SOME HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS ON RELIGION, NATIONALISM AND THE CULTURE OF *TAFAHOM* (MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING)

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In 1977 the prehistory expert Jacques Cauvin published a book entitled *Naissance des Divinités, Naissance de l'Agriculture* (The *Birth of the Gods and the Origins of Agriculture*) in which he posited that religion was the factor that had led men to build towns and cities, adopt a settled existence, engage in agriculture and agree on a set of principles that would enable them to live together, thus marking the start of the Neolithic Revolution which launched the biggest transformation in human history.

Cauvin's hypothesis is quite contrary to the view held by most historians of religion, who maintain that it was agriculture and urban civilization that led to the development of religion in the sense that it is understood today. In Cauvin's opinion, the prevailing view was incapable of answering the question: "Why did a group of human beings decide to abandon the nomadic hunter-gatherer way of life, establish settled communities and become farmers?" In other words, he

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had doubts about the materialist interpretation of religion and – by contrast – proposed a culture-based explanation by posing the following question: "What if it was a human desire to share communal activities – as expressed through communal religious rituals – that led man first to establish temples, then to build towns and cities?"

When the book came out excavations had been going on for two years at the Turkish archaeological site in Gobekli Tepe, near the Syrian border. As the dig progressed Klaus Schmidt, the German leader of the team, came to a similar conclusion: that is, that it was man's need for a religious faith that had triggered the Neolithic Revolution rather than the reverse; this was because he had discovered a temple at the site that – as far as we know at present – was the oldest temple in history, built some seventy centuries before the temples of Mesopotamia and the pyramids of Egypt; earlier, indeed, than the date when man was first known to have settled in towns and taken up farming. The discovery of this site lent additional support to the cultural interpretation of religion in the context set out by Cauvin in his book.

It would seem that today we are standing on the threshold of a "paradigmatic revolution" in the field of comparative religion which will lead to a rethink about several issues. In doing so it will undermine the materialist interpretation of religion in particular, and societal phenomena in general, and recognize culture as the main factor – firstly in interpreting Middle Eastern civilization, then when applying this interpretation to the civilizations and cultures of the world as a whole.

One point that we should note here is that the role of religion was fundamental in helping human beings to develop their community life on a basis that was simultaneously spiritual and social. Religion itself, which was a constant, was represented by the spiritual side, while the social factor was liable to change – the changing circumstances having the potential to reduce the significance of the social side as people began to give themselves and their intellects an ever greater role in regulating their community and its affairs.

A culture of *tafahom* (mutual understanding) cannot thrive unless society accepts this dynamic, which began far back in the mists of time. It is therefore vital to free oneself from the attitudes that were imposed during the time of the nationalist revolutions – attitudes which meant that the relationship between religion and society became so limited that it amounted to nothing more than a kind of “religio-political interdependence”. From the beginning of history, religions have played an important part in developing human societies, expanding beyond the narrow confines of the clan and helping establish a system of contractual relationships to include the wider community. Examples of these include a collective acceptance of various rules of conduct such as refraining from killing, defining prohibited behaviour in sexual relations and marriage, the adoption of primitive systems for recognizing property ownership, etc.

We may therefore postulate that a dialectical relationship emerged between the development of the role of religion and the evolution of mankind’s social systems. Traces of the original communal religions can be seen in the ancient Mesopotamian religion in Iraq and the Pharaonic religion in Egypt; in both these cases we find that people were attracted by water (the Nile in Egypt and the Tigris and Euphrates in Iraq). However, they were not content to build primitive dams around the water sources and springs, nor were they satisfied with merely being able to control the water and use it for irrigation; in addition, they also built temples which played a major role in regulating their societies. In the archaeological evidence dating from that time – some 5,000 years before our present era – not a single ancient city has been found without a temple, or indeed a number of temples.

For example, the city of Ordu, which some archaeologists regard as the oldest human settlement discovered to date, contains traces of the first recorded mud buildings as well as evidence of primitive agriculture and irrigation techniques. Its crop surpluses almost certainly created the conditions for the first forms of human trade and the adoption of a barter system for the exchange of goods and services. These new practices gave rise to the first examples of writing and arithmetic to enable those transactions to be recorded.

At the same time, however, we find that from that period man also tended to turn to his gods, either in order to thank them for the blessings they had bestowed upon him or to pray to them and offer them supplications and sacrifices in the hope that their bounty to him would increase. Archaeologists observed that although the people of those days built their houses of mud, for their temples they used less commonplace materials such as timber, which at that time was considered a rare and precious substance. Their original houses were small and poky, since their sole purpose was to provide shelter from the harsh climate, while their temples were large and spacious and built on hilltops in their cities' most desirable locations. As well as being the reason behind the construction of the temples, the community's gods united the whole of the local population in worship, while totemic family and tribal gods saw a decline in their role. This development was significant because it meant that from that distant era religion came to play a major role in human society, a role no less important than that other main social institution – i.e. the state.

It was also during this period that the first royal dynasties appeared in Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, China and Persia, and man began to lay down rules stipulating how the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of Earth should be governed. This led to the birth of a communal moral code for human society to abide by.

Historians are agreed that the first laws were based on religious beliefs and ideas. Prohibitions and obligations were seen as an expression of the Will of God. This was the case with the Code of Hammurabi – one of the oldest legal codes known to us today – though it was not the oldest legal system in existence; there were others which were considerably older, though no examples remain of them at the present time apart from a few fragments. However, the Code of Hammurabi, which was engraved upon steles, is indeed one of the oldest and can be seen today in the Louvre in Paris. Dating from around 1750 BC it comprises 282 articles, though only some of these would be classed as "laws" in the precise meaning of the word.

Legislation in the "Hammurabi sense" is a combination of moral guidance, legal opinions and decrees. They include the oldest decrees devised by human society, including the principle of *lex talionis*, or retribution in kind – a law familiar to the Mesopotamian civilization before the Ten Commandments in the Hebrew Torah's Book of Genesis. Nevertheless, what we should particularly note here is the fact that both the Hebrew Torah and the older Code of Hammurabi ascribe their decrees to the Will of God, not the will of man.

The arrival of the modern era saw the birth of the Enlightenment – a philosophy which regarded man and society as being capable of setting their own social rules and relying on their own intellects and efforts. This led people to seek wide-ranging answers to the question of religion and its role in the evolution of human society. The Age of Enlightenment gave birth to two different schools of thought – the French School (represented by, among others, the philosopher Diderot) and the German School (e.g. Lessing). Followers of the first of these two schools looked to the past to understand the present; this was exemplified in their observations on the development of French national consciousness from the reign of Louis XIV, one of the most significant features of which was the recognition of an organic relationship between the royal establishment (the State) and the religious establishment (the Church). These thinkers - who struggled against their era's religious despotism, though they were unaware of the historical and archaeological evidence available to us today - saw the past as a mirror image of their present; in their view religion was a tool for conditioning people's minds to accepting the *status quo* and ensuring that they remained uninvolved in political, social and cultural affairs. This became a firmly established hypothesis during the nineteenth century, particularly with Feuerbach and Marx (both German), whose position was embodied in the famous statement: "Religion is the opium of the people."

This attitude fails to take several factors into account. Even if it is true that religion was used to justify and uphold the *status quo* – particularly in former times when there was no media and few people had access to education – that does not mean that religion in every time, place and circumstance only performed this social role and had no other function.

The German School did not totally reject the French School's hypothesis, but it gave it a lower priority in comparison with another factor which it regarded as considerably more significant: the power of religion to determine the structure of human society. Followers of this second school, such as Lessing, suggested that man had only been able to progress from savagery to civilization because religion had played a major role in taming him over the course of his long history. Although religion had not been the only factor in this process – but rather a component along with art, philosophy, thought and literature – its function had been fundamental, particularly during that crucial phase of man's existence before the intellect had blossomed to the point of being able to assume a guiding role in the development of human society. Accordingly, followers of the second school did not consider the part played by religion in human society from a narrow national perspective; rather, they saw in more as a universal, cosmic phenomenon, and a positive one at that.

Here we should point out once again that we are discussing the two interpretations (both of which were derived from the same Enlightenment philosophy) in connection with their relationship to the issue of mutual understanding and the role of religion. At the same time, however, we are also considering them within the context of two political climates that differed substantially from each other in their relationship to national attitudes. During that period the Germans did not form a single national entity; instead, they comprised a number of separate principalities, some of which were Catholic while others were Protestant. Indeed, it may well be that the German School's broad-mindedness and openness to mutual understanding in the eighteenth century was due to the fact that its thinkers at that time were not subjected to strong nationalist pressures.

On the other hand, the French School was more widely known and for a number of reasons, including the fact that it was linked to the French nationalist model which dazzled the world after the Revolution of 1789.

So what was the relationship between this model and mutual understanding between different religious beliefs?

Nationalism is based upon the principle of "unity of society's principal elements", such as geographical unity, the unity of its political institutions etc. In this scenario religion is classed either as one of society's main components, in which case there is only a single religion (as in the case of pre-Revolutionary France; for this, see the treatises of Abbe Poissier and the bitter persecution suffered by Protestants in France at that time); or, alternatively, it is regarded as being outside society's remit and a personal matter, of concern to the individual rather than the community as a whole (as with the post-Revolutionary French model of *laicite*).

The modern Arab world has had some experiences with the second model and steps have been taken to reform its religious institutions and establish a new type of relationship between them and its newly emerging states. This has created a completely new and unfamiliar situation in comparison with the past, when the "Land of Islam" was a land of open borders in which every Muslim enjoyed the same rights. For example, some time after Kheireddine Pasha became the Grand Vizier of Tunisia, he travelled to Turkey where he became Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire. This was one of numerous instances which illustrate just how open borders were before the creation of the modern nation-states. Equally, religious scholars used to travel unrestrictedly, change their countries of residence and teach new student groups as circumstances dictated; in fact, travel was regarded as one of the conditions required of an aspiring scholar. During his journey from Tangier to the frontiers of China, the famous traveller Ibn Battuta had the opportunity to benefit from the knowledge and experience of various networks of scholars and Sufis he encountered along the way.

However, this situation changed dramatically after new borders were drawn where none had existed before and modern states were created. This was true not only of the Arab and Islamic world, but of all five continents due to two momentous events: the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution in England. The impact of these two events was not just local, but global. Not only did they reshape Europe; they also redrew the map of the world and for the first time in history Europe overtook all the other human civilizations on earth to become the world leader. Consequently, every other people found itself forced to adapt to the new situation.

Space does not permit us to list every event and development that took place during that long and complex century which formed a turning-point in human history, and in any case vast numbers of volumes have already been written on the subject. However, we can single out the highly significant date of 1815 – the year when the Congress of Vienna redrew the political map of Europe in the wake of the upheavals following the French Revolution of 1789 and the Napoleonic wars which had engulfed huge areas of territory from Europe to Egypt. After the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, the royal families sought to restore their power and authority and the Congress of Vienna was convened for that purpose. However, it did not result in a return to the situation that had existed in pre-revolutionary Europe, but tempered the old system by combining it with some of the radical ideas that had triggered the French Revolution. While asserting the principle of limited constitutional monarchy as a compromise between absolute monarchy and popular parliamentary rule, it also embraced elements of liberalism as a means of steering a path between the old feudal system and the notion of equality between all social classes. At the same time, it approved the principle of territorial division on the basis of nation states as a replacement for the "imperial model" which had ruled Christendom during the previous era. In addition, it endorsed the Revolution's principles of universalism and human rights.

Thus Europe underwent a radical process of renewal. Its borders were redrawn and its new systems of government were established without the debilitating effects of revolutionary wars that would threaten to halt its technical and scientific advances. The world was stunned by its progress and its new political and social ideas such as liberty, constitutional government, human rights, universal education and the encouragement of individual enterprise. Urban civilization was transformed, a new middle – or petty bourgeois – class emerged and, like most of the changes that occurred in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, this phenomenon began to spread from Europe to the rest of the world. The Congress of Vienna brought an end to all the

European regimes that had failed to adopt this new cultural model – a model which also offered a guiding light to numerous non-European peoples.

For the Arabs, modernisation in this new and changing world led initially to a greater degree of openness and a readiness to accept differences, though this was followed by a "relapse" as nationalism began to dominate their cultural space and the "struggle" mentality became more entrenched in their general thinking as well as their political attitudes. We know that imperialism united the peoples in a nationalist-inspired demand for freedom; however, what often happened was that "national" boundaries were drawn according to the imperialist territorial divisions.

One of the main reasons why the culture of mutual understanding and acceptance of differences is so weak nowadays is the widely-held view that someone who is "different" must automatically be a stooge and servant of foreign interests. This type of thinking became deeply engrained during the national liberation revolutions when the stark choice was seen as: "You are either with the Nation or with the imperialist coloniser."

These days we find that political discussion in Arab countries often slides into accusations of treason and selling out to the foreigner. This kind of mentality could well be hereditary and derived from a belief in "*al Firqa al Najiyah*" (the group destined for Salvation), which could easily lead to accusations of *zandaqah* (heresy/atheism) being replaced by accusations of treason.

The Arab nationalist experience has been quite different from Europe's. Modern states in the West grew initially out of internal divisions; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there were wars between Catholics and Protestants, both sects of whom were to be found in all European societies. Then in the eighteenth century there were bitter conflicts between the Enlightenment and the conservatives. In the nineteenth century the main differences were centred round the major ideologies of that time – socialism, liberalism, radicalism and nationalism. In every case the divisions were within a society rather than between one society and an external party.

After a long period of “training” with massive tragic upheavals those societies finally came to the conclusion that human beings should coexist on a basis of mutual understanding and harmony, and that differences of opinion were a positive thing and a source of social enrichment rather than the opposite.

On the other hand, when difference is held to be a threat to national unity and - a not uncommon attitude in Arab societies - a symptom of treason, it becomes difficult to promote a culture of mutual understanding and the result is that every side tries to impose what it sees as “the truth” by force.

In such circumstances it has become essential that religion should resume the function which it has served from the moment mankind first appeared on the face of this earth – that is, that it should be on a higher plane than nationalism and transcend political boundaries. This means that religion should not be expected to play a direct role in politics – a principle that became widely recognized during the days of imperialism when Arab societies felt that their very existence was threatened. If we regard acceptance of differences as a rule of life when existential issues are at stake (regardless of whether or not a particular human group is united around a particular nationalist project), then two factors must inevitably come into play: the religious dimension based on difference and mutual understanding, and national identity based on common values and absolutes. At the same time, every effort must be made to keep sectarian conflicts and religious pontificating to a minimum when working out the rules for coexistence.

Sudan, which is currently heading for partition, could be an apt example of the scale of the catastrophe which can occur when there is a failure to make a distinction between religion and politics. There, the unity of the country has collapsed because its leaders are determined to impose a single religious vision, and this has led to a quasi-conflict between Islamic Sudan and Christian Sudan. Yet originally it was claimed that the purpose of the Islamic nationalist project was to unite Sudan and strengthen the cohesion between its people.

If every difference of opinion leads to division owing to the absence of a culture of mutual understanding, Arab and Islamic societies will become a mosaic of mutually hostile mini-states and the Arabs will lose their standing in the international arena. Mutual understanding is not just a philosophical matter; much more than that, it is an issue which will decide the future of the Arab world.