

An Islamic revolution

Seeing the insurgents in Tahrir Square, prostrating in their thousands at every call to prayer, in close-knit lines like “a building sealed in lead” (*bunyân marsûs*; cf. Qur’an, 61.4), does make for taking sides – indeed, sundry commentators are already speaking of a new *Islamist* revolution. They fear that this revolution, masterminded by the nebulous Muslim Brotherhood and Lord knows who else, threatens the very foundations of “civilization”! But what if, as usual, the truth were a teeny bit more complex?

For the Muslim theologian the contrast is huge between the events which brought Hosni Mubarak to power in 1981 and the circumstances of his recent resignation. An historical reflection is called for. Before the tribunal which hanged him for assassinating Anwar Sadat, Khalid Islambuli shouted “I killed Pharaoh!” He might equally well have cried out, “I killed Genghis Khan!” His inspiration indeed came to him from texts identifying the President with the Mongols who, having destroyed Baghdad in 1256, in the years around 1300 were once more threatening the Syrian-Egyptian sultanate of the Mamlukes. In order to rouse and sustain resistance against the Tatar invaders, a Damascene shaykh called Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) had, during that period, developed an argument in three steps: despite their apparent conversion to Islam in 1295, the Mongols of Iran do not govern according to the Shari‘a; they are therefore unbelievers; consequently they must be fought. The Islamists plotting to assassinate Sadat knew this anti-Mongol reasoning of Ibn Taymiyya, having discovered it either in his great *Collected Fatwas* or in the *Qur’anic Commentary* of his disciple Ibn Kathir (d. 1273). Identifying the Egyptian President with a Tatar potentate, they saw the Mongol enemy not only beyond the walls of the Muslim city but at its very head, and they developed against him the same logic: Sadat has abandoned the Shari‘a, as demonstrated by his peace treaty with Israel; he is therefore an unbeliever; consequently it is obligatory to overthrow him and to kill him. Which is what happened on 6 October 1981... For a good many Western “experts” ever since, Ibn Taymiyya has become the intellectual father of violent Islamism, just as he was so for those extremist Egyptians. More gravely, in a medley of counter-truths orchestrated by, or handed round between, poorly learned turban-heads, peddlers of dictatorial propaganda, bad Orientalists, crusading missionaries, bribed or greedy media, the recourse to terror, armed insurrection and tyrannicide were depicted as the hallmark of political theology in Islam.

So then, as the hallmark fits, should we call the French Revolution of 1789 an Islamic revolution? Or rather, to the contrary, was there a miscomprehension and hijacking of the religion by Khalid Islambuli, his peers, and a good many “new Orientalists”? As recent studies have clearly confirmed,¹ to legitimize armed struggle and the assassination of Muslim rulers by identifying them with the invaders attacked in the anti-Mongol fatwas of Ibn Taymiyya is, quite simply, a hijacking of the text that transforms his writings calling to resist an incoming foreign invader into pamphlets challenging a power in situ. It is shocking that such a “Mongolization” of Sadat and other Muslim rulers could be conceived as faithful to the thought of Ibn Taymiyya. He himself indeed remained always loyal vis-à-vis his own sultan, the Mamluk al-Nasir Muhammad – even though the latter was, in respect of the Shari‘a, not much stricter than a Mongol of that time or a modern Arab-Muslim ruler... The writings of

¹ See for example Y. Michot, *Ibn Taymiyya. Muslims under non-Muslim Rule* (Oxford: Interface, 2006), 27-29, 49-57.

the Damascene shaykh are, moreover, explicit: for him, as for the great majority of classical Sunni authors, such a loyalty is the very foundation of the political theology of Islam. It derives from the oath in which the Companions gave their allegiance to the Prophet and by which they pledged in particular “to hear and to obey – when that pleases us and when we hate it, when that is difficult for us and when it is easy, as also in the event of a favouritism that is to our detriment – and not to dispute the command of those who exercise it...” This loyalty is based, furthermore, on several commendations of the Messenger, for example: “For him who sees in his emir something that he hates – let him be patient towards him!”²

Ibn Taymiyya is not unaware that one version of the famous *hadith* of allegiance to the Prophet might permit disputing the command of those who exercise it in the case of “blatant unbelief” (*kufir bawah*) on their part, religiously demonstrated. He knows human beings however too well to imagine that an armed insurrection would provoke less *fasad* (“corruption”), and have consequences less damaging for society, than the injustice of the power thus contested. “For sure,” he writes, “one hardly knows of a group that rose up against a sultan without there being in its uprising some factors of corruption more grave than the corrupted situation to which the group put an end... God’s Messenger forbade fighting against such sultans even though he informed us that they would do some reprehensible (*munkar*) things. He expounded that it is not permissible to reprove them by the sword...”³ The conclusion, repeated in various writings by the so-called patron saint of Islamist terrorism: “Sixty years of an unjust sultan are better than a single night without sultan.”⁴

Also according to Ibn Taymiyya,⁵ if a power “beats and imprisons” and one suffers at its hands “various sorts of mistreatment so that what is known of the Law of God and His Messenger is forsaken [...] it is incumbent, still, to be patient. And if, in respect of God, some harm is done to you, that is God’s way of acting (*sunna*) with His Prophets and those who follow them. ‘Do the people,’ says God, Exalted is He, ‘reckon that they shall be allowed to say “We believe!” without their being put to the test? We tested well their predecessors...’ (Q. 29.1-3) The Exalted also said: ‘Assuredly, We shall test you, in order to know among you the *mujahidin* and the patient...’ ” (Q. 47.31)

As for killing Pharaoh – as Khalid Islambuli boasted of having done – the notion would certainly have seemed preposterous to the Damascene theologian. He indeed praises Joseph for nominating himself to manage the treasuries of the king of Egypt, that is to say, for spontaneously setting himself to serve an unbelieving state, fully aware as he was, first, that its institutions were not based on the “tradition (*sunna*) of the Prophets and their justice (*‘adl*)” and, secondly, that it would not be possible for him to implement all that “he regarded as part of the religion of God”. For Ibn Taymiyya, it is nevertheless precisely because Joseph invested himself in this way in a non-Muslim society, contributing therein as much as he could to establish the rule of “justice and beneficence (*ihsan*)”, that

² See Y. Michot, *Textes spirituels d’Ibn Taymiyya (Nouvelle série). IV. L’obéissance aux autorités*. On internet: www.muslimphilosophy.com, Dec. 2009, 1-4. – Also forthcoming in English translation in *Ibn Taymiyya. Against extremisms* (Markfield: Kube Publishing - Oxford: Interface, 2011), Ch. 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4, and Y. Michot, *Textes spirituels d’Ibn Taymiyya (Nouvelle série). VII. Comme Joseph, au service de Pharaon...* On internet : www.muslimphilosophy.com, April 2010, 1-4; 1. – Also in *Ibn Taymiyya. Against extremisms* (forthcoming), Ch. 18.

⁵ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmû‘ al-Fatâwâ*, xxxv. 373.

he was finally able, thanks to his power, to help his family stranded in Palestine...⁶

Let us come back to Hosni Mubarak. Vice-President to Sadat, he was brought to power by the assassination of the latter, that is to say, following an armed coup, the Mongolizing Islamism of which in fact owed more to Robespierre and bolshevism than to the Muslim tradition as expounded by Ibn Taymiyya and many other classical Muslim sources. Thirty years on, it is a non-violent popular uprising that has brought down the despot. So, a *post-Islamist* uprising? Certainly, and by the grace of God! A sociologist will not have any difficulty marking up this aspect of the insurrection that led to the downfall of the dictator of Cairo (as also, some weeks earlier, that of his Tunisian counterpart): the causes of this revolution were poverty, unemployment, the lack of a future, police brutality, corruption of power, oligarchy, gerontocracy... The shaykhs to whom the rebelling young deferred are called *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and the ways (*tariqa*) of their new disciples *Al Jazeera*, *Al Arabiyya*, etc. There was no need whatever of the FIS, Nahda, Lashkar-e Tayyiba, the Taliban, or any other of the *jama'at islamiyya* ("Islamic groupings"), to mobilize the disinherited masses against dictatorship.

Even more important than the post-Islamist character of the Egyptian revolution of 11.2.11 is its quality of being profoundly faithful to the *Sunna* of God and of the Prophet, whatever may have been said by the court ulama, in Egypt or elsewhere. Patience, loyalty, service of the pharaoh, non-anathematization of a perverted, unjust power, and refusal to take up arms against it – these do not in fact signal an unconditional, absolute obedience to a human authority, in mute silence and disobedience to the Creator. Moreover, there is room in Islam – between the two extremes of the revolution of 1789 (or 1917) and resignation, retreat, disinterest in public life and disinvestment in the affairs of the community – for conscientious objection, non-violent protest, and civil disobedience enlightened by faith. Or rather, in some circumstances, those are obligations of the religion, in the same way as are moderation and weighing the pros and cons in all things. "The one who does not preoccupy himself with the affairs of the Muslims is not one of them," a *hadith* says. Among the pledges to which the Companions subscribed when giving allegiance to the Messenger, and which Ibn Taymiyya regularly invokes, there was also: "to speak – or to take up – the Truth (*qala wa qama bi-l-haqq*) wherever we may be and without fearing, in respect of God, the criticism of anyone." *Qama bi-*, that is to say, at the same time "to take up" and "stand up with", "rise in favour of". *Al-haqq*, that is to say, "the right", as much as "the truth".

To rise and stand up in favour of the right and the truth, that is exactly what hundreds of thousands of Egyptian men and women were doing over the eighteen days that led to the fall of Hosni Mubarak. According to Ibn Hanbal, Ibn Maja, and other collections of *hadiths*, the Prophet said: "The noblest *jihād* is a speech of justice before a tyrannical power" (*afdal al-jihad kalimat 'adl 'inda sultan ja'ir*) – in contemporary formulation: "speaking truth to power". Speaking the truth and calling for justice in the face of a despot was precisely the fight that the insurgents in Tahrir Square and in the rest of Egypt were carrying on, for over two weeks, while peacefully enduring attacks from the special forces of the dinosaurian regime that they were challenging. Several hundreds of believers thus put to the test by their Lord gave their lives therein. Those dead are, in the truest and noblest sense of the term in Islam, martyrs of the *jihād*.

⁶ Y. Michot, *Textes spirituels*, NS VII, 1-4.

On the morrow of the fall of Hosni Mubarak and the seizure of power in Cairo by the army, no one can say if all the hopes that the Egyptian people have vested in their revolution will become reality. Perhaps the people are too naively trusting of the military. The generals might well have yielded to pressure from the street by unseating a President from their own ranks only in order to preserve their neo-Mamluk caste privileges, and their good relations with various foreign countries, even enemies of the Muslims, without any intention at all of recognizing popular sovereignty. One thing, however, is already clear: the lie, with which all the alleged Middle East specialists have so long been buzzing our ears, of the so-called intrinsic violence of Islam. In fact, the Egyptian revolution of 11.2.11 was far less murderous than some of the “great revolutions” in which the West takes such pride. No impure blood irrigates the furrows of the Nile valley. As for the hundreds of martyrs, they were the victims of a dictatorship, supported, pampered and armed without scruple, for thirty years, by our noble teachers of human rights, secularism and democracy. It is easy enough to picture the disarray of these impostors of “Western values” and other Islamophobic Cassandras: peaceful Islamic revolutions?! An Islam advancing without violence?! Ignorant of the Muslim tradition of critical patience and of the *jihad* of the word, as notably illustrated in the Taymiyyan texts mentioned above, some will no doubt speak of an influence of Gandhi or Martin Luther King. What does it matter, since the truth is now on the march, and in any case sooner or later they will have to revise their copy and work up a different rhetoric...!

From the Mongolizing blunders of a Khalid Islambuli in 1981 to the Tahrir Square in 2011, long is the road that the Muslims of Egypt have journeyed on the way (*sunna*) of God and of the Prophet. Like the Tunisians some weeks earlier, they have been able to present, to the *Umma* and to the rest of the world, a visible demonstration of the noblest *jihad*. This *jihad* mobilized insurgents of both sexes, people very different but alike in solidarity, wearing hijab and/or jeans, bearded and/or westernized. The pious faithful were militant alongside the non-practising. Copts mounted guard around Muslims in prayer and the Muslims guarded the Copts during the mass celebrated in their midst. Led by right, truth, justice, collectively, without violence but with determination, without fear of the criticism of anyone except God, this *jihad* was, precisely for those reasons, a truly *Islamic* revolution. In our contemporary *Jurassic Park*, moreover, it teaches to each and all of us, a lesson, quite simply, in profound humanity.

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