments across the Muslim world and pose the danger of spreading acrimony among the religions." In India, which has a sizeable Muslim population, Minority Commission Chairman Hamid Ansari said: "The language used by the Pope sounds like that of his 12th-Century counterpart who ordered the crusades".

How can statements like these, along with an explosion of violent demonstrations in the streets that claimed at least one human life, be reconciled with exclamations of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence? Besides, it is well documented that there is no lack of anti-Christian rhetoric in the Muslim world. This kind of reaction justifies many westerners' fear that there is a strong link for many Islamists between religion and violence. Their refusal to respond to criticism with

rational arguments, but only with demonstrations, threats, and actual violence it appears to prove the point.

The essence of the passage in the Pope's speech is about forced conversion. It begins by pointing out that Mohammed spoke of faith without compulsion when he lacked political power, but that when he became strong, his perspective changed. Benedict goes on to make the argument that violent conversion -- from the standpoint of a Byzantine shaped by Greek philosophy, and therefore shaped by the priority of reason -- is unacceptable. For someone who believes that God is absolutely transcendent and beyond reason, the argument goes, it is acceptable. Muslim religious leaders never clarified whether they agreed with this part of the old emperor's arguments and with the Pope's relative conclusion!!

Muslim leaders, nevertheless have now to prove that the above-mentioned verse, ie, "there is no compulsion in religion", dominates in reality Islamic thinking today. And prove the long gone Byzantine Emperor wrong. If the Muslims reject the Pope's speech, they have to acknowledge the rationalist aspects of Islam. The burden is on the Ummah to lift the religion out of the hands of radicals and extremist scholars by demonstrating that Muslims can adhere to reason. The community elders have to influence religious leaders to tone down their rhetoric and calm younger Wahhabist activists. They have to exacerbate tolerance and co-existence with followers of opposite religious beliefs. And demonstrate that their religion is not bellicose by repudiating plainly conversion by force.

There is an intensifying tension in Europe over the powerful wave of Muslim immigration. Frictions are high on both sides. Europeans fear that the Muslim immigrants will overwhelm their native culture or form an unassimilated and destabilizing mass. Muslims feel unwelcome, and some extreme groups have threatened to work for the conversion of Europe. Europeans should show tolerance and embrace multiculturalism and co-habitation with the different. But all these would remain empty words if they are not accompanied by the other side's understanding that they reside in countries with their own journeyes in history. Where cultural habits have been commonly erected and traditions shaped. These have also to be respected. Muslim leaders should not expect all the moves to come from the west. It was not, after all, the West and its religious hierarchy who have hitherto unfolded the flags of intolerance and extremist fundamentalism.

It is for the respected religious leaders of the Muslim communities, therefore, and for the Islamic countries to make clear that they think in a peaceful and tolerant way. And that this is the context through which they view their relations with the West. Only in this way a war of civilizations can be averted. And the extremists from both sides pushed to the margins of social and political life.