



ISLAM AND THE WEST

Cristianisme i Justícia (Permanent Council)

Introduction: a cultural conflict

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"Why do you say to your brother 'I am going to take out the mote from your eye' when you do not notice the beam in your own? Hypocrite: take out first the beam from your own eye and then you will see clearly to clean the eye of your brother" (Mt. 7,4-5).

INTRODUCTION

At the end of October 2001 the world was going through a situation of conflict. Not of war: since this would require an official declaration and a clear identification of the warring parties. Some would qualify it as an anti-terrorist "crusade" showing thereby how little we have evolved since the Medieval Age. Perhaps the best description is that we *are before a threat of putting on a world level situations like that of Israel and the Palestinians*, converting the whole world into a kind of Middle East, a type of globalised Ulster or an immense Colombia... That is to say: situations marked by this dynamic of mad or desperate acts of terrorism and disproportionate replies to these acts.

Religions are not the agents of this conflict. We are not experiencing a clash of Christianity with the Muslim religion since, on the one hand, the Western World is no longer Christian; it may have a few excellent Christians, but neither the official culture, nor those who direct it, nor the leaders or authorised voices of the West are Christians today. On the other hand, the Islamic world is in reality much more plural than it appears to be. We have heard fervent Muslims discrediting the religiosity of a Bin Laden. And we know too that countries that practise in their territory a hard-line Islamic fundamentalism, like Saudi Arabia, are discredited in the Muslim world as false believers on account of their foreign policy...

Religions intervene in the conflict because of their cultural expression. *The real clash at the present moment lies in the conflict between Islam as a culture and the developed Western world understood as a culture.* This Booklet proposes to analyse briefly these two cultures in conflict, with special attention to our own, written as it is by Westerners and preferably for Westerners. We do not know how the conflict will evolve. And it is probable that, when this Booklet appears, things that at this point in time are not foreseeable could actually take place. For this reason we must limit ourselves to talking about the historic causes that have provoked it and we fervently wish the contemplation of these causes will contribute some useful elements to solving the conflict¹.

For informational purposes, nevertheless, we will begin with a rapid information about Islam as a religion.

1.- ISLAM AS A RELIGION

It is very difficult to speak of a religion from the outside and in only two pages. The following lines aim at presenting only those aspects of Islamic religiosity that can intervene in the cultural conflict. We presuppose that all religions contain dialectical affirmations on the Divinity that are difficult to harmonise but must necessarily be maintained.

These affirmations are wont to be the source of their problems in this world. And they are wont to revolve around the Greatness and the Remoteness of God (that which makes God to be "God"), and His Presence and closeness with respect to us (that which permits us to know Him, have dealings with Him and render Him worship etc).

1. God and man

As everybody knows, "Islam" means submission. Islam is a religion marked by the seriousness of God. Mohammed regarded many forms of worship and many Christian affirmations that he was familiar with as superstitious or polytheistic (e.g. the Incarnation or the death on the Cross of the One sent by God...). His first obsession was an absolutely pure monotheism ("only God is God"; and "there is no other God than Him") in which God appears in His place and man in his.

And so, although believing in another life, Islam does not accept that it is a life "next to God" as Christianity promises. Expressions like that of the New Testament: when what we are is manifested, we will be equal to Him because we will see Him as He is" (1 Jn 3, 1ss), are inconceivable - if not blasphemy - for a Muslim. The other life is manifested within the limits of human creaturehood and can only be described as a pleasant "here-beyond"². Biblical definitions of man as the "son of God" in the full sense of the word or as the evangelical sentence of "I will no longer call you servants but friends", are blasphemies for a Muslim. God remains in His place and man in his. And although Allah is proclaimed in each 'sur' (or chapter) of the Koran as "clement and merciful", among the one hundred names of God the only one that is missing in the Koran but which is given in the New Testament is "God is Love". For the Muslim, God is the Lord and not "Abba" in the sense that Jesus gave to the word Father³.

2. History

On account of this, God will be Judge, the Rewarder and Punisher of what is done in this life. *He cannot be the goal of history*. Human history cannot be called to "end up" in God (in the sense of the Christian heaven). And for this reason, the Incarnation of God, or the Resurrection of Jesus defined as "the end of history anticipated in this resurrection" (Pannenberg) are false and blasphemous affirmations.

And, nevertheless, the profound religiosity of Islam does not resign itself to leaving God alone in His transcendental dimension (as for e.g. the philosophy called "deist" would). God marks the whole life of man. All reality is impregnated with God and it is difficult to understand how reality could have "autonomy" in its functioning. From this rises what is

often termed "the theocratic temptation" or the difficulty to assume secularity which, although a difficulty proper of all religions, is perhaps even stronger in Islam. The deep piety of Islam does not understand what a Christian would call "*kénosis*" (destruction) of God in our reality. The "word of God" precisely because it is so, cannot be the human word: hence the immense respect of Islam for the sacred text.

Islam is, in this sense, the most "religious" of all world religions. God will always remain "in His place" of Lord, and man in his of creature, without there existing any possibility of altering this situation not even by the favour or Grace of God. All this converts it too into an enormously simple religion.

3. Mysticism

What we have described is the official religion. But where the experience of God is authentic, this goes beyond the official schemas. In fact, Islam has handed down to humanity one of the greatest treasures of mystical literature. We refer to all that current of literature spanning some seven centuries from Baghdad to Spain and which is known by the name of Sufism. Sufism is a way of personal purification, very serious and beautiful at the same time.

In it, the experience of the closeness of God is of such intensity that it is often quite close to "Christian"-cut formulations in which the distance between God and man seem to disappear. On account of this second point, Sufism is looked upon with suspicion in the majority of Islamic societies, and in some is even banned. For its beauty it is being converted into a product of "consumption" for our bored Western society, that runs the danger of trivialising it, not knowing the seriousness of its ways of personal purification⁴.

4. False and disfiguring Accusations

To sum up: *this deep affirmation of uniqueness and transcendence of God calls necessarily for a reflection as to how this God can influence the total existence of the human being without annulling his autonomy* and that of the rest of creation. Let it be noted that all religions have in some way this same problem. If we point it out, it is not to criticise but rather to defend Islam from many topical accusations that are being made today. For example:

a. The "Holy War"

It is a bad translation of a word that means "effort" and that often refers to the war that man has to wage against himself, against what is within himself contrary to God, not against other believers that in the Koran are deeply respected. When Muslim religiosity feels itself attacked, it is then that this effort can be converted into war. And this aggression has often been felt by Muslims in their relations with the Western world⁵. But the Koran itself teaches: "there should be no coercion in religion. The true way knows how to distinguish itself from error (2,257).

And although it is true that Mohammed had recourse to arms when he saw the first rejection of his preaching by the rich businessmen of Mecca, nevertheless, a decisive factor in the expansion of Islam was the fact that he found a tremendously divided world, full of

quarrels between factions, so much so that it was not difficult to make alliances in any of the places he reached and to act (to use a word very much in vogue today) in the fashion of a first "globalisation".

Not to quote at this point the well known story of the entry into Spain of Don Rodrigo, let us recall a saying attributed to the "monophysists" of the Christian East: the God of vengeance has sent the Arabs to free us from the Romans. If the Holy War has so often been disfigured (as it was right from the beginning by those wealthy businessmen themselves, who having rejected at first the preaching of Mohammed later saw in it an opportunity to expand their business), it will be good to remember that a very similar disfigurement took place in the Christianity of the Middle Ages with the so-called "Crusades". On the other hand, Islam was tolerant in the places where it grew. And it could be good to recall too that it was under full Arab domination that one of the greatest Christian saints (and theologians) of the VIII century, St. John Damascene, flourished and was treasurer of the Caliph of Damascus.

b. *Women*

On the topic of women, the same could be said. Nothing in the Koran authorises the crimes of a Taliban-type male domination. The savagery of genital mutilation has not risen from any Koranic precept, (neither is it in origin a product of the Muslim world) but of false primitive social solutions, and in this connection we of the Western world must not forget the "chastity belts" of our XIII century: in both cases it is a question of false solutions taken by males in self-defence with an easy recourse to God to justify the solutions taken and following the terrible human temptation of resorting to the most sacred to support their own desires and privileges.

2. THE CLASH: DEMOCRACY VERSUS FUNDAMENTALISM? **TWO FUNDAMENTALISMS FACE TO FACE?**

Till 1989 the Muslim world had existed without attaining either universal presence or the Satanisation that it has experienced since then. 1989 marked the fall of the USSR and in 1991 we already had the atrocity of the Gulf War, described by its authors as the beginning of a new world order.

Communism had been up to then the absolute enemy, the "total evil" whose sole existence legitimised all sorts of violence to protect ourselves from it. The process, which goes from 1989 up to our days, authorises us to at least raise the suspicion of whether *our western "order" needs an absolute enemy to be able to subsist as such.*

1. The necessity of an absolute enemy

What is the reason for the need of an absolute enemy? Simply the urgency of finding an explanation that justifies the contradictions of our western culture, whose proclamations speak of tolerance but its deeds, of domination, and whose languages are of peace while its acts are of violence. A contradiction which resides in *the ultimate incompatibility between the anthropological ideals and the economic ideals of the West.*

2. The contradiction of the West

2.1. As a matter of fact, the big contradiction of the West lies in *the impossibility of harmonising its critical reason with its economic reason.* Modernity is born proclaiming the 'critical' possibilities of human reason: "dare to think", Kant taught. But our economy is sustained by (and can only function with) a total lack of critical reason: what is important in it is confidence (who of us is not tired of hearing people speak of "the confidence of investors" or "the confidence of consumers"?). We proclaim ourselves children of the masters of suspicion and who does not know that when a little suspicion is spread around, it is enough to bring about a real financial downfall? What is decisive in our economy is the non-critical acceptance of the market economy whose dogmas have substituted the old dogmas of religion or tradition, typical of the Old World.

As is wont to happen in such cases of accepted authoritarianism, these procedures are of overwhelming efficiency, capable of justifying themselves by their results, *provided nobody questions the price paid* for these results. This is how the economy has silenced critical reason, it has hurled against critical reason the same excommunications that religion had done in olden times. And it has fallen again into a new fundamentalism that is unconscious of its uncritical character and has its eyes open only for Islamic fundamentalism.

2.2. As a result of this, the West has been a victim of another contradiction between the human ideals of Modernity and its economic ideals. Modernity has discovered the

dignity of the human being (of *all* human beings) and equality among men. But the fathers themselves of Modernity (like Voltaire and Montesquieu) contradict *even theoretically* the ideals they have proclaimed, admitting for economic reasons the legitimacy of slavery and of the sales/purchase of slaves because they were indispensable for maintaining the prices of our sugar and cocoa, thereby reducing at the end the universal ideals of Modernity to the exclusive sphere of the western world. Western culture has been enormously uncritical in respect of the second contradiction. One is not allowed to think freely either against the dogmas or against the interests (usually sustained by these dogmas) of powerful bodies.

In this way while the western discourse has filled the world with splendid human ideals in which all of us can relate and unite ourselves to, western praxis in recent years has tacitly spread the teaching that political ends (and it is just a saying, that of politicians, since these ends are always at the service of economic interests) justify all means even the death of innocent people⁶. Do we have the right to be surprised if we are paid in the same coin? Because the West has not only put in practice this way of seeing things but it has ended up justifying the practice theoretically: our wars are always of the total good against the absolute evil (and the ingenuity of Bush junior committed the mistake of proclaiming it as such, calmly speaking of "infinite justice" and of "the war of good against evil").

Well, *this approach contradicts in the last analysis the vision that the Western world has been attempting to build up and to spread around as the basis of society and of human coexistence: that of a healthy secularism and an acceptance of plurality*. Later we will touch on this point.

3. The real confrontation

The Biblical book of Daniel (in chapter 7) describes a vision in which four beasts⁷ appear and these are set up against a "human figure" ("The Son of Man") who has true strength and around whom people gather. Following this allegory, we could evoke too that the recent history of the world is marked by four imperial aspirations, all with their promise of false paradises and their oppression of what is truly human:

- a. the empire "of the race" of the nazis which brought about the first holocaust;
- b. the empire "of class" of the Soviets, which produced the Gulag;
- c. the empire of the market which is now producing a new apartheid and a multitude of holocausts which we prefer to be unaware of, or to look upon as provisional stages, which are perverse but necessary.
- d. And finally, the dreams of a pan-Arab empire that have arisen here and there from the remembrance of past epochs and are like ardent desires that some are waiting to bring to fulfilment, confident as they are of their strength. From time to time, these dreams give a glimpse of their possibilities of evil in episodes like that of the Afghan Talibans or the persecution by Iran of Salman Rushdie.

We make this sort of allegory so that it becomes evident that after the fall of the first two empires, the only fight left for the present is between the third and the fourth. And this forecast is confirmed if we take into account that the Arab world is not only the one that offers the most resistance to the cultural and economic penetration of the West, but in addition is the biggest owner of petrol which has

turned into the very "air" our western economy breathes. It is not coincidence that almost all the big crusades launched by the United States in the name of great values have occurred precisely in places and situations where economic interests have been at stake. We reflect here once again the contradiction of the West, which we have just spoken about. During the Gulf war people already spoke of "blood for petrol". And now it is impossible not to know about the tenacious determination of the United States to construct an oil pipeline to transport petrol from Central Asia to Pakistani ports of the Indian Ocean. That pipeline had to pass through Afghanistan and up to now conversations with the Afghans to obtain permission had not given any results⁸... This suspicion should be taken into consideration. And with this in mind, we wish in the pages ahead to limit ourselves more to the cultural aspect of the clash we are witnessing. We could define it as *the clash between total secularity* (which is impossible, as we will try to show) *and political religion* (which is also impossible as we will try to show).

3. WHICH WAY DO WE GO?

In the confrontation of this recently begun century there appears, on the one hand, the might of the refined cruelty of armaments united to the misery of the enemy and on the other, the cruelty of accumulated hate united to how vulnerable our fear makes us.

1. More despair than religion

Religion can be manipulated like any other human element that gives strength. It will be less manipulated in Europe, which has learnt to accept secularism better (though there will be some in Europe who will take advantage of this manipulation to pursue new anti-religious crusades). The latter case could well happen in the USA, a country much more superstitious than Europe, though freedom of expression will permit other voices (like those of the Baptists, Catholics, etc.) to rise up publicly against this sort of manipulation. This is one of the great values of freedom of expression. Where this does not exist, and where in addition, there is less school education - as occurs in the Arab world - religion will be much more manipulated by the appearance of intelligent people with a capacity for leadership and with no scruples, as is the case of Ossama Bin Laden.

Let us put an example: according to the Koran, Christians are "closest to the love of Believers"⁹. This shows the tremendous infidelity of Bin Laden to his origin, when he describes the current situation as "a war of Believers against Christians". Other Muslim voices have already contradicted him on this point. And, nevertheless, despite this terrible use of religion (which in the ultimate analysis seeks to manipulate more easily the feelings of his fellow-believers), we have to say that Bin Laden is right in many of his *political* judgements. "Noblesse oblige".

In reality, the West is quite guilty for the dire situation of the Palestinians, the UNO is much to be blamed for the current world situation (although this blame derives from it being unable to free itself from submission to the USA), its current secretary though no "criminal" (as Bin Laden claims), has been a toy in the hands of North-American governments (some motive there must have been for forcing the destitution of the former secretary Butros Galli; the Europeans on that occasion maintained a passive stance). And mark the example that hurts most: it was the need to avenge the terrorist attack on the twin towers and the concomitant need to obtain Arab support for this vengeance that impelled Bush and Blair to make declarations to the effect that the problem of the Middle East had to be resolved with the proclamation of a Palestinian State and by honouring the much forgotten resolution 242 of the UN (which, though passed more than 30 years ago, has systematically been kept unimplemented by Israel and the USA). Even during the savagery of the Gulf War when a solution to the Palestinian problem was requested as a means to avoid future conflicts, the reply of the then President, G. Bush senior, was that it was still not possible then but that the problem would be resolved after the war was over. To be sure that "war" ended and in the ten following years the Palestinian problem still remains getting worse.

Really, though the truth hurts, we of the West lack credibility. Because we have gradually been abandoning the arms of reason (to which arms the West proclaims its origin) to substitute them by the reason of arms.

2. More fear than moral reason

But fear is the worst councillor and Westerners have fear. Let us see some of the consequences of that fear which reigns at this point of the confrontation and we will try to formulate it with certain good humour.

2.1. "Empires on the verge of a nervous breakdown"

Our situation seems to be something like this. The terror we feel before anthrax or the economic recession, the images of prevention that appear on TV sharply contrast with the fearlessness of those who fear nothing simply because they have always lived under these and other worse threats. And the expenditure of thousands of millions of dollars in defence appear irrational, because it only contributes to increasing the economic crisis and because with less investment, if done before and in time, would have obviated many of the causes of our conflicts. The governments of the First World should ask themselves if their reaction does not appear too much like that of a boxer who the apostle Paul describes as always "hitting blindly" (1 Cor. 9,27), trying to cover the spot where he has been hit and, with that, leaving unguarded some other side to be attacked. With reason the saying goes "Prevention is better than cure".

2.2. "The war of idiots"

As in that film of F. Bever called "the supper of idiots", the "wanted-idiot" could end up being less stupid than those looking out for him are. We have made a fool of ourselves invoking concepts like that of a "just war", with no idea at all what this concept signifies in the moral tradition of the West, nor of the elementary conditions to be able to coin that expression, none of which are fulfilled now¹⁰. It makes one sad when one hears CNN informing (not much) about the civil deaths in Afghanistan, the speaker adding in a louder tone of voice that one must not forget that these deaths are "to avenge the thousands of deaths among us". In this way we are converting ourselves into greater terrorists than those we are combating.

2.3. "The apprentice of the witch doctor"

All the wicked terrorists we are now trying to exterminate were promoted, supported, armed and trained by our own selves. This happened not only with Bin Laden, but also with Saddam Hussein, with Noriega, with Pinochet or with the rightists of Salvador... Without necessity of getting pious, there is a sentence which the Koran often repeats and which we could apply to ourselves: "Are you not going to learn?" This short-sighted immediateness and our incapacity to see things on a long term basis turns us very vulnerable before those whom the very magnitude of their problems and their own impotence have taught them to be patient and to try to resolve them very slowly, at times with no other way out than that of the proverb (Arab?): Remain at the door of your shop till you see pass the corpse of your enemy".

2.4. *A Requiem for democracy?*

It would be terrible if the planes of Sept. 11 not only destroyed the gigantic material towers but also the big edifice of democracy itself, the construction of which (despite the current lamentable state) the West feels so proud of. In fact, we are seeing how the obsession for safety is making us accept the curtailing of our freedom in respect of information, capacity to move about, etc. And this contradicts the famous principle of Benjamin Franklin, "father of the fatherland" for many Westerners: those who sacrifice freedom for safety deserve neither the one nor the other. The philosopher Hobbs in a famous work (*Leviathan*) has already described this process by which citizens surrender their freedom to an absolute power that frees them from fear. If this process were to be brought about in our societies, even if the process were very gradual, it would not only mean the death of democracy but also the biggest victory of Bin Laden.

In a confrontation of this nature between despair and fear, much evil during a long period can be expected, unless we decide to allow dialogue and critical reason, which the West prides itself on, to play a role in this conflict. There is no reason to think that dialogue can be efficacious only in the case of internal terrorism (as that of the IRA) and not for terrorism coming from the outside. Only an unacknowledged form of Western racism can argue in this way. Unless we really think, without daring to say so, it is already too late for this...

4.- A WORD TO EUROPE

The inevitable brevity of this Booklet has obliged us to speak generically of the "West", without distinguishing too much between the USA and Europe. We are not unaware of some differences, nor of the current lack of personality of a Europe submissive, more than allied, to the American friend. But since the majority of our readers are European, more than analysing differences, we prefer to reflect a moment on Europe.

1. "Watch out about losing your soul"

*The clamorous demolition of the famous "Maginot line" towards 1940 highlighted the greater efficacy of German Nazism vis-à-vis the French military plans. But in the long term, it showed too the greater immorality that was at the root of that efficacy. And what is important: this was seen by practically nobody at that time! The opinion then of the triumphant majority was on the side of the invaders, although today practically no one sides with them. Against those invaders a group of Christians founded rapidly, desperately, the magazine *Témoignage chrétien*, whose first issue, appeared and vilified in November 1941, was entitled 'France, watch out about losing your soul' and was the work of none other than Gaston Fessard"¹.*

This evocation (which we made for the first time ten years ago) seems to us a parable of the current European situation, invaded by an economic efficacy which always triumphs at the cost of something that is most ours: of what is most human. From this example of the past, perhaps we should address a similar word to Europe: "Watch out about losing your soul".

When this Booklet appears, the Euro will already have become the common European currency. This suggests a simple reflection: if just half the time and effort dedicated to the establishment of a common currency had been spent in the elaboration of a common foreign policy, we would not have had to lament the sad role of an extra (or the absence of a role) that Europe is currently playing in the construction of the world. It is a shame to see the contrast that exists between European Disunion in respect of international policy and European Union in respect of monetary matters.

This observation does not only affect the authorities of our "virtual" Europe. In it "demotivation" (the lack of motivation) of some citizens, children of consumerism and post-modernity, play an important role.

2. The culture of "demotivation"

At the beginning of the nineties when the avalanche was perceived of the so-called neoliberalism, many social analysts warned about the danger of the new situation creating a generation of unmotivated citizens who would later be the best breeding grounds for a new totalitarian social structure.

Well, it can be said that the culture that all mass media exude today, and which many qualify as characteristic of post-modernity, such as the reaction to disenchantment following the proud promises of Modernity, can be summed up under the following three principles:

- *It is immoral to renounce "something" that reality offers, granted that reality does not permit great dreams.* (And let us add graphically: even if this "something" were the wife of your brother or the money of your neighbour).
- *It is also absolutely immoral to try to change anything of this reality.* And the one, who tries to do so, will receive his punishment.
- Finally, *it is even more immoral to renounce something in the hope of changing reality a little bit.*

This description does not reproduce criteria that are formulated in as many words. It reflects the unconscious stratum of a mentality that manifests itself in all those products of the cultural industry that are "commercial". In this context, great words are always taken as something that "must be said" to depict reality in a better light, but which nobody should give credence to. The undeniable fact that we are wont to hear great words and great promises only at elections and wars (that is to say, in the so-called lying periods¹²) has contributed greatly to this lack of credence.

And so it happens that a citizen given over to narcissistic consumption, as compensation for a life that is not easy, and manipulated besides by misinformation controlled by political and economic powers or secretly censored, or by information that has been converted into some true sort of "catechism" that describes and qualifies facts instead of trying to approach them and their causes - this citizen tends to react angrily and disparagingly when he comes across someone who "commits the crime of taking life seriously"¹³.

We must add that in many poor countries of the world, precisely because life there is not something that can be taken for granted, the crime is sometimes committed of taking life seriously. And this reaction of ours against them is one that lacks critical reason and is a new form of fundamentalism.

3. An example

Let us put an example of this mentality that we are trying to describe: it is not very difficult to guess that what was most intolerable for us about the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 was not that they were morally unjustifiable (although they were so) nor that they caused the deaths of innocent victims but *that they could not be converted into objects of consumption*. This has been precisely the great resort of our post-modern culture against all interpellation of what is real. In our world there are a thousand other things in the field of sex, economics, society, military operations, politics and child suffering that are as morally unjustifiable as the terrorist attack of 11-S. But the contradiction of our system turns them into simple objects of consumption.

Allow us to put another example of converting horrors into objects of consumption. The director of one of the shocking films of our times (*La Pianista*) said in a statement to the press that pessimists are those who limit themselves to making entertainment films (they implicitly acknowledge that it is impossible to change anything), whereas

he had tried to provoke a shock in the spectator, because he still considered himself an optimist. If the first part of the commentary is undeniably true, the second commits a crass mistake of perception. A clever, more or less morbid launch could get the cinema halls packed on the day of the première show but it could also happen that the public could leave the halls much calmer and less interpellated than the author of the film said he had tried to get them to be (it could even happen that they could be satisfied they were not "as crazy" as the leading actor of the film). Well, this way of turning horror and immorality into a simple object of consumption is what could not occur (or there was no interest that it should occur) with the terrorist attacks of the World Trade Towers.

5.- WAYS OF SOLUTION

It is evident that in situations as difficult as the one we have created, there do not exist prefabricated solutions that can be applied mechanically, something like ordering a "pizza" to be taken home. There only exist ways, which at times have "to be made while on the march", but which in the trajectory can permit us to find solutions progressively. Let us insinuate some of these ways.

1. The necessity of enlightening Islam

The question of how a religion gets set in culture is very complicated and can be touched on only very superficially here. Keeping in mind historical data, in the so-called "Spain of the three cultures" and at the height of its splendour, Islam showed that it was capable of co-existing and was not contrary to the Enlightenment. The West owes to Islam the discovery of Aristotle and the example of some pioneers like Avicena and others.

Today it seems evident to us that the Islamic world needs a serious "Enlightenment". Such enlightenments are difficult processes that are achieved better by confidence rather than by imposition. Studies on mystical experience have highlighted today that this (even in the case it is authentic) is always different in the forms in which it is expressed, since these forms are conditioned culturally and though serving as vehicle for part of the experience do not reproduce it since the experience is irreproducible. The same mystical authors had a presentiment of this and expressed it in a thousand ways. The immediateness of God will always be for us a mediated immediateness.

1.1 Some examples

Putting what has been said above in a simple way, we know today the ease with which ancient religious texts presented as a divine mandate what were no more than hygienic measures very useful in primitive societies but which would not have turned out efficacious in the environment of scarce culture, had they not been presented with a halo of sacredness.

This is valid for a thousand precepts on impure foods, total rejection of alcohol, circumcision etc. And this is beginning to be understood in an intuitive way by immigrants who, today with other work companions take a beer and small rations of pork sausage and who do not feel that by doing this they have offended Allah.

Let us give another more academic example: the sura (or chapter) 55 of the Koran has in its final part a number of repetitions that probably advocate a superposition of two compositions (a case which is also detected on very many occasions in the Bible), which an immediatist conception of the "Word of God" would reject scandalised.

1.2. The true problem

The above examples are not so very important. The real serious problem is posed with the aspiration of a political religion that derives from the profound experience that God permeates all human realities and dimensions. The Western version of this problem lay in what was called "Christianity" and in the late efforts to resuscitate it today. The "public" dimension of the authentic religious experience can never be eliminated (even though certain party interests of politicians may attempt doing so). But the way adopted by the Western version of the problem does not manifest itself in the ardent desire of a political religion which would necessarily lead to intolerance and the need to eliminate the "heretic".

In our opinion, Islam has a serious journey to make here. But neither disdain nor ill treatment nor a racist pride that each day is confessed more openly will help Islam in this direction. Because Islam has, moreover, serious reasons to suspect that our western reason is in reality a dominating reason that is little reliable and can be very little universalised as reason. Some should learn that reason is incapable of laying the foundations of many of the ultimate and more serious decisions of the life of man. And others should acknowledge that despite this, reason is an indispensable instrument to assess, control and lead this type of ultimate decisions, preventing these from converting themselves into pseudo-mystical, irrational and blind. Let us say now a few words on the first element of this duality.

2. Necessity of an open secularism

When in this article we speak of "religion", we are not referring to Christianity but to the Islamic religion. For good or for bad, Christianity is no longer esteemed in Western Europe. But the whole of the Arab world still believes (and at times, deeply) in God. Attempting then to do away with God in order to solve the conflict is equivalent to resolving nothing (except one's own satisfaction) or to proclaiming a religious persecution against the Arabs, similar to what the Communist countries proclaimed against Christianity. This is a false solution because history shows that the more religions are persecuted, the more they grow.

And it is, moreover, a useless solution because a minimum of rationality permits one to understand that the true reason of the conflict does not lie in faith in God but - as we have already said - in desperation on the one hand and on the other, fear of the other (although later this desperation - as fear of the other party - will use God as any other tool that could appear useful).

The problem is rather that to end their desperation it is necessary to end too the "installation" of us all. This is what makes us panicky and what we deny facing. Not only the installation in our economic level (of which we have already spoken) but also *the installation in our unbelief for which we feel so superior and so proud of.*

Secularism, therefore, will not be truly such if it does not know how to leave space in its bosom for the possibility of faith in God. And this not only for political reasons of co-existence but also because secularism should bear its own ambiguity.

2.1. *The limits of secularism*

Indeed: *the limits of all this that we call secularism or laity become manifest with the appearance of conflicts, which are intrinsic to human life.* Who resolves them? If there are organs destined for this *by nature*, we are already introducing a certain "confessional" factor: some pseudo-priests before whom there is no room for neutrality and whose wisdom will be used to resolve the conflict. If we are told that these organs are not destined "by nature" but by mere designation of the same society, we take a step forward but we have only pushed the problem one step back since in accordance with which values will these designated organs resolve the conflicts? In accordance with their subjective or group tastes? Or will it be in accordance with *objective* values in the presence of which there is no possible room for neutrality and whose application will permit the correct solution of the conflict?

If in this dilemma we opt for the first alternative, we will run the great risk of confusing secularism with "neutrality". Be it said: neutrality in the very many dramatic situations of our world is either impossible or is converted into a flagrant complicity. And if we opt for the second alternative, we are again introducing a "confessional" element. Indeed: does this signify that there must be a body of common and shared values for secular society? What is to be done then with members of this society that do not share such values (e.g. the unity of Spain to put a topical example? Does not the danger exist of some pseudo-values getting filtered in dogmatically as "secular" values?

Something similar occurs with the market: in its current version (global market) it is very debatable whether or not this market is a social value. Nevertheless, economic powers require societies that proclaim themselves secular to defend wholeheartedly this market against any interference in it. This is done naturally in the name of a good functioning of the economy, but of an economy that considers the "merchandising" of everything as an authentic natural value. And so we have brought about a type of "confessional state of the market" which is what in reality all states are that today proclaim themselves secular. Values, moreover, have the drawback of being either universal or "not valid". So, what credit can our proclamations of the value of life have, when we are cool accomplices of tens of thousands of deaths of starvation every day?¹⁴ Or which life is of better quality: that of one who needs to kill others to defend his standard of life or that of a person who sacrifices his life with the idea (perhaps mistaken) of giving life to his people. These are not comfortable questions for secular societies.

To sum up: *it is practically impossible for a society to feel itself united and in communion with one another, unless it is so on the basis of authentic values and not only on the basis of norms that facilitate co-existence as traffic regulations facilitate traffic. But then it is not so easy nor at times so possible to find the harmonisation between these values and true secularism.*

2.2. *The ways of a healthy secularism*

This is the problem secular societies must acknowledge and bear, not to abjure their secularism (which remains better than any imposed confessionality) but to realise how precarious secularism is and the necessity of trying to advance in the search of it. And to understand that secularism does not mean having a closed mentality, rather it should acknowledge boundaries, which it must remain open to. True secularism must imply, therefore, authentic respect for the reality of religious belief although it does not actively participate or attempt to decide on it.

Or in other words: the great secular value of tolerance should not be confused with neutrality, although both words have something in common. True tolerance does not take place in the name of lack of values or of indifference to values, but precisely in the name of values. *But if we accept that secularism is not the same as a lack of values then when values appear, the question always arises about their foundations.*

Secularism tries to accept these values, leaving the reply to this question. It is an ambitious and necessary project for co-existence but is enormously fragile, given that the basis is wont to condition the content of the values. Hence the current attempts to look out for "minimal ethics" by which all can live together secularly and without regarding this "minimal" as signifying total ethics (= "there are no other values than these"). Since this would be again a camouflaged confessionality that would be a perpetual threat for all secular societies.

The inconvenient Nietzsche (inconvenient for one and the other party) had already touched on this problem: "all of us are equal *before God*. But the problem is that God does not exist now" according to his Zoroaster. Hence it would follow that we are not all equal, something that the West tries to deny in moments of tranquillity but fanatically proclaims when it feels itself threatened. And if we are not all equal, it is inevitable that, sooner or later, more criminally or less, there should rise some Bin Laden who will not allow us to live in peace.

3. To attack the causes of terrorism before attacking terrorism itself

Anybody who knows a little about our world and who has the experience of arriving in some country of the so-called First World from any Third World part of the planet, the experience of passing in a very short time from unbearable misery to sleep-inducing opulence should make him realise immediately that a situation such as this cannot last long. And this opinion is alien to any ethical or religious consideration. It is a perception of common sense. The presence of so many journalists these days in Afghanistan has permitted them to live for a short time in similar (although improved) conditions to those in which Afghans live. The journalists do this for a salary, for service to a cause, for love of information or adventure. But they know that their sacrifice will last for a short time, and many may have asked themselves how it could be that those people could tolerate a life in such inhuman conditions. A similar judgement could be valid for the majority of places on the globe, although now they are not news and do not call the attention of journalists.

Well, in such a situation it is absolutely irrational (even from a long term economic viewpoint) that we spend billions of dollars in defence, putting our own economies in danger with this lavish spending, when with less than half of these figures one could remedy all the causes of despair of the countries of the world. Only the terror of feeding future competitors, typical of the bad conscience of the powerful, can explain such great irrationality.

Remember in this context a graphic sentence of Pope John Paul II in Brazil: "If we do not give our rings in time, they will end up by cutting our arms". Again: this is not an ethical or religious opinion but a simple truth of common sense.

4. Refocusing on the question of weapons

The USA has denied signing the treaty against biological weapons, except in the form of a declaration of good intentions without coercive power (and in July of this year it denied too an inspection). So it is pathetic to see now President Bush trying to obtain supporters for his violence with the argument that the terrorists could have these weapons¹⁵. The idea that we can arm ourselves because we are "the good guys" and defend the absolute good and they cannot because they are "the bad guys" is one of those forms of fundamentalism contrary to all secularism, about which we have just spoken.

Safety in the world will not exist as long as the problem of weapons is not reserved to a democratically elected world authority and kept away from individual states. We know that this proposal could seem naive. We only wish to add that the alternative to it is that terrorism has nuclear weapons, etc. It is up to us "to choose between life and death".

6.- A WORD FOR CHRISTIANS

1. For those of our readers who share faith in Jesus Christ, we would like to add a few words. Against some form of religiosity that tries to escape from history, we believe that history is "theophanous", it is the place where we should seek God. But it should be kept quite clear that *history is theophanous because in it are the losers, the crucified* of this history who, though not the ones who write it, are all recapitulated in The Crucified One through Whom God revealed Himself. History is not theophanous because they who write it are the conquerors (as is the great danger in the USA where a large dose of fundamentalist religiosity is to be found that envelops the current president and the defenders of capital punishment and of revenge of the powerful). Neither is history theophanous because of our assurance that Allah is going to give us the final victory and a "reward" for all the unfaithful we kill... It is simply so because in the impossible effort to bring down the crucified from the cross of history, one can experience (and many have done so) that "God Himself walks with us" as the words of a Spanish song goes and which we have often sung in church.
2. Remembering now the contradiction of the West that has been described earlier and the anonymous economic factors latent in the conflict, Christians can understand better the meaning of the words of Jesus: "One cannot serve both God and wealth"¹⁶. He who said those words was not ignorant of human needs; He had lived trying to remedy them and "His bowels were moved with compassion" before them. And although His words may seem to us intolerable, including those of us who acknowledge His authority, they offer one of the best X-ray pictures of our western society. One of the causes (although not the only one) of the loss of faith in Europe lies in our choice "to serve riches". And in the USA, where this religion is followed better, it is being clearly shown that when one serves riches one is serving a god who forces one to kill. All this should make us think, though we might not be prepared to accept the result.
3. Finally, we have nothing to object to the prayer meetings for peace that are being conducted in different communities. But we do wish to add that Christian prayer should in this case be similar to that famous prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, which does not simply say "Give us peace" but "Make me an instrument of Your Peace. Where there is hate, let me put peace"...etc. It would have little meaning to pray for peace if later we side with one of its enemies for whatever reason.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps this text would seem to some too negative. We would like to clarify that every exam aims at acknowledging one's own deficiencies, without that implying being ignorant of, much less denying, the positive elements of the West. On the contrary: precisely because these exist, because we are aware of them and because we believe in them, we are able to perceive better what in us is opposed to them. We have tried to speak out of love for what is most precious in the West and out of our confidence in this preciousness.

With this attitude and keeping in sight the "war" of Afghanistan that is taking place today (October-end, 2001), we must say simply that some other solution could have been possible. As a Middle Ages classical saying goes, often "*occasions do not make the man but show what he is*". Something of this could be happening to us.

A different reaction from blind vengeance motivated by injured pride could perhaps have been possible. Another reaction, something similar to that which simple people showed in New York immediately following the terrorist attacks, drawing the best out of them by collaborating in the measure they could. This type of reaction is what is usually lacking in the powerful of this world. A reaction that would look not only to the effects but also to the causes, a reaction in which there would be true dialogue and not one that is bought or imposed, a reaction that without renouncing the exercise of justice, would pay attention to the elemental principles of all administration of justice, among which is that of the presumption of innocence until the sentence is passed by an authority distinct from the one that applies the punishment. And one must not forget that generosity is precisely the greatest exhibition of strength: the person who feels he is weak is the one who least feels himself capable of being generous.

We believe that to date things have not occurred this way. We can only desire and work so that this does not end up bringing down on humanity more evils than those it was trying to avoid. And so we conclude with the same words that were used to close another Booklet of our Centre, published in 1991 on the occasion of the Gulf "war".

"The true prologue of this war is not to be sought on 17th January nor on 2nd August but in the long chain of harassment and humiliation practised by the West in their relations with the Islamic world. The Islamic culture probably needs an "Enlightenment", but perhaps what it needs is not our western enlightenment that has already manifested sufficiently its contradictions... All this can be said without making any excessive defence of Islam, and less still of Islamic fundamentalism, but only as an expression of fear that the West may have underestimated the capacity of resistance and despair of the Arabs and could be helping in an authentic "libanising" of the whole planet... This is the blind alley that the current "international disorder" has led us to". (Booklet 38, *Reflection on the Gulf war*, pg. 15).

Unfortunately, we fear these words instead of becoming outdated have taken on more force.

Cristianisme i Justícia
Permanent Council, Nov.6, 2001

APPENDIX: THE CLAMOUR OF NATIONS FOR JUSTICE, SOLIDARITY AND PEACE.

(Document signed by a group of Bishops, Protestant Parsons and Catholics on October 20, 2001)

We, the undersigned Bishops, Evangelical Parsons and Catholics, gathered together at a study, reflection and prayer meeting in Ibiúrana, Sao Paulo, from October 15-22, 2001, wish to express our anguish and concern over the current international situation.

We condemn all and any terrorist act, like those perpetrated last September 11 that raised universal repudiation and consternation, on account of their madness and on account of the thousands of victims they caused, included among whom were even aid teams. From all corners a huge clamour has been heard for justice, together with gestures of mercy and solidarity towards the victims and their relations.

On the other hand, the inappropriate transformation of the clamour for justice into acts of vengeance and retaliation with air bombardments against Afghanistan is equally terrorism, practised now by governments that consider themselves democratic, civilised and Christian.

The bombardments are provoking innumerable victims, including women, children and old people, destruction of infrastructures, increase of hunger and despair, aggravation of the sanitary situation and is putting on the streets millions of refugees. Deliberately a worsening of the civil war between rival political factions is being incited with renewed suffering for the people.

Today the clamour for justice is accompanied by an increasing outcry for peace which is expressed in renewed protests and demonstrations against war, in manifestos and ecumenical and inter-religious celebrations in favour of peace.

We unite forces with all these people, religious and civil institutions and our communities to propose, in the light of the Word of God and of the deep longing of so many different peoples, a renewed determination in favour of justice and dialogue, solidarity and peace.

"The fruit of justice is peace" (Isaiah 32,7)

The prolonged international indifference vis-à-vis situations of inhuman misery that affect the greater and increasing part of the world population is leaving a trail of suffering and death throughout the world and is also generating resentment and protests against a reduced number of countries that impose this new international order, which they are able to carry out, thanks to the support of international organisms and of their policies of economic adjustment.

These neo-liberal policies have been producing economic and financial disasters in many countries weighed down under the burden of unpayable external debts, or affected by brusque movements and attacks on the local currencies by speculative capital.

In poor countries diseases and epidemics like cholera, tuberculosis, yellow fever and malaria that apparently had been under control have made a reappearance and a resurgence has been experienced of widespread epidemics, such as AIDS that devastate whole continents.

Behind all these current wars lie the interests of arms industries and the dispute for the control of markets and strategic natural resources like petrol and gas.

Without the overcoming of tensions provoked by exclusion and marginalisation of the vast majority of peoples; without the concerted and sincere commitment to diminish international inequalities, to eliminate hunger, racism, discrimination against women and ethnic and religious minorities, to cancel or reduce the debt of poor countries and to limit the destruction of and damage to the environment, the conditions for a lasting peace will not easily be attained.

"Never more war! Never more war! It is peace that should guide the destiny of all humanity. If you wish to be brothers, drop the weapons from your hands!" was the cry of Paul VI, on October 4, 1965 before the Assembly of the UNO, in the city of New York, today wounded by the terrorist attacks?

People and countries that have suffered the horrors and the madness of war with no sort of limits and those that were consumed in the holocaust of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, can only unite themselves to the voice and testimony of wise guides like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, martyrs of justice and of peace, who actively adopted non-violence as a spiritual and political attitude.

Before modern weapons of mass destruction and of nuclear, chemical or biological war that endanger the survival of our planet earth and humanity itself, there is place only for the ethical and straightforward condemnation of Pope John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris*: *"It is not possible to think that in our Atomic Age war can be an apt means to achieve the satisfaction of violated rights"....* (n° 127).

To those who try today to justify war, we would remind them of the firm words of the Council: *Any act of war that leads to the indiscriminate destruction of entire cities and vast regions with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man himself and should be condemned with firmness and no hesitation"* (GS n° 47,9).

What is being spent on the military operation against Afghanistan would be sufficient to free that nation and many others from hunger, misery and destruction that they are subjected to, and would inaugurate relations of respect and co-operation, help and solidarity, and would not aggravate suffering and sow new seeds of hate and lack of comprehension.

The only way to peace is to be found in the overcoming of injustices and differences, in a framework of dialogue supervised by legitimate international political and juridical institutions which should be better respected and strengthened, such as the UNO and the International Tribunal of the Hague, before whom should be brought, judged, punished if found guilty, all who are suspected of war crimes and terrorism.

War and vengeance against another sovereign and practically defenceless nation, undertaken unilaterally and imperialistically by one or more countries who are at the same time party and judge, destroy the basis of international co-existence and establish the law of the jungle, might is right, destroying the safeguards of law.

One of the first victims of war is truth. Modern wars are waged on battlefields but also and above all in social communication media.

Falsehood and manipulation of the truth, the demonising of the adversary and the intoxication of the people with desires of vengeance and hatred, make negotiation, dialogue and restoration of concord and peace difficult.

We denounce and condemn with all vehemence the caricature that is being diffused of the Islamic faith and of the Arab world and which converts into suspects individuals, peoples and religions. We ask them forgiveness for the unjust offence that is coming to them from the Christian West. This only aggravates misunderstanding, foments prejudices and increases international tensions.

A look at ourselves and at the situation we are living invites us to adopt an attitude not only of listening and prayer but also of decided determination in the construction of justice and peace. This attitude would be reflected in our daily lives by acts aimed at combating injustice, inequality, prejudice and discrimination, by acts of compassion towards the poor and small, by the struggle for social policies that do not exclude people and by a new international order.

The justification of war is neither human nor evangelical, and of the beatitudes announced by Jesus, the one we are called to put into practice at this moment is that of constructors of peace:

"Blessed are the peacemakers because they will be called the children of God" (Mt. 5,9).

*Ibiúna, Sao Paulo, Brazil,
October 10, 2001. 25 signatures follow**

* Among others the signatures of Luis Fernandes, Antonio Batista Fragoso, José María Pires, Pedro Casaldáliga, Tomás Baldino, bishops of Brazil; Raúl Vera, Samuel Ruiz, Hermenegildo Ramírez, Alejo Zavala, bishops of Mexico; the protestant parsons D. Almir dos Santos and Rev. Rolf Schuenemann of Brazil.

NOTES

¹ For further information the reader is referred to the Booklet of Luis Sols: *Islam. A necessary Dialogue* (nº 82 of this collection) which we consider very necessary.

² In chapters 55 and 56 of the Koran there are two scenes similar to that of the Last Judgement of Mt. 25. And there, among the things that are promised to those "on the right", we find "excellent beautiful virgins, 'houris' kept in pavilions who have been untouched by men before"... "They will be lying on raised carpets. The houris that we have formed and whom we have maintained as virgins, flirtatious and of the same age will belong to those on the right". Although these promises should not be taken literally (at other times reference is made to "their own wives, pure" etc., and the New Testament insinuates at times images like that of the banquet and the new city), what does call the attention is the absence of any sexual allusion in the Christian heaven (based perhaps on the words of Jesus in Mt. 22,30). The New Testament seems to be more concerned about the search for a language that speaks about the overcoming of finitude (dangers, tears, death, mourning, work...) and about religious mediations ("there will be no temple since the Lord is His temple... no night nor need of the light of the sun or torches because the Lord will radiate light on them" Cf. Apoc. 21)

³ Despite this, the experts call our attention to the fact that the words clement and merciful come from the root RHM which means bowels. And perhaps Mohammed avoided the word love to avoid a sexual conception of the love of God.

⁴ Regarding the Sufists we recommend: E. Galindo, *La experiencia del fuego*, (ed. Verbo Divino)

⁵ For example in the European domination over Magreb, or in the English domination over the East (with the appearance in Afghanistan of the activist al_Afghani who found in the Muslim religion the basis for his anti-colonial fight. Or in the 4000 million dollar aid that the American Congress donates to Israel every year.

⁶ It is not only about the savagery committed in Iraq but of other similar atrocities like the invasion of Panama at the price of 3,000 dead to capture an old "treacherous" ally, the bombardment of Sudan, the organisation of the "contra" in Nicaragua which left that country submerged in the most dreadful misery, the explicit support of the savagery of Pinochet in Chile. And standing by them, the deplorable cowardice of the European Union, forgetful of its proclamations of the defence of human rights for fear of economic sanctions...

⁷ Which represent the four empires of ancient history: the Assyrian, Medes, Persian and that of Alexander

⁸ See for example the article of CARLOS TAIBO in *La Vanguardia* of Tuesday Nov. 6

⁹ Cf. 5.85. See also 2.59; 5.18; 57.27

¹⁰ Those conditions were recalled in the States by letters to President Bush sent by Catholic bishops and Jesuit Provincials. Coming from North-American citizens, the letters had more merit.

¹¹ From the work in collaboration edited by Cristianisme i Justícia: *El neoliberalismo en cuestión*, Santander 1993, pg. 172.

¹² The following saying is attributed to Chancellor Bismarck: "Never are more lies told than before elections, during a war and after a hunt"

¹³ Sentence taken from the dedication

¹⁴ On the same September 11, 35000 innocent children died of starvation without any communication media giving this information or proposing to look out for those responsible for those deaths.

¹⁵ Not to quote the other point (against which false excuses could be brought forward) that in 1987 the General Assembly of the United Nations approved a very strong resolution against terrorism with only two dissident votes - that of the USA and Israel.

¹⁶ The original Greek of the gospels commits the same linguistic violence that our translation does when speaking of Mammon (wealth) without an article and personified: riches converted into a god, that is what private riches are. The same as when Quevedo in his famous *letrilla*, speaks of "Mr. Money".

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