

The presence of Islam in Europe. New challenges for contemporary Christianity

The presence of Islam in Europe is a reality and a challenge for the church today. After the first appearances of the oriental cults in the second half of last century, the present records a more significant presence of Islam, one of the great monotheistic religions of the world. These phenomena, foreign to the religious Christian ethos, brought and is still bringing panic within the Christian world, because with the loss of God, with the installation of secularization, the de-sacralization and the gradual de-Christianization of a large part of the European continent, the place vacated by the Christian God in the religious life of man must be filled with something else because, *homo religiosus* is a perennial and universal human category, an anthropological category which can not fail to manifest. Only in this way can be explained the various religious surrogates that attract modern man.

This time, Islam enters Europe neither by force nor by an aggressive missionary strategy, but in a humble way, together with the convoy of war refugees of the Near East and Middle East, or with the economic immigration of the Muslims of Asia or of the northern African continent in search of a better life. But, together with the installation in one of the rich Western countries, the religious missions or violent manifestations of Islam are not excluded, as happened on the 11th September 2001 in the United States, at Atocha station in Madrid, in London and in Paris, the punishing of the French journalists from Charlie Hebdo, who had mocked about the Prophet Muhammad.

The Islamic presence in Europe is a great challenge for the European Christianity in crisis, which should identify the best ways of response, the best adapted missionary strategies in front of a particularly aggressive religion, a religion difficult to live with.

In the past history, the Mediterranean was the border between Islam and Europe. Today, this border no longer exists, as the Muslims have formed their own enclaves within Europe and continue to consolidate them. As professor M. Weiner, the main researcher of the phenomenon of migration, says, this could lead to a “global crisis”.

In Europe, Islam has a long history, of about fourteen centuries, and the Muslims of this continent represent 7.2% of the total population. Europe's total population is 735 million people, of which 53 million are Muslims, their presence growing day by day. Thinking of this situation, Professor Houssain Kettani, from the Politechnic University of Puerto Rico, who conducted a study on the demographic situation of the Islamic world, proposed the division of Europe into four regions: South-East, South-West, North-East and North-West Europe, and the following demographic situation: 1. South-East Europe Region comprises 16 countries (Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia). Within these countries are 8 million Muslims (8.1%), out of a total population of 105 million. 2. The region South-West consists of 11 countries (Andorra, France, Gibraltar, Italy, Liechtenstein, Malta, Monaco, Portugal, San Marino, Spain and Switzerland), with 9 million Muslims (4.7%), out of a total population of 187 million. 3. North-East is composed of 7 countries (Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Ukraine), with 23 million Muslims (9.5%), out of a total population of 240 million. 4. North-West is composed of 11 countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Iceland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK), with 8 million Muslims (4.2%), out of a total population of 202 million.

When referring to the presence of Islam in contemporary Europe, we must mention the presence of the “traditional” Islam in the Balkans as a result of centuries of Ottoman occupation in South East Europe. The Ottoman Empire greatly favoured the Muslims in the border regions of the empire, at the expense of the Christian communities, this leading to inter-ethnic and inter-confessional conflicts in the region. Hence, the state and religious fragmentation in the Balkans, the fratricidal wars in the former Yugoslavia which had a religious, Christian-Muslim component, culminating with detachment of the Muslim Albanian-majority Kosovo from the Orthodox Serbia. Although, fortunately, still enjoying tranquillity, Roma-

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nia is one of the European nations placed close to the Islamic world. We are just at 350 km away from the border with Turkey, a country which, for several years, has known several internal convulsions and that seems to long for the days of the Ottoman Empire, rejecting increasingly the secular state founded by Kemal Atatürk.

Western Europe, the former colonial powers and Western major economies, is facing a different kind of Muslim influence, a large number of immigrants in the last 30-40 years. Not without significance is the immigration from Middle East we are witnessing today, immigration that comes to further enlarge the Muslim presence in Europe. The integration of these immigrants into the culture of the host countries is difficult and demographic statistics show the accelerated growth of the Muslim community at the expense of secularism or Christianity.

The main factors explaining the accelerated Islamization of Europe are, according to sociologists, the continuous migration, high birth rate among the Muslim population and frequent conversions of Europeans who become followers of Islam, according to Christian Telegraph. So, “geographically” Islam as Dar al-Islam (“House of Islam”), is already within Europe, even if in terms of mentality not yet in Europe because, until now, their integration failed. Muslims will be a majority in Europe by the end of the 21st century. This is Bernard Lewis’ prediction, a specialist in Oriental studies and political commentator, and not only his.

For Christians, the growing Islamization of the West Europe can be seen as both a challenge and as an opportunity to use the apologetic arsenal again and renew our evangelizing action. Christians should learn from Muslims their missionary zeal, their religious involvement, sense of belonging to a revealed religion and the spirit of sacrifice in the affirmation of Islam.

Europe faces two major changes affecting the religious and social component of the old continent. The first concerns the weakening of Christianity and the second the demographic decline. Currently, in Europe are born only two-thirds of the children needed to maintain the population at the same numeric values. Population decline began to slow down due to the wave of immigration from the Muslim world. In general, the growing Islamic population is not integrated into the host societies and does not adapt politically to its rules. On the contrary, the radical Islamist movements gain ground in these political emigrants. The question that arises

is: is this a temporary deviation or Europe is about to lose its historical identity? Secondly: it seems that Europe is quickly turning into “Eurabia”, a cultural and political extension of the Arab / Muslim world, that is certainly anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, anti-Western and anti-American.

A Vatican official remarked that Europe will become a continent increasingly “Islamized” if the European Christians will continue to use contraceptives and abortive means and will not go to church more often. Monsignor Piero Gheddo from the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions says that the indigenous population of Europe not only abandoned Christianity, but becomes pagan. “Indifference is spreading. Christianity and the Church are attacked,” said Gheddo. “The truth is that, as people we become more pagan and the religious vacuum is inevitably filled by other options and religious forces.”

The missionary strategy that the church will adopt should be based on the realization that, in general, Muslim communities can't be assimilated, but at least integrated in the Western way of relating to society and religion. This would represent a great achievement, since we all know that Muslim believers from the Christian majority countries adopt a kind of self-seclusion inside the Christian communities.

These are some of the challenges that Christianity will have to answer in the coming years, a Christianity that will have to take account of the realities described above when establishing the missionary strategies.

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