

# The need for an Islamic liberation theology

By Abdennur Prado

The need for an Islamic liberation theology appears to many like a logical conclusion as a reaction to the setbacks suffered by Muslim communities in the last century and the geopolitical situation at the start of the 21st century. To understand this necessity, we need to think back to the Cold War times, when Western powers allied themselves with the most conservative currents of the Islamic world to avoid an encounter between Islamic movements and the international left. This alliance still exerts a stifling power over Muslim populations.

All of this takes us to the key issue of corporate globalization, and the role that the OPEP plays in it. We are witnessing the collaboration between the reactionary sectors of the Islamic world with corporate globalization, to the point that they are now one of its pillars. Tariq Ramadan has referred to this alliance as follows:

"The whole of the Islamic world is under the tutelage of market economy. Countries apparently Islamic from the viewpoint of laws and government, for example Saudi Arabia or other petrokingdoms, are the most integrated economically with the neoliberal system founded on speculation and immersed in interest transactions (in reference to usury)." [1]

Already two decades ago, economist Susan George made manifest the role that the OPEP has played since the 70s in the rise of North/South inequality. Susan George states:

"Petroleum producing countries behaved like true capitalists, waiting to make a lot of money trusting in professionals brought from New York or London. Thus, they lost a historic occasion and opened the door to the formidable blow carefully planned by wealthy countries. Debt, generated by western countries, banks and their agents, such as the IMF, have weakened countries in the South further (including OPEP members); it has placed them in an even more disfavorable situation than before the age of loans, opening the door to a true

recolonization."[2]

Some countries have a significantly high debt, including many self-proclaimed "Islamic States" supposedly guided by the Sharia such as Saudi Arabia (US\$47,390 millions; 2006), Pakistan (US\$42,280 million; 2006), Sudan (\$29,690; 2006), or Iran (14,800; 2006). Somebody should remind their ulama, great mufties and other government wise men that usury is forbidden under Islam....Why is Saudi Arabia, one of the largest producers of oil, have an external debt, when thousands of members of the Saud family have a lifetime monthly allowance assigned to them, just for belonging to the family? Almost all of this debt has been spent in weapons, purchased from their masters. Let's not fool ourselves, these countries are only "Islamic" in those aspects that are in the interest of the state, especially when it comes to social control.

The obsession over religion understood as extreme morality, a suffocating puritanism obsessed with honor and sexuality, is a means to alienate Muslim populations, it acts as a veil that prevents the analyzing of the real causes of the social injustices they suffer, and presents those responsible for these injustices as guarantors of their identity and national honor. We are witnessing an extreme form of obscurantism, brought upon by reactionary ulemas, who occupy positions based on their significance in the history of Islam, such as the University of Al-Azhar or the Mosques of Mecca and Medina. An obscurantist vision of Islam that intercepts any critical thought among believers, condemning their communities to remain in ignorance. If religion were reduced to this, then we would undoubtedly subscribe to Marx's phrase, of religion being the opium of the people. Fortunately, religion is much more than this, or rather, it is something else, a potential that can be placed in the service of the liberation of us humans, insha Al-lah.

At this point, we have to locate anticommunist thought, promoted by certain Muslim institutions, from the Arab world to Southeast Asia. We are placing ourselves in the days of the Cold War, when communism was made to occupy the role of absolute evil, like Islamism occupies it today. A good example of the link between Islam, anticommunism, secular dictatorships and Western interests is the infitah (openness) promoted in Egypt by Sadat in the 70, in order to liberalize the economy (after a period of "Arab socialism" said to have been overcome). Unions and leftist

organizations opposed the privatizing policies and the opening to foreign investment, but these get the support of the ulemas of Al-Azhar and of the Muslim Brotherhood. Sadat supports the Islamic yamaat (assemblies) at universities, in order to weaken leftist student associations, one of the main sources of opposition. It is in this context that we need to place the appearance of anticommunism from ulema officials. Return to religiousness and liberalism go hand in hand. The successive Seijs at Al-Azhar issue anticommunist fatwas. Sheij Muhammad Fahham makes a diatribe against students protesting against the government. He calls them heathens and urges them to behave religiously. Sheij Abel Halim Mahmud states "Zionism is the mother of communism." Imam Shaltut states "communism is kufur. The communist in his rosary does not say "Al-lahu Akbar" but "Marx is great." Hasanayan Muhammad Majluf, mufti of the Republic, proposes naming communist as Islam renegades, in a time when this could carry grave harm.[3]

In Indonesia, the two biggest Islamic organizations in the country (Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, with several million militants) are deeply entrenched in the anticommunist crusade. During the years 1965-1966, Suharto would unleash a wave of killings that would end the life of over one million communists. According to Noam Chomsky, US agents handed them lists of communists of communist sympathizers to local authorities, who carried out a merciless hunt, supported by Islamic organization. The Muhammadiyah declared a jihad against the Gestapu (Indonesian Communist Party). It is sad to confirm the role of the two most important Islamic organizations in the country in one of the most tragic events of the 20th century, that led to the deaths of over one million people for the mere fact of being communist.

But this alliance is not a thing of the past. Currently, some Muslim countries are among the first when it comes to income per capita: Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Brunei, Oman and Saudi Arabia, countries that carry out their economic activities under the protection of the United States military. But this privileged position is not made manifest just in the form of cooperation towards development in comparison with other Muslim nations. We have to remember the numerous situations where Muslims live in dramatic circumstances. Hundreds of thousands of them are packed in refugee camps: Saharais in the Argelia desert, Sudanese in Darfur,

Rohingya in Bangladesh and Thailand. Other situations are no less dramatic: like in Chechnya, Ethiopia or Somalia. These circumstances of extreme poverty coexist with wastefulness. As a contrast, we have to mention the pharaonic projects (in the Coranic sense) carried out by the petromillionaire dynasties in the Persian Gulf, like the construction projects in Dubai with ultra luxurious hotels built in land gained from the sea, including even ski tracks.

There is no (to our awareness) true aid towards development organized by rich Muslim countries towards the third world. There is large scale humanitarian work and hundreds of organizations dedicated to alleviating immediate necessities, but not a global project that would help needy communities generate their own survival mechanisms for the future. In this aspect, we have to regret the way Saudi Arabia spends all of its oil money financing large universities and schools to indoctrinate foreign populations, creating a fracture in the Muslim world between traditional Islam and wahabism. The sole concern of Saudi Arabia in all of the tragedies mentioned is to use them to infiltrate and impose their rigorous conception of Islam, killing local traditions, always in the name of religious purity, always at the service of imperialism. Saudi Arabia has earned the hatred of an immense majority of Muslims across the globe for its political dissemination of wahabism, its support for US domination and its disregard towards the suffering of fellow Muslims throughout the planet.

Wahabism is not an orthodox interpretation of Islam, but a reformist movement born in Arabia in the 8th century. Further, this reformism has taken the sense of abandonment of an organic conception of the community, in favor of the power structures that arose with industrialization. A state like Saudi Arabia represents the abandonment of tradition in favor of economic interests, and was chosen by the British because it adjusted to their plans of exploitation of natural resources designed for the Middle East. Its external appearance gives them an Islamic guise, while its modernist essence makes it simple to rule according to the whim of its masters. Through the call of "opening the door of ijtihad" (interpretative effort in jurisprudence), the ulemas at the service of the State can issue fatwas to justify anything that the government is interested in: US bases in Arabia, political killings, drug trafficking. Internationally, Wahabism tries to make Islam a piece of the world

market economy, collaborating thoroughly with the International Monetary Fund.

Saudi Arabia: a country that is in the business of gun trafficking but which calls itself Islamic because it cuts the hand of a child that steals an apple, where rulers live surrounded by extravagant luxury while the external debt reaches astronomical figures... But Prophet Muhammed (saws.) said: "That who barter what he has, that is who Al-lah provides; that who hoards goods and accumulates them, that is who Al-lah curses and casts aside." All that they have done in the cities of Mecca and Medina does not leave room for doubts. Were some years ago were the graves of the companions of the Prophet (saws) are now packed with Mercedes or Chrysler dealerships. In places associated with the prophetic mission of Muhammed (saws) there are now five star hotels managed by foreign companies. The destruction of the heritage, the collective memory of Muslims is part of the policy of the Bani Saud from their beginnings. This disarray is also being reproduced in a large scale, operated from within Islam, from its geographic center.

This is the entry of Islam to the world of the spectacle, Wahabism represents the westernization of Islam, the abandonment of tradition to find its likeness in that culture of representation and image. Culture of images: the acceptance of images from different traditions but not their contents. We are in a world where the idea of tradition is tried to be reduced to folklore. This is what Wahabism offers: not Islam, only its appearance. Not truth, but a stereotypical image. In this cult of the image all religions, all "representatives of God on earth" are sucked in, like salesmen, like the economists of the New World Order, like news manufacturers. Saudi Arabia, like the cradle of Islam, plays the perfect role for the policies of Western powers, a policy that cannot end but with the sacrifice of the image they themselves have created. The concise definition by Tariq Ramadan reflects a majority opinion:

"Saudi Arabia: crossroads of all lies and all hypocrisy. First, from the West, whose governments, although know of the horrors of dictatorship, of reactionary enslaving and of corruption, keep quiet for economic reasons. Afterwards, from the East and too many Muslims, who because of financial mana, respond with silence to the most odious and overt treason to the principles of Islam." [4]

We are currently witnessing new episodes of this never-revoked collaboration. The agrarian counterreform carried out in 1999 by Mubarak, which implicated the return of agricultural leases to capital, received the support of the Islamic Yahad and the Muslim Brotherhood, in the name of sharia and the right of property. We can still find on the website of the also Egyptian Yusuf Qaradawi a fatwa where he states that it is incompatible to be communist and Muslim (the fatwa is in response to a woman who asked him if she could marry a "communist Muslim"; his response is negative, it is haram to marry a communist, because communists are nothing less than diabolical nihilists...even though in the question the woman stated clearly that the man was a Muslim). Qaradawi himself is sitting on the right of the Emir of Qatar, while US troops prepare to invade Iraq, from huge bases granted by the Emirate, a country where Egyptian immigrants (among others) live in semi-slavery... All of this justifies their rejection of the left when it tries to approach Islamic movements and makes evident the close ties between religious fundamentalism and neoliberalism. We quote Samir Amin:

"In the field of true social questions, political Islam allies itself with dependent capitalism and dominant imperialism. It defends the sacred principle of property and legitimizes inequality and the requisites for capitalist reproduction. The support given by the Muslim Brotherhood to the Egyptian parliament to their recent reactionary laws that reinforce property rights to the detriment of rural renters (the majority of small farmers) is nothing but one example among hundreds. There is no example of even a single reactionary law promoted by any Muslim state that Islamic movements have opposed...It is easy to understand then why political Islam has always counted in their ranks with the dominant class in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Local comprador bourgeoisie, new rich, those benefitted by imperialist globalization, generously support political Islam. And this movement has forfeited any anti-imperialist perspective and replaced it with an "antiwestern" stance (almost "antichristian") that evidently, only leads affected communities to a dead end and does not constitute an obstacle to the spreading of imperialistic control over the world. The history of the Muslim Brotherhood is well known. The Brotherhood was created by the

British and the monarchy in the 1920s in order to stop the advance of Al-Wafd, secular and democratic. Its return home from their Saudi sanctuary after the death of Nasser, organized by the CIA and Sadat, is also well known. We are all familiar with the history of the Taliban, formed by the CIA in Pakistan to fight against the "communists" that had opened schools for all, boys and girls. It is also common knowledge that Israel supported Hamas at first as a way of weakening secular and democratic currents in the Palestinian resistance. Political Islam would have had much greater difficulties to move outside of the borders of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were it not for the continuous, decisive support of the United States. Saudi Arabia society had not moved further than its traditional limits when it found oil beneath its soil. An alliance was worked out between imperialism and the traditional dominant class, sealed immediately, that gave Wahabism a new lease on life...It is easy to understand then, the initiative taken by the United States to break the united front formed by Asian and African nations established in 1955, creating an "Islamic Conference" promoted immediately by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Political Islam penetrated the region through these means. The most conservative conclusion one can draw is that Political Islam is not the spontaneous result of the affirmation of authentic religious convictions made by the people affected. Political Islam was forged by the systematic action of imperialism, supported, of course, by reactionary forces and the subordinate comprador classes."[5]

In conclusion, Islam is being used from power, to in many cases justify privileges and oppression, and fight the left. This use by the State is normally linked to an imposition of a reactionary view of Islam, focused on form and in herd morality. Corporate globalization and religious fundamentalism feed each other, like two sides of the same phenomenon. The structural measures advocated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank create the necessary conditions that make the rise of fundamentalism possible (even inevitable); and in the end, it is this fundamentalism that justifies the intervention of Western states. All of this explains the support of the most reactionary views of Islam by the West.

But we must say that the analysis made by Samir Amir is excessively broad: while it is

without doubt that the dominant political Islam (especially the Wahabi/Salafi current promoted from Saudi Arabia) is aligned with imperialism, it does not mean that all political Islam should be placed in that category. There is a growing awareness of this issue within Muslim movements, an issue whose solving implies the construction of a new alliance with the global left and the alter-globalization movement, such as the one we will propose briefly. There is no other remedy than to work in this direction. It would be a crass mistake by anticapitalist movements in Muslim countries to state their ground aside from Islam, since Islam is the axis around which life is carried out in those societies. Battling Islam and capitalism at the same time does not seem reasonable, especially if we realize that Islam constitutes today one of the few living alternatives to neoliberal globalization.

At this point we can understand the importance that the Islamic liberation theology (ILT) can play in the context of peoples' struggles against corporate globalization and new imperialism, as well as against the hegemony of the alienated forms of understand Islam that are linked to them. That is: to counteract the existing alliance between corporate globalization and religious fundamentalism.

We understand ILT as a discourse and social practice that places at the forefront the Coranic mandate of building a just and egalitarian society, where the spiritual dimension of human beings are taken into account, in opposition of both reactionary conceptions of Islam and neoliberalism. In opposition of the drifting of Islamic movements towards ultraconservative positions politically and morally, ILT emerges from the rescuing of the revolutionary message made by Prophet Muhammed (saws) fourteen centuries ago, against the oligarchies of his time.

ILT gains new strength in the post 9-11 world, with the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the situation of Muslims in Burma and the continuation of the Palestinian genocide. But, above all, ILT emerges as a growing awareness of the social impact of corporate globalization. The dominance of neoliberalism and free market theory poses a threat towards equality and social justice, since both conceive society as a market that reduces human beings to their dimension as producer-consumer. A liberalized market economy, that has no consideration for social affairs or for local culture or environmental awareness, cannot promote global economic or social welfare, or

ensure sustainable development. Neoliberalism increasingly threatens civil rights, particularly the right to education, dignified employment and health.

Facing this situation, ILT proposes a radical reform of the Sharia so that it may aid the underprivileged. It proposes reforming Muslim family laws to achieve the equality between men and women. It also proposes to incorporate the matter of economic justice in contemporary discourse around the Sharia and to focus on its horizontal aspects, mu'amalat or social transactions, before the 'ibada or acts of adoration. This reform is based on the notion of Sovereignty of Al-lah, according to which only Al-lah is our Lord and therefore nobody can be the lord or master of his fellow men. This understanding of Islam leads us to question the alienating understandings of religion. To apply these principles, it becomes necessary to form unions inspired by ILT, capable of vindicating workers rights, in contexts where Islam is state religion and where everything revolves around Islam.

ILT defends the entry of Islam into politics. If all the ethical (religious) components of politics, medicine, economy were to be eliminated... what would we have left? The postwestern civilization: a system of generalized depredation of planet earth, that does not respond to any ethical or rational criteria... In Western countries, this system is balanced by civil society, especially thanks to the efforts made by Marxists and anarchists in the 19th and 20th centuries, and to the civil rights movement that emerged after the Second World War. But this balancing power does not have sufficient strength in a worldwide scale, much less in the third world, where large corporations are dedicated to a policy of depredation of natural resources, robbing people and annihilating their cultures, enthroning dictators docile to their interests and financing wars in those places where communities unite against them. ILT presents itself, therefore, as a challenge to the so called "liberal Islam" that seeks a strict separation between religion and politics, also a complacent speech to the new needs of the establishment. There is a policy of infiltration by Western think tanks that promotes an antifundamentalist Islamic discourse and the defence of the compatibility of Islam and democracy, human rights, etc, but which is not critical to the policies promoted by the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and the World Bank. This is the so-called "moderate Islam" that is promoted by the UK and US

governments as a parallel offensive to their invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

ILT has a distinguished figure in Sudanese Mahmud Taha, who in his famous work "The second message of Quran" identified the ideal society proposed by Prophet Muhammed with a "democratic socialism" (although a better term to define his proposals would be communism). According to Taha, the active pursuing of this ideal community is necessary for our fulfillment as human beings. In a society ruled by egotism and the exsacerbation of passions, human beings cannot fully activate their capacities or live as a creature worthy of Al-lah. At the same time, he believes that socialism cannot come about without taking in consideration the spiritual dimension of human beings. This explains the failure of historical meterialms and the Soviet regime, whose materialist conception of the human being did not stand fully apart from the proposal by capitalist society. Taha includes in a democratic perspective gender equality and environmental values.

ITL does not deny its links with Muslim reformism or even with Islamic movement, and can quote Sayed Qutb or Ali Shariarti to support its positions. It connects with reformism, from before it was swallowed by Saudi Arabia and placed at the service of corporate globalization and conservative policies. This return to the revolutionary origins of Islamic movements is the proposal made by Shabbir Akhtar in "The Final Imperative: An Islamic Theology of Liberation." This is a British intellectual that acknowledges himself as a disciple of Sayed Qutb. ITL could connect to an Islamism that has acknowledged the totalitarian excesses it has committed and is willing to promote openness towards gender equality, environmental and democratic values. Tariq Ramada, a Swiss thinker of Egyptian origin, represents a bridge in this respect, which explains the scorn he receives in Western media.

A work that has to be taken into account is "Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire" by Iranian Hamid Dabashi. The critiques to the Islamic Republic of Islam do not lead him to embrace Western modernity as a panacea; quite the contrary. Dabashi contends that Islamic ideology has ceased from being a factor in the resistance against "colonial modernity." Islamic militancy emerged from determinate conditions and it remains a prisoner to them. It isn't capable of responding to present needs or to the challenges of corporate globalization. In order to renew Muslim aspirations it is

necessary to revisit the concept of "Islamic ideology" in the sense of offering a local, and therefore limited, response of what presents itself as a global challenge. No alternative ideology will awaken the energies and create the synergies necessary to face planetary depredation carried out by the centers of corporate globalization. Neither is this globalization "the West" or is Bin Laden "Islam." Very especially, the legalist visions of Islam have to be overcome, since they lead to a multiple fracture between Islam and the West, Islam and human rights, Islam and feminism...This is a series of fractures that are exploited by the empire to undermine and delegitimize Muslim resistance.

The only way to overcome these fractures is to think of an Islamic ideology of liberation that converges with other similar movements across the globe. Muslims are not alone in this struggle. They cannot continue to think that their fight is carried out to the back of the rest of the planet, or in terms of an Islamic supremacy. An ideology that separates the world between Islam and the West, or among believers and non-believers does not have anything to offer. The contemporary situation leads us towards syncretism and the acceptance of universal values. It believes that Islam will have to rearticulate itself in relation to globalized capitalism. As a result of the globalization process, the mass worker migrations has dismantled the dichotomy "center-periphery" or "Islam-West" that could have had their *raison d'être* during the colonial period. Dabashi defends multiculturalism and explores the similarities and differences with regards to the Christian liberation theology, to reach an understanding. The revolutionary potential of Islam has to be put to the service of humanity, and not to the service of the Islamic cause. We have to think in terms of diversity and syncretism, not in terms of supremacy.

More than a theology, we should talk of a theodicea, a natural and rational theology of universalist cut that seeks its foundation within human beings. Dabashi defines this theodicy as "*a form of theology of liberation that does not just account for the existence of its moral and normative shadows, but embraces them.*" [6]. In Dabashi's vision, this theodicy will result in the liberation of Islam itself from its ghosts, its atavisms, and the forms of idolatry generated through the centuries. It is not just about rethinking Islam in liberation terms, but to think of an Islam itself liberated.

## **Notas**

- [1] *Globalisation. Muslim Resistances* (ed. Tawhid 2002).
- [2] *Jusqu'au cou, enquête sur la dette du tiers monde* (ed. La Découverte, 1988, pp. 68-71)
- [3] Malika Zeghal, *Guardianes del islam*, pp.140-144
- [4] *El islam minoritario*, ed. Bellateraa, p.333
- [5] Samir Amin, *El islam político, al servicio del imperialismo*
- [6] *Islamic liberation theology: resisting the empire*, p. 18