

Between Islamism and Islam

Abstract. *Islamism* is a form of political and religious utopia, created by the Arab-Muslim world, as an ideological alternative to the invasion of modern western doctrines: communism, socialism, liberalism, capitalism etc. This political and ideological current appears to some as a substitute for nationalism, which lost its appeal in many Muslim countries, due to the application of a „socialist” model, as well as due to the deception that emerges from the successive defeats in the fight with the Israeli enemy. The anti-Occidentalism of this movement is seen as a side effect in the fight against laicization, against materialism and moral degradation.

Keywords: Islam, Islamism, terrorism, Shari’ a, Qur’an, reformism.

Islam is an Abrahamic, monotheistic religion, founded in the 7th century AD and it is based on the holy book known as Qur’an (Arabic: القرآن *al-qur’ān*, literally "the recitation"). Islam is the last universal religion, emerged after Judaism and Christianity, already known in the ancient Arabia¹.

In Arabic, Islam means „submission” – in the sense of total surrender of oneself to Allah and it is described as „way of life” or „religion”. It is derived from the same root as the word „Salam”, which means „Peace” (used as greeting). The word „Islam” defines the monotheistic revelation as taught by Muhammad (ca. 570 Mecca – June 8, 632 Medina) in the Arab lands of the 7th century and later spread on a big part of the inhabited land. This word also applies to the community of the believers and to the civilization that was born within this community².

The word „Muslim” is also related to the word „Islam” and means „person that submits himself to Allah³. The Muslims state that Islam

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¹ Yves Thoraval, *Larousse, Dicționar de civilizație musulmană*, traducere, adaptare și completări de Nadia Anghelescu, editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1997, p. 156.

² Dominique Sourdel, *Islamul*, trad. Liliana Saraiev, editura Humanitas, București, 1993, p. 5.

³ <http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam>

contains the same faith as the one of all messengers sent by Allah to the human kind, since Adam, and Qur'an contains the final revelation of Allah. The Islamic school of thought sees Judaism and Christianity as stemming from the teachings of some of these prophets – especially Abraham – and acknowledges their Abrahamic roots, while Qur'an names them „People of the Book”. Muhammad the Prophet (or Mohamed) stresses the total independence from „the people of the Gospel”, which, even though having the same origin as the Qur'an is incomplete and deformed⁴.

The Qur'an is the holy book of Islam, being preserved over time through complete memorization of the entire text, word by word. For Muslims, the Qur'an is not only the sacred book, coming directly from God, and frequently defined as „a sum of principles in which to believe, a synthesis of ethical statements, a guide for spiritual life, a civil codex that answers the questions of everyday life, but also an acute reality, with a profound and mysterious meaning”⁵. Qur'an presents to us in the form of a codex, that is both religious and social, from which the judicial character of Islam originates, and is first of all defined as a law (Shari' a) that only applies to the community of the believers.

In the Islamic interpretation, the revelation of the Qur'an was accomplished through the intervention of the angel Gabriel (Arabic: Jibril), by Allah and to the last of his prophets, Muhammad. Muslims consider Qur'an as the main written record of the revelation to mankind. They also consider Qur'an as being perfect, the final revelation of Allah through Muhammad, which closes the group of prophets, composed from Adam, Abraham, Moses or Jesus. Muslims believe that parts of the Bible and of the Torah have been lost, misinterpreted or distorted by the believers. From this perspective, Qur'an is regarded as a correction brought to the Judaic and Christian holy books.

In the golden age of Islam, the Muslim thinkers were posing the problem of distinction between philosophy and religion. The problem of founding *in jure* the existence of philosophy was put in the Andalusia Muslim fortress of XIIth century. Due to this juridical effort, unique in this kind, it will be born, from the very heart of methodological reflection on The Sources of revealed Law, a definition of philosophy regarded as possibility of a human discourse which is based only in itself

⁴ Dominique Sourdel, *idem*, p. 16.

⁵ George Grigore, *Coranul*, Editura Herald, București, 2005, p. 5.

and not in the Revelation, possibility asserted and fully legitimated of opening a *secular* way of thinking in a medieval Muslim society⁶.

In present times, the situation briefly presents this way: on the one side, in Islamic countries exists a category of excessively westernized intellectuals for whom the enveloping technology seems to have been extirpated the traditional spiritual roots. On the other side, especially in Iran, there are still a big number of personalities, qualified by their moral dignity and intellectual formation to represent the traditional spiritual culture⁷. Unfortunately, in most cases these personalities ignore almost all the big spiritual traditions of the West⁸, which amplify the difficulty of communication between the two great cultures.

Islam has three main religion denominations, based especially on historic disagreement regarding the delegation of authority following Muhammad's death; these are known as Sunni Islam, Shi'a Islam and Kharijite Islam

The foundation of Islamic faith lies in the *shahadatun* (two confessions): *lā ilāhā illā-llāhu; muhammadur-rasūlu-llāhi* – 'There is no god other than Allah; Muhammad is Allah's messenger (His prophet)'. In order to become Muslim, one person must recite and believe in these words. Sunni Muslims regard this formula as one of the five pillars of Islam.

There are six fundamental beliefs, shared by all Muslims:

1. Belief in Allah, the only one to be worshiped.
2. Belief in all prophets and messengers (sent by Allah)
3. Belief in the books sent by Allah
4. Belief in angels
5. Belief in the Day of Judgement (Qiyamah) and in resurrection
6. Belief in destiny (Qadaa and Qadar in Arabic). This does not mean that a person is predetermined in its actions or life, as Allah gives free will to man, in order to allow him to take decisions.

The fundamental concept in Islam is the oneness of Allah (*tawhid*). This monotheism is absolute, never relative or pluralist in any sense of the term. In Arabic, God is named Allah, a form of „al-ilah”, or „the only god”. *Allah* then translates to „God”. The implicit use of the article in „Allah” indicates the divine uniqueness. In spite of the different name

⁶ Averroès, *L'islam et la raison. Antologie de textes juridiques, théologiques et polémiques*, Flammarion, Paris, 2000, p. 79.

⁷ Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, Gallimard, Paris, 1986, p. 498.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 498.

given to God, the Muslims consider that they worship the same god as Jews and Christians. Still, the Muslims reject the Christian theology of God's uniqueness (the Trinity regards Jesus as the son of God), seeing it as a form of polytheism.

There is no visual depiction of Allah as such an artistic image would bring to the worshipping of idols, which is forbidden. Furthermore, many Muslims believe the God has no body, making impossible bi-dimensional or tri-dimensional depiction. Muslims prefer to describe Allah through the many divine attributes, mentioned in Qur'an and also through Allah's 99 names.

According to Islamic tradition, Allah assigned certain men with the task to convey its will and to call to obedience to the chosen peoples, which many times, blindly refuse to comply. The Muslim doctrine not only commands to believe in the vision of Muhammad, but also in the ones of the preceding prophets, as the ones in the Bible (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses) and Jesus. Still, the most important is Muhammad, „the seal of prophets”, who fully restores the divine revelation, partially known by Jews and Christians, but deformed by these⁹. Prophets, saved from grave sins and positioned above angels, have the privilege to perform wonders, but revelation of Qur'an can only be accomplished by Muhammad.

There are two main denominations in Islam: Sunni and Shi'a. The fundamental beliefs of Sunni Muslims are known as the Five Pillars of Islam, while Shi'a Muslims have a different terminology, comprising five fundamental beliefs („the roots of the religion”) and ten basic practices („the branches of religion”). All Muslims agree on the following statements, the ones that are called „the five pillars of Islam” by the Sunni Muslims:

- „shahadah” – the confession of the fact that no one is worthy of being worshipped other than Allah, and Muhammad is its messenger.
- „salah” - the establishment of the five prayers of the day (salah).
- „zakat” – charity (Zakaah) which represent the fortieth part (2.5%) of the savings kept for more than a year, with few exceptions, for every Muslim whose fortune is bigger than the nisab (the sum, the minimum amount established by convention), and 10% or 20% of the agricultural production. These money or products will be distributed to the poor.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 52.

- „ramadhan” – the fasting from dusk until dawn in the month of Ramadan (sawm)

- „hajj” – pilgrimage to Mecca during the month of Dhul Hijjah, which is mandatory for once in a lifetime for all that are able.

The Islamic law covers all aspects of life, from government and external relations to the everyday life. At the levels of government and social justice, Islamic law applies only where the government is Islamic. In the Islamic faith, Shari’a is divinely revealed. It is understood as protecting five things: faith, life, knowledge, inheritance and property. However it is not a rigid law system. There are various schools and movements within Islam, which allow flexibility, the Islamic religion becoming more diverse as it was adopted by various cultures.

The entire Muslim system of laws results from Shari’a, which reunites the juridical rules of Islam regarding both religious practice and life in society¹⁰. Both for Shia and Sunna community, Shari’a is extracted from the two main sources: the Qur’an and Sunna, the later being a little bit different for the two communities¹¹.

There are more than one billion Muslims in the world, from which only less than a fifth are Arabs. Islam is the main religion in a major part of Asia, including Indonesia (which has the biggest Muslim population in the world), Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, the Arab peninsula states and Turkey. India also has one of the biggest Muslim populations in the world, even though its main religion is Hindu.

In Africa, Islam is the main religion in Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Djibouti, Gambia, Guinea, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, Somalia and Sudan, and there are also considerable Muslim populations in Chad, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania (where Zanzibar Island is mainly Muslim) and Nigeria¹². In Europe, Albania is mainly Muslim, and due to historical reasons, Bulgaria, Bosnia, Macedonia and Georgia have important Muslim communities. Muslim immigrants from northern Africa, Turkey and Asia (including Middle East) live in France, Germany and Great Britain. On the American continent, Islamic population increased significantly in the recent past,

¹⁰ Serge Lafitte, *Chûtes et sumites*, collection dirigée par Frédéric Lenoir, Plon, Paris, p. 57.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 57.

¹² The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition Copyright 2004, Columbia University Press. Licensed from Lernout & Hauspie Speech Products N.V., apud www.questia.com.

both through conversions and through migration of believers from other parts of the world. In United States, the number of Muslims is estimated between 2 and 6 millions; 20% of the population of Surinam is Muslim¹³.

Islam is mainly Sunni, as the Shiites represent only 10% of the total of Muslims. Islam aims to be a religion of „reconciliation”, this being another sense of the word „Islam”. For Muhammad, the new religion comes to seal and consolidate the messages of the two previous religions – Judaism and Christianity – and to give a prophet to the Arabs and a sacred book that descended upon him. Once rising above the tribal anarchy of the Arabs, these two notions make a nation of Arabs, giving them one language – the Arabic. The absolute uniqueness of Allah (*tamhid*) is the fundamental doctrine of Islam, together with the mission of the prophets and the judgement day. Refusing to dissociate the present life from the afterlife, the Islamic religion states that the human being is endowed with free will, in order to obey or not obey the divine commandments, in front of which it stands alone, with no intermediary clergy between him and Allah. The notion of Islamic community (*umma*) is central, and it transcends ethnic and social boundaries and ensures the defence of the Muslims. The work of holy war (*jihad*), which is not a canonical commandment, allows the expansion of the community outside its boundaries, so that the geography of Islam includes all continents today¹⁴.

There is a clear distinction between Islam as religion, Islamism as a bigot and political interpretation of Qur’an and terrorism, as a form of political violence, disguised in religious coat¹⁵. After 11th of September 2001, the Institute of Arab World Studies from Paris requested all Western offices, which were willing to support United States efforts to start an international campaign against terrorism, to tray and distinguish between these three evolutions stages, from natural religious feeling to forms of political pathology.

If some fundamentalist factions seek legitimacy and reasons for their violent actions in Islamic theological concepts, this must not lead us to indiscriminately confuse Islamic religion with Islamism or terrorism. Islamism, also known as Islamic fundamentalism or Muslim integrism,

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Yves Thoraval, op. cit., pp. 156-157.

¹⁵ Bogdan George Rădulescu, articolul „De la vechea confruntare ideologică est-vest la un potențial conflict civilizațional Occident-lumea arabo-islamică”, în *Cadran Politic*, nr. 25, 2007.

accounts for the most rigid citation of the holy text, completely opaque to any interpretation effort (*ijtihad*). The call to return to the origins, that is, to Qur'an and traditions (*sunnah*), against any innovations that emerged in time, which are meant to steal Islam its original purity, it is a recurring phenomenon in Islam and it appears to be common to all reformist movements that emerged in modern Muslim countries.

In our period, the idea of a political Islam emerges, named Islamism, which stresses on the concrete actions that must be performed in order to take over the governing power in some Muslim countries, sometimes through violent means. The declared goal is to install an Islamic state, in which *Shari'a* is applied, in all its initial rigor, which will perform justice and social equity, principles which would have already been abandoned by most secular governments from Muslim countries¹⁶.

Islamism is a form of political and religious utopia, created by the Arab-Muslim world, as an ideological alternative to the invasion of modern western doctrines: communism, socialism, liberalism, capitalism etc. This political and ideological current appears to some as a substitute for nationalism, which lost its appeal in many Muslim countries, due to the application of a „socialist” model, as well as due to the deception that emerges from the successive defeats in the fight with the Israeli enemy. The anti-Occidentalism of this movement is seen as a side effect in the fight against laicization, against materialism and moral degradation.

Globally, Islamism, often translated by Muslim fundamentalism, is a political-religious ideology that aims the establishment of an Islamic state governed by *Shari'a* and the reunification of *umma* (the Islamic nation)¹⁷.

Such attitude must not be put on the account of Islam in general, as long as the Islamists are keen to differentiate themselves from the rest of the Muslims through their very own naming (they are *islamiyyun*, as opposed to the Muslims that are *muslimun*), as well as through various external signs such as wearing a beard for men or wearing of the veil by women (which is actually clothing that fully covers both the face and the body). The idea of a political Islam, that does not respect the boundary between sacred and profane, is far from being shared by all Muslims, especially in the educated and modern layers of the society. Some Muslim countries experience often violent clashes between Islamists or

¹⁶ Yves Thoraval, op. cit., p. 149.

¹⁷ *Dictionnaire mondial de l'islamisme*, sous la direction d'Antoine Sfeir et des Cahiers de l'Orient, Plon, Paris, 2002, p. 265.

integrist and their adversaries, as well as between various rival integrist movements¹⁸.

Starting with the American politologist Samuel Huntington, there is an increasing number of voices that state that the old ideological confrontation between East and West, between communism and capitalism seems to be today reformulated in the appearance of a potential civilization conflict, of religious essence, between West and Islam. The attacks of September 11th 2001 from United States have exacerbated this perception.

Islamism is synonym with politicized Islam. Islamism is structured on political theology principles, derived from traditional Islamic religion, but which are offered as radical solutions to social crisis, raised by modern times. Everything, starting with the government problem, going through the political or economic debate, towards the balance of the social mechanics is interpreted through a sophisticated internal logic of the Qur'an verses.

Change and political reform are regarded as a necessity by Islamists. Sometimes, these changes are seen as entire political and social revolutions (as in the case of Iran), Islamists claiming that they return to the purity of some theological principles, in order to protect Muslim world from modern world sins. Islam becomes thus a pretext, a reason for radical behaviour, which challenge the current social and political order. In a different space, the same gesture has been performed by the first communist thinkers, which at their time attempted to disguise their political goals in conceptual clothing and visions that were borrowed from the missionary language of the ancient Christians

In the twentieth century, the necessity to find answers to the demands of the moment led to three ideological and politic reactions: option for *modernism*, secularism and democracy, *Arab nationalism* (also detailed by pan-Islamism) and *Islamic fundamentalism*¹⁹.

Stating that Islamism is the answer of some modern peoples to problems raised by modern times and modern ideologies, the American historian Daniel Pipes gives new names to the three political options of the Islamic world: *secularism*, *reformism* and *Islamism*²⁰. First of those states

¹⁸ Ibidem, pp. 149-150.

¹⁹ Ali Merad, *Islamul contemporan*, trad. Gheorghe Țițeica, prefața Daniela Zaharia, Editura Corint, București, 2003, p. 6.

²⁰ Daniel Pipes, „Islam and Islamism – Faith and Ideology”, in *National Interest* political journal, online edition, spring 2000.

Muslims can only advance by imitating the West. Indeed, stated the secularists, Islam represents an important legacy, but its public dimensions must be left aside. In particular, the sacred law of Islam (named Shari'a) – which regulates problems such the judicial system, the way in which Muslim countries involve into war and the nature of social interaction between men and women – should be fully abandoned. First country that adopted secularism is Turkey, where Kemal Atatürk, between 1923 and 1938 reformed and modernized a typical Muslim society. In spite all these, secularism is a minority position in the Muslim world, even in Turkey being intensely fought against.

Reformism offers a more popular answer to the challenge of modernity. While secularism had the message of fully embracing the western progress, the reformism proposes the sectarian approach. The reformists' state: „Look, Islam is compatible with the western way at its base. Only that we lost track of our own progress, and the West exploited them. We must come back to our own ways, by adopting the ones from the West.”

In this way, case by case, and with various degrees of credibility, the reformists acknowledge western accomplishments as their own, in the disguise of the discovery of their own legacy. The final goal of reformists is to imitate West without acknowledging it in full. Although intellectual theft, the reformists use this as political strategy.

The third answer to the modern trauma is *Islamism*, which has three main features: devotion to sacred law, rejection of western influence and turning faith into ideology.

In *The Third Wave*, Alvin Toffler was stating that a new civilisation is about to appear in our lives and everywhere *blind people* try to stop it²¹. This new civilisation would bring with it new types of family, other styles of working, of love and life, another economy system, new political conflicts and, above all this, a modified conscience.

The dawns of this new civilisation are the most explosive phenomenon in our lives, representing, for Toffler, the key of understanding the future years. A phenomenon as strong as the First Wave of changing launched ten thousand years ago by the inventing of agriculture, or as the Second Wave of changing, initiated by the

²¹ Alvin Toffler, *Al treilea val*, prefață Ioniș Olteanu, trad. Georgeta Bolomey și Drăgan Stoianovici, Politică, București, 1983, p. 43.

industrial revolution and which had shaken the earth. We are the children of the next transformation – the Third Wave²².

In particular case of Islam, the things are the more sensitive as these *axiological blinded* and the movements they take part were born in territories with a very important geopolitical and geo-strategically stake because of the huge reserves of oil which are in the area. The big companies, the producing countries and numerous of specialised journalists, who humbly reproduce the speeches and official numbers referring the oil reserves doesn't want war and conflicts that can affect their interests²³.

Today, Islam was confiscated by the political ideologists, who don't hesitate to evade the moral from their speech, but also to appeal on extreme violence in order to shape the behaviour of believers²⁴. This control over spirits spreads until the day to day life, sexual behaviour included, and to the interaction with non-believers, with an abundance of interdictions more or less explicit, more or less retrograded²⁵. In order to understand the irresistible appearance of fundamentalism – which founded assembly coherence in this reactionary way of the Islam, combined with violence – we must return to the intellectual patrimony of the origins of Islam, analyzing the fractures and cleavages, putting in light the first conflicts and, if necessary, showing the extreme diversity of approaching the divinity in Islam.

The history of ideas in Islam resembles with a stretched thread between two abysses, between *Fides*, the Believe, and *Ratio*, the Reason. In a particular way, freedom of thinking is mal regarded in Islam, a tension which can not be stand „a rope stretched over an abyss”, to ingeminate the words of Nietzsche. In front of notions such as liberty, reason, individual responsibility or choice, the Muslim theologian prefers the moral ideals with imprecise limits, like kindness, fraternity, generosity or camaraderie²⁶.

The Islamist militants are sustaining the dogma of the Islam according to which the world is divided into three parts: *dar al-harb* (the house of war), *dar al-islam* (the house of Islam) and *dar al-solh* (the house

²² Ibidem, p. 43.

²³ Eric Laurent, *La face cachée du pétrole*, Plon, Paris, 2006, p. 441.

²⁴ Malek Chebel, *L'Islam et la Raison. Le combat des idées*, Perrin, collection Tempus, Paris, 2006, p. 7.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 8.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 9.

of reconciliation)²⁷. Although Islamism seems to be appeared in XXth century, in its actual sense it was born in the same time with Islam; he naturally became the spiritual son of the hanbalite juridical school of the IXth century, its doctrine may be resuming to this formula „After Prophet, nothing new”²⁸. Along the centuries this school was changed by prestigious theologians like the Syrian Ibn Taymiyya, in XIVth century, or the Saudi Mohammed Abdel Wahhab, in XVIIIth century, which will later initiate the wahhabism, the official doctrine of today Saudi Arabia, the heart of many contemporary fundamentalist Sunnite movements.

Regarded as an alternative to the „cultural western dependence”, Shari’a signifies, in the very heart of the Islamist speech, the restoration of „divine sovereignty” and the rehabilitation of the resulted normative order. An Islamic state is therefore a state whose governors respect a basic rule: the governance with „that of what God revealed to the people”, namely by the divine law, Shari’a of God²⁹. The political program of all Islamist formations gives therefore, with no surprise, a central place to this claim or to that of the restoration of *Dawla islamiyya* (Islamic state)³⁰.

Islamism claims that Muslims lagged behind the westerns due to the fact that they are not good Muslims. In order to regain their lost glory, they must return to the old way of life, and this can be accomplished by living in complete accordance with Shari’a. Where Muslims proceed this way, they will become again leaders, as they were one millennium ago³¹. This is no easy task, as the sacred law contains a large set of rules regarding each aspect of life, some of them being contrary to modern practices (Shari’a resembles to some extent with the Judaic law, but there is no Christian counterpart). As an example, Shari’a forbids usury or other interest gain, which would yield profound and obvious repercussions in economy. Also, Shari’a imposes cutting of thieves’ hands, which is against modern sense, constrains women to wear the Islamic veil and imposes sexual discrimination. Islamism not only demands the application of these laws but also their strict obedience, now much more than ever in the history of Islam.

²⁷ Antoine Sfeir, *Les réseaux d’Allah. Les filières islamistes en France et en Europe*, Plon, Paris, 1997, p. 15.

²⁸ Antoine Sfeir, *Les islamismes d’hier à aujourd’hui*, Lignes de Repères, Paris, 2007, p. 8.

²⁹ François Burgat, *L’islamisme en face*, La Découverte, Paris, 2007, p. 92.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 92.

³¹ Daniel Pipes, op. cit.

In their effort to build a way of life based only on Shari`a laws, Islamists struggle to eliminate all aspects of western influence – habits, philosophy, political institutions and values. In spite of their efforts, they are still „contaminated” in many ways by these influences. On one side, they need modern technology, especially in military and medial domains. On the other side, they tend to be modern individuals, so they become more influenced by the west than they are willing to accept. So, while ayatollah Khomeini, being more traditional than many other Islamists, tried to found in Iran a government based on the pure principles of Shi’a Islam, he ended up creating a republic, based on a constitution, which represents a nation, which is represented by the decisions of a parliament, elected by popular vote – each of these being western concepts³². Another example of western influence is the fact that Fridays, which was only a gathering for prayer day and not a resting day in Islam, became now the Muslim equivalent of Sabbath. In a similar manner, the Islamic laws do not apply to all persons living in a certain area, but only to Muslims; the Islamic fundamentalists perceive them however as being territorial per se, an example being recorded of an Italian priest from Sudan that was lashed for alcohol possession. Even if denied, all these examples prove that Islamism is, step by step, inevitably heading West.

³² Ibidem.