Religions and new perspectives for dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean?

By Roberto Catalano

I would like to offer a few considerations as a European, who keeps on observing, from the northern part of our Mediterranean Sea, the events unfolding in its Southern part.

First of all, the importance of the right approach. Speaking of a northern and a southern part of the Mediterranean does not imply an intention of dividing the area into sections. There are different contexts but it is crucial to have a unifying approach to what is happening in North Africa, considering that there are a number of European countries facing the same sea and constituting the Euro-Mediterranean reality which often had been considered in portions not as a whole. At the same time, we must avoid the danger of a creating a melting pot. Through millennia the Mediterranean offered the meeting place to different cultures and religions, which met, often clashed and also managed to find peaceful co-existence.

Therefore, dialogue can be very well the key for future perspectives in this area. But what are the implications of a dialogical approach to the events we are lately witnessing? What could be the role of the countries on this side of the Mediterranean Sea for the present and for future? I would like to offer a few consideration to reflect upon.

I must confess that the more we witnessed in the last few months, the more I got confused. I had the chance, on several occasions, to ask colleagues and friends, living in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, about their perception of what were happening. I myself was in Algeria last June and realized that even that country is not immune from what is happening elsewhere in neighboring regions. Often people, both natives and foreigners living there since many years, could not answer my questions. They themselves were attentive to developments and the unfolding of the situation without being able to give an explanation or, even less, to foresee what would come next. Still, the amazing fact was that media and observers in Europe seemed and seem to describe the process clearly, reading the events and defining them with precise statements. Unfortunately or surprisingly these interpretations sound far from the reading of the same events done by local people. The scenario is rather absurd: people on one side of the area seem to know and entitled to define what is happening on the other side, where people who live there can not find ways to understand.
A first note which is rather constant in the comments of people who have lived through the events in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria is that, unlike other revolutions, what sparked in the Middle East, in the last few months, is not a well planned and prepared revolution. It does not come from a clear thought and a precise programme and strategy. Especially, the ones in Tunisia and Egypt were not prepared by a well trained leading group. It was rather a popular upheaval, often provoked by unprepared young people without a specific political training but with expectations which haven’t been met. Their disappointment on basic issues like employment, civil rights, human dignity and freedom made them say Enough. Moreover, in other countries there were not military coups, which brought about a political change as it was in the past, like Nasser in Egypt, Assad in Syria, Gheddafi in Libya, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq etc.

A second aspect is all the more significant.
The situation is not the same everywhere, though local people and observers are ready to acknowledge that there is a common ground linking all these phenomena. In the West, instead, we tend to tag everything under the umbrella definition of ‘Arab spring-time’, a term perceived as dangerously ambiguous, in those countries. There had been revolutions, insurgencies which led to upheavals and changes in the whole region and this brought about positive and beneficial effects. At the same time, people often feel puzzled, perplexed, fearful and in certain places there are still situations which are highly dramatic to the point that there are people who prefer to speak of an ‘Arab autumn’ or a winter-time’. Some do not hesitate to define the events as a ‘high jacked revolution’.

We can not deny that there is a remarkable discrepancy between the two perspectives, the local one and the one in Europe. This calls for a moment of reflection on the part of the European side. I would like to offer two considerations which are contained in the title proposed.

First of all, the role of religions.
We can not analyze what is happening in these countries, while ignoring the relationship of peoples, in different contexts, with God. This is true everywhere, but surely in a very special way when we come to the Mediterranean Sea, which seems to be a privileged place as far as man’s relationship with God and God’s with man. In fact, the God who meets man in this region is not an impersonal or indefinite One, but He is a God, who has opened up the door to the monotheistic religions. Each of these religions claims a relationship with Him which is not the same and which can not be homogenized to the other two. Moreover, often it is
exclusive and expressed with absolute statements: the chosen people, the only way or the final revelation.

Here we, Europeans, find the first stumbling block. We have been proved wrong, after a few centuries of our history, during which we identified progress and civilisation with a distinction of different domains: man from God, faith from reason, theology from politics. To distinguish them was surely a healthy process but it went too far up to the point of separating them. In the light of this process, we ended up in not understanding any more peoples who have kept these domains together. This is exactly what happened in the Muslim world. We can not look at rapport among men without considering the religious factor.

A second aspect, which is perceived more and more as crucial is that religion, in general, and religions, in a more specific way, can not be exclusivist. They are called to be opened to each other according to what we can define a dialogical relationship. This is exactly what had been often missing in all the three monotheistic religions of this region. We Europeans, for instance, have forgotten too soon Socrates who acknowledged that *he knew that he did not know*. This placed him in an attitude of listening, a dimension which is vital if we wish to dialogue. A great Italian, who was among the forerunners in peace-building process in the Mediterranean region, Giorgo La Pira, mayor of Florence for over a decade, used to notice that «*western man seems to be unable to find spaces for silence*».

Silence is crucial even in the present situation. Obviously, I am not speaking of a passive silence, but of the one which means a true listening and implies removing one’s conviction and prejudices. «*Silence is a way to live relationship with oneself and with the others too. Be silent is far from being wordless. It means to create a space within myself where I can meet [...] with daily events*»¹. Marie Delbrèl stated that «*silence, at times, is to keep quiet but it is, always, to be ready to listen*»².

This attitude guarantees a rapport within, in which I can perceive the other ones according to the way they portray themselves not the way I decide they are. Silence and listening helps erasing prejudice. Albert Einstein used to state that it is easier to split the atom than to remove a prejudice. To have a prejudice, in fact, «*is a hidden sort of being in a hurry and prevents us from listening, prompting us to label the person who is speaking to us to the point that we believe that we already know what she or he or they mean to say. [...] In this way it happens that instead of*

listening, though we keep silent, we speak to ourselves of that person or group of people and we do it the way we like not the way they present themselves to us. This attitude prevents us from meeting the others, from accepting them and from truly understanding them».³

This is exactly what we Europeans run the risk to do with what is happening in the Arab world, with its peoples and cultures. We think we know who they are. We decide what step they have to take. Once again, we are close to the trap of exporting our models: democracy, for instance, but a democracy the way we apply it. Here is a crucial point from passing from a possible clash of civilisations to a meeting of civilisations. We need silence and listening in order to be able to be empathic, feeling with the other, with the other peoples and cultures. I often perceived in the last few months that peoples on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea are not expecting us on this side to explain to them what they are going through, which kind of process they have to promote and how to build a democracy after dictatorships, which, by the way, were often supported by European Governments. They need to find a silent support, respectful of the process required in a context which is not Europe.

This attitude could be a starting point for a dialogue among cultures and religions, but above all of a dialogue among men and women of different faiths and cultures. In fact, men and women are the protagonists of dialogue not the faiths in which they believe and the cultures in which they were born and grew up. Silence and listening are essential points of the art of dialogue, which is rooted in the golden rule, present in all religions, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

From a dialogical approach a different anthropology can take shape. Gandhi used to sum it up as «consciousness of the living presence of God within one»⁴. For him «the golden way is to be friends of the whole world and to look at all men and women as members of the same human family»⁵. Gandhi offered two corner-stones for an alternative anthropology, which we need if we wish to understand many happenings in today’s world, including the ones of the Euro-Mediterranean area. They are the sacredness and dignity of each human being and his or her belonging to the same one family.

I feel these two along with silent respect and support is what this part of the world needs right now in order to contribute along with us to build a Mediterranean region capable of offering a sustainable model of peaceful coexistence among people of different cultures and religions. This could

³ R.BESSERO BELTI, Il silenzio voce dell'anima, La Locusta, Vicenza, 1988, 33
⁴ M. GANDHI, Harijans, 26-9-1947, pag. 209
⁵ M. GANDHI, Harijans, 13-11-1946, pag. 402

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The Euro-Mediterranean Region: religions and new perspectives for dialogue?

4
lead *Mare Nostrum* to get back the central place it used to have in the world arena.